

Table of Contents

Issue 5

Stories



[We Never Talk About My Brother](#)

by Peter Beagle

Art by Anselmo Alliegro



[Under Janey's Garden](#)

by Margit Elland Schmitt

Art by Nick Greenwood

-- Orson Picks --



[When I Kissed the Learned Astronomer](#)

by Jamie Todd Rubin

Art by Jin Han



[Original Audrey](#)

by Tammy Brown

Art by Raffaele Marinetti



[Beauty's Folly](#)

by Eugie Foster

Art by Liz Clarke



[Rumspringa](#)

by Jason Sanford

Art by Walter Simon



[The Polka Man](#)

by William John Watkins

Art by Kevin Wasden

From the Ender Saga



[The Gold Bug](#)

Included in Ender in Exile and the DabelPro Comic



by Orson Scott Card

Art by Jin Han

Tales for the Young and Unafraid by David Lubar



[Toon Out](#)

by David Lubar

Art by Lance Card



[Braces](#)

by David Lubar

Art by Lance Card

InterGalactic Medicine Show Interviews

[InterGalactic Interview with Peter S. Beagle](#)

by Edmund R. Schubert

Essays by Orson Scott Card

[Who Is Snape?](#)

by Orson Scott Card

We Never Talk About My Brother

by Peter S. Beagle

*Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.*
-- A. E. Housman



Artwork by Anselmo Allegrò

he'd get jumped by a whole mob of his fans, his groupies. Couldn't turn on the TV and not see him on half a dozen channels, broadcasting, or being interviewed, or being a special guest on some show or other. I mean everything from big political stuff to cooking shows, for heaven's sake. My friend Buddy Andreason, we go fishing weekends, us and Kirby Rich, Buddy used to always tease me about it. Point to those little girls on the news, screaming and running after Esau for autographs, and he'd say, "Man, you could get yourself some of that so easy! Just tell them you're his brother, you'll introduce them -- man, they'd be all over you! *Allover* you!"

No, it's not a nickname, that was real. Esau Robbins. Right out of the Bible, the Old Testament, the guy who sold his birthright to his brother for a mess of pottage. Pottage is like soup or stew, something like that. Our Papa was a big Bible reader, and there was ... I don't know, there was stuff that was funny to him that wasn't real funny to anyone else. Like naming me and Esau like he did.

A lot easier to live with Jacob than a funny name like Esau, I guess -- you know, when you're a kid. But I wasn't all that crazy about my name either, tell you the truth, which is why I went with Jake first time anybody ever called me that in school, never looked back. I mean, you think about it now. The Bible Esau's the hunter, the fisherman, the outdoor guy -- okay, maybe not the brightest fellow, not the most mannerly, maybe he cusses too much and spits his tobacco where he shouldn't, but still. And Jacob's the sneaky one, you know? Esau's come home beat and hungry and thirsty, and Jacob tricks him -- face it, Jacob *tricks* him right out of his inheritance, his whole future, and their mama helps him do it, and God thinks that's righteous, a righteous act. Makes you wonder about some things, don't it?

Did he have a bad time of it growing up, account of his name? 'Bout like you'd expect. I had to fight his battles time to time, if some big fellow was bullying him, and my sister Willa did the same, because we were the older ones, and that's just what you do, right? But we didn't *see* him, you know what I mean? Didn't have any idea who he *was*, except a nuisance we had to take care of, watch after, keep

Nobody does anymore, haven't for years -- well, that's why you're here, ain't it, one of those "Where Are They Now" pieces of yours? - - but it's funny, when you think about it. I mean, even after what happened, and all this time, you'd think Willa and I -- Willa's my sister -- you'd think we'd say at least Word One about him now and then. To each other, maybe not to anyone else. But we don't, not ever, even now. Hell, my wife won't talk about Esau, and she'd have more reason than most. Lucky you found me first -- she'd have run you right on out of the house, and she could do it, too. Tell the truth, shame the devil, the only reason I'm sitting here talking to you at all is you having the mother wit to bring along that bottle of Blanton's Single Barrel. Lord, I swear I can *not* remember the last time I had any of that in the house.

Mind if you record me? No, no, you go ahead on, get your little tape thing going, okay by me. Doesn't make a bit of difference. You're like to think I'm pretty crazy before we're through, one way or another, but that don't make any difference either.

Well, okay then. Let's get started.

Last of the great TV anchormen, my brother, just as big as newsmen ever used to get. Not like today -- too many of them in the game, too much competition, all sort of, I don't know, interchangeable. More and more folks getting the news on their computers, those little earphone gadgets, I don't know what-all. It's just different than it was. Way different. Confess I kind of like it.

But back then, back then, Esau was just a little way south of a movie star. Couldn't walk down the street, go out grocery-shopping,

out of traffic. He's seven years younger than Willa, five years younger than me. Doesn't sound like much now, but when you're a kid it's a lot. He might have been growing up in China, for all we knew about him.

I'm embarrassed to say it flat out, but there's not a lot I really recall about him as a kid, before the whole thing with Donnie Schmidt. I remember Esau loved tomatoes ripe off the vine -- got into trouble every summer, stealing them out of the neighbors' yards -- and he was scared of squirrels, can you believe that? Squirrels, for God's sake. Said they chased him. Oh, and he used to hurt himself a lot, jumping down from higher and higher places -- ladders, trees, sheds and all such. Practicing landing, that was the idea. Practicing landing.

But I surely remember the first time I ever really looked at Esau and thought, wow, what's going on here? Not at school -- in the old Pott Street playground, it was. Donnie Schmidt -- mean kid with red hair and a squinty eye -- Donnie had Esau down on his back, and was just beating him like a rug. Bloody nose, big purple shiner already coming up ... I came running all the way across the playground, Willa too, and I got Donnie by the neck and hauled him right off my brother. Whopped him a couple of times too, I don't mind telling you. He was a nasty one, Donnie Schmidt.

Esau had quit fighting, but he didn't bounce up right away, and I wouldn't have either, the whupping he'd taken. He was just staring at Donnie, and his eyes had gone really pale, both of them, and he pointed straight at Donnie -- looked funny, I'm bound to say, with him still lying flat down in that red-clay mud -- and he kind of whispered, "*You got run over.*" Hadn't been as close as I was, I'd never have heard him.

"You got run over." Like that -- like it had already happened, you see? Exactly -- like he was reading the news. You got it.

Okay. Now. This is what's important. This is where you're going to start wondering whether you should have maybe sat just a little closer to the door. See, what happened to Donnie, didn't happen then -- it had already happened a week before. Seriously. Donnie, he didn't disappear, blink out of sight, right when Esau said those words. He just shrugged and walked away, and Willa took Esau home to clean him up, and I got into a one-o-cat game -- what you probably call "horse" or "catcher-flies-up" -- with a couple of my pals until dinnertime. And Ma yelled some at Esau for getting into a fight, but nobody else thought anything more about it, then or ever. Nobody except me.

Because when I woke up next morning, everybody in town knew Donnie Schmidt had been dead for a week. Hell, we'd all been to the funeral.

I didn't see it happen, but Willa did -- or that's what she thought, anyway. Donnie'd been walking to school, and old Mack Moffett's car went out of control somehow, crossed three lanes in two, three seconds, and pinned him against the wall of a house. Poor kid never knew what hit him, and neither did anyone who ever went over the car or gave poor Mack a sobriety test. The old man died a couple of months later, by the way. Call it shock, call it a broken heart, if you like -- I don't know.

But the point is. The point is that Donnie Schmidt was alive as could be the day before, beating up on Esau on the playground. I remembered that. But I'd also swear on a stack of Bibles that he'd been killed in an accident the week before, and Willa would swear on the Day of Judgment that she was there. And we'd both pass any and every lie-detector test you want to put us through. Because we *know*, we know we're telling the truth, so it's not a lie. Right?

It's just not true.

Told you. Told you you'd be looking at me like that about now ... no, don't say nothing, just *listen*, okay? There's more.

Now I got no idea if that was the first time he did it -- made something happen by saying it already had. No idea. Like I said before, it was just the first time I ever really saw my brother.

Nor it didn't change a lot between us, him and Willa and me. Willa was all books and choir rehearsals, and I was all cars and trucks and hunting with my Uncle Rick, and Esau pretty much got along on his own, same as he'd always done. He was just Esau, bony as a clothes rack, all elbows and knees -- Papa used to say that he was so thin you could shave with him -- but if you looked closely, I guess you could have seen how he might yet turn out goodlooking. Only we weren't looking closely, none of us were, not even me. Not even after Donnie. One of anything is still just one of anything, even if it's strange. You can put it out of your mind. So across the dinner table was about it for Willa and me. If we were home.

But while I wasn't really looking, I can't say I didn't pay a little more attention in the looking I did, if you know what I mean.

One time I do recall, when Esau was maybe twelve, maybe thirteen, in there somewhere. Must have been thirteen, because I was already out of high school and working five days a week to help with the rent. Anyway I'm up on the roof of the house on a Saturday, replacing a few shingles got blown off in the last windstorm. Hammering and humming, not thinking about much of anything, and suddenly I turn

my head and there's Esau, a few feet away, squatting on his heels and watching me. Never heard him climbing up, no idea how long he's been there, but I know I don't like that look -- sets me to thinking about the one he gave Donnie. What if he says to me, "*You* fell off the roof," and it turns out I'm dead, and been dead some while? So I say "Hey, you want to hand me those nails over there?" friendly and peaceable as you like. Probably the most I've said to him in a week, more.

So he hands me the nails, and I say thanks, and I go back to work. And Esau sits watching me a few minutes more, and then he asks, right out of nowhere, "Jake, you believe in God?"

Like that. I didn't even look up, just grunted, "Guess I do."

"You think God's nice?"

His voice was still breaking, I recall -- went up and down like a seesaw, made me laugh. I said, "Minister says so."

He wouldn't quit on it, wouldn't let up. "But do *you* think God's nice?"

I dropped a couple of shingles, and made him go down and bring them back up to the roof for me. When he'd done that, I said, "You look around at this world, you think God's nice?"

He didn't answer for a while, just sat there watching me work. By and by he said, "If I was God, I'd be nice."

I set my eye on him then, and I don't know what made me do it, but I said, "You would, huh? Tell it to Donnie Schmidt."

I'd never said anything like that to him before. I'd never mentioned Donnie Schmidt since the funeral, because I knew in my mind -- like Willa, like everyone else -- that Donnie was dead and buried a week before him and Esau had that fight. Anyway, Esau's eyes filled up, which hardly ever happened, he wasn't ever a crier, and his face got all red, and he stood up, and for a minute I thought he actually was about to come at me. But he didn't -- he just screamed, with that funny breaking voice, "*I would* be a nice God! *I would!*"

And he was off and gone, I guess down the ladder, though maybe he jumped, the way he was doing then, because he was limping a bit at dinnertime. Anyway, we never talked about God no more, nor about Donnie Schmidt neither, at least while Esau still lived here.

I never talked about any of this with Papa. He was pretty much taken up with his Bible and his notions and his work at the tannery, before he passed. But Ma saw more than she let on. One time ... there was this one time she was still up when I come home from little Sadie Morrison's place, she as later married that Canuck fellow, Rene Arceneaux, and she said -- that's Ma, not Sadie -- she said to me, "Jacob, Esau's bad."

I said, "Ma, goodness' sake, don't say that. There's nothing wrong with the kid except he's kind of a pain in the ass. Otherwise I got no quarrel with him." Which was true enough then, and maybe still is, depending how you measure.

Ma shook her head. I remember, she was sitting right where you are, by the fireplace -- this was their house, you know -- just rocking and shelling peas -- and she said, "Jacob, I ain't nearly as silly as everybody always thinks I am. I know when somebody's bad. Esau, he makes people into ghosts."

I looked at her. I said, "Ma. Ma, don't you never go round saying stuff like that, they'll put you away for sure. You're saying Esau kills people, and he never killed nobody!" And I believed it, you see, absolutely, even though I also knew better.

And Ma ... Ma, whatever she knew, maybe she knew it because she was just as silly as folks thought she was. Hard to say about Ma. She said, "That girl last year, the one he was so gone on, who wanted to go off to New York to be an actress. You remember her?"

"Susie Harkin," I said. "Sure I remember. Plane crashed, killed everybody on board. It was real sad."

Ma didn't say nothing for a long time. Rocked and shelled, rocked and shelled. I stood and watched her, snatching myself a pea now and then, and thinking on how wearied she was getting to look. Then she said, almost mumbling-like, "I don't think so, Jacob. I'm*persuaded* she got killed in that crash, but I don't *think* so."

That's exactly how she put it -- exactly. I didn't say anything myself, because what could I say -- Ma, you're right, I remember it both ways too? I remember you telling me she gave him the mitten -- that's the way Ma talks; she meant the girl broke up with him -- and left, and I remember Susie doing just fine up there in the city, she even sent me a letter ... but I also remember her and Esau talking about

getting married someday, only then she stepped on that flight and never got to New York at all ... I'm going to tell Ma that, and get her going, when the city health people already thought she ought to be off in some *facility* somewhere? Not hardly.

Things wandered along, way they do, just happening and not happening. Willa went all the way on to state college and become a teacher, and then she got married and moved all that way to Florida, Jacksonville Beach. Got two nice kids, my niece Carol Ann and my nephew Ben. Ma finally did have to go away, and soon enough she passed too. Me, I kept on at the same hardware store where you found me, only after a while I came to own it -- me and the bank. Married Middy Jo Staines, but she died. No children.

And Esau ... well, he graduated the town high school like me and Willa -- unless maybe we just think he did -- and then the University of Colorado gave him a scholarship, unless they just think so, and he was gone out of here quicker than scat. Never really came home after that, except the once, which I'll get to in a bit. Got through college, got the job with that station in Baltimore, and the next time we saw him he was on the air, feeding stories to the network, the way they do -- like, "And here's Esau Robbins, our Baltimore correspondent to tell you more about today's tragic explosion," or whatever. And pretty soon it was D.C. and the national news, every night, and you look up and your baby brother's famous. Couldn't have been over thirty.

And looking good, too, no question about it. Grew up taller than me, taller than Papa, with Ma's dark hair and dark blue eyes, and that look -- like he belonged right where he was, telling you things he knows that you don't, and telling them in that deep, warm, friendly voice he had. Lord, I don't know where he rented that voice -- he sure didn't have it when he lived in this town. Voice like that, he could have been reciting Mother Goose or something, wouldn't have mattered. When you heard it you just wanted to listen.

I used to watch him on the TV, my brother Esau, telling us what's really doing in Afghanistan, in Somalia, in France, in D.C., and I'd look at his eyes, and I'd wonder if he ever even thought about poor, nasty Donnie Schmidt. And I'd wonder how he found out he could do it, how'd he discover his talent, his knack, whatever you want to call it. I mean, how does a little boy, schoolyard-age boy -- how does he deal with a thing like that? How does he even practice it, predicting something he wants to happen -- and then, like that, it's true, and it's always been true, it's just a plain fact, like gravity or something, with nobody knowing any better for sure but me? Town like this, there's not a lot of people you can talk to about that kind of thing. Must of made him feel even more alone, you know?

The visit. Whoo. Yeah, well -- all right. All right.

It wasn't hardly a real visit, first off. See, he'd already been the anchorman on that big news program for at least ten, twelve years when they got the notion to do a show on his return to the old home town. So they sent a whole crowd along with him -- a camera crew, and a couple of producers, the way they do, and there was a writer, and some publicity people, and some other folks I can't recall. Anyw ay, I'll tell you, it was for sure the biggest thing to hit this place since Ruth and Gehrig barnstormed through here back in the Twenties. They were here a whole week, that gang, and they spent a lot of money, and made all the businesses happy. Can't beat that with a stick, can you?

And Esau walked through it all like a king -- just like a king, no other word for it. They filmed him greeting old friends, talking with his old teachers, stopping in at all his old hangouts, even reading to kids at the library. Mind you, I don't remember him ever having any hangouts, and the teachers didn't seem to remember him much at all. As for the old friends ... look, if Esau had any friends when we were all kids, I swear I don't recall them. I mean, there they were in this documentary thing, shaking his hand, slapping his back, having a beer with him in Henry's -- been there fifty, sixty years, that place -- but I'd never seen any of them with him as a kid, 'ceptin maybe a few of them were pounding on him, back before Donnie. Thing is, I don't imagine Esau was trying very hard to get the details right. Wouldn't have hardly thought we was worth the trouble. Willa thought she recognized one or two, and remembered this and that, but even she wasn't sure.

Oh, yeah, her and me, we were both in it. They paid for Willa to come from Florida -- flew little Ben and Carol Ann, too, but not her husband Jerry, cause they just wanted to show Esau being an uncle. They'd have put her and the kids up at the Laurel Inn with the crew, but she wanted to stay here at the old house, which was fine with me. Don't get to be around children much.

We didn't see much of Esau even after Willa got here, but a day or two before they wrapped up the film, he dropped over to the house for dinner, which meant that the whole crew dropped over too. We were the only ones eating, and it was the strangest meal I've ever had in my life, what with all those electricians setting up lights, and the sound people running cables every which way, and a director, for God's sake, a director telling us when to start eating -- they sent out to Horshach's for prime rib -- and where to look when the camera was on us, and what Willa should say to the kids when they asked for seconds. Carol Ann got so nervous, she actually threw up her creamed corn. And Willa got so mad at the lighting guy, because Ben's got eye trouble, and the lights were so bright and hot ... well, it was a real mess, that's all. Just a real mess.

But Esau, he just sat through it all like it was just another broadcast, which I guess to him it was. Never got upset about all the retakes -- lord, that dinner must have taken three hours, one thing another -- never looked sweaty or tired, always found something new and funny to say to the camera when it started rolling again. But that's who he was talking to, all through that show -- not us, for sure. He never once looked straight at any of us, Willa or the kids or me, if the camera wasn't on him.

He was a stranger in this house, the house where we'd all grown up -- more of a stranger than all those cameramen, those producers. He could just as well have been from another country, where everybody's great-looking, but they don't speak any language you ever heard of. With all the craziness and confusion, the lights and the reflectors, and the microphones swinging around on pole-things, I probably studied on my brother longer and harder than I'd ever done in my life before. There at that table, having that fake dinner, I studied on him, and I thought a few new things.

See, I couldn't believe it was just Esau. What I *could* believe is there's no such thing as history, not the way they teach it to you in school. Wars, revolutions, all those big inventions, all those big discoveries ... if there's been a bunch of people like Esau right through time -- or even a few, a handful -- then the history books don't signify, you understand what I'm saying? Then it's all just been what any one of them wanted, decided on, right at this moment or that, and no great, you know, patterns to the way things happen. Just Esau, and whatever Others, and *you got run over*. Like that. That's what I came to think.

And I know I'm right. Because Susie Harkin was in that film.

Yeah, yeah, I know what I told you about the plane crash, the rest of it, I'm telling you this now. She walked in by herself, bright as you please, just before they finally got around to putting real food on the table, and sat right down across from Esau, between me and little Ben. The TV people looked at the director for orders, and I guess he figured she was family, no point fussing about it, and let her stay. He was too busy yelling at the crew about the lights, anyway.

Esau was good. I am here to tell you, Esau was *good*. There was just that one moment when he saw her ... and even then, you might have had to be me or Willa, and watching close, before you noticed the twist of blank panic in his eyes. After that he never looked straight at her, and he sure never said her name, but you couldn't have told one thing from his expression. Susie didn't waste no time on him, neither; she was busy helping little Ben with his food, cutting his meat up small for him, and making faces to make him laugh. Ma had said "Esau makes people into ghosts," but I don't guess you'd find a ghost cutting up a boy's prime rib for him, do you? Not any kind of ghost I ever heard about.

When she'd finished helping Ben, she looked right up at me, and she winked.

As long as she'd been gone, Susie Harkin didn't look a day different. I don't suppose you'd ever have called her a beauty, best day she ever saw. Face too thin, forehead a shade low, nose maybe a bit beaky -- but she had real nice brown eyes, and when she smiled you didn't see a thing but that smile. I'd liked her a good bit when she was going out with Esau, and I was real sorry when she died in that plane crash. So was Willa. And now here Susie was again, sitting at our old dinner table with all these people around, winking at me like the two of us had a secret together. And we did, because I knew she'd been dead, and now she wasn't, and *she* knew I knew, and she knew *why* I knew besides. So, yeah, you could say we had our secret.

Esau didn't do much more looking at me during the dinner than he did at Susie, but that was the one time he did. I saw him when I turned to say something to Willa. It wasn't any special kind of a look he gave me, not in particular; it was maybe more like the first time I really looked at him, when he did what he did to Donnie Schmidt. As though he hadn't ever seen me either, until that glance, that wink, passed between Susie Harkin and me.

Anyway, by and by the little ones fell asleep, and Willa took them off to bed, and the crew packed up and went back to the Laurel Inn, and Susie right away vanished into the kitchen with all the dirty dishes -- "No, I insist, you boys just stay and talk." You don't hear women say that much anymore.

So there we were, me and Esau, everything gotten quiet now -- always more quiet after a lot of noise, you notice? -- and him still not really looking at me, and me too tired and fussed and befuddled not to come straight at him. But the first thing I asked was about as dumb as it could be. "Squirrels still chasing you?"

Whatever he was or wasn't expecting from me, that sure as hell wasn't it. He practically laughed, or maybe it was more like he grunted in a laugh sort of way, and he said, "Not so much these days." Close to, he looked exactly like he looked on the TV -- exactly, right down to the one curl off to the left on his forehead, and the inlaid belt buckle, and that steeping thing he did with his fingers. Really was like talking to the screen.

"Susie's looking fine, don't you think?" I asked him. "I mean, for having been dead and all."

Oh, that reached him. That got his attention. He looked at me then, all right, and he answered, real slow and cold and careful, "I don't know what you're talking about. *Whatare* you talking about?"

"Come on, Esau," I said. "Tomorrow I might wake up remembering mostly whatever you want me to remember, the way you do people, but right now, tonight, I'm afraid you're just going to have to sit here and talk to me --"

"Or *what*?" Those two words cracked out of him just like a whip does -- there's the forward throw, almost gentle, like you're fly-fishing, and then the way you bring it back, that's what makes that sound. He didn't say anything more, but the color had drained right out of his eyes, same way it happened with Donnie Schmidt. Didn't look much like the TV now.

I asked him, "You planning to make me a ghost too? Kill me off in a plane crash a few weeks ago? I ought to tell you, I hate flying, and everybody knows it, so you might want to try something different. Me, I always wanted to get shot by a jealous husband at ninety-five or so, but it's your business, I wouldn't presume." I don't know, something just took me over and I didn't care what I said right then.

He didn't answer. We could hear Susie rattling things in the kitchen, and Willa singing softly to her kids upstairs. Got a pretty voice, Willa does. Wanted to do something with it, but what with school, and then there was Jerry, and then there was the trouble starting with Ma ... well, nothing ever came of it somehow. But I could see Esau listening, and just for a minute or so he looked like somebody who really might have had a sister, and maybe a brother too, and was just visiting with them for the evening, like always. I took the moment to say, "Papa was funny, wasn't he, Esau? Getting us backwards like that, with the naming?"

He stared at me. I shrugged a little bit. I said, "Well, you think about it some. Here's Jacob, which I'm named for, cheating Esau out of his inheritance, tricks him into swapping everything due him for a mess of chicken soup or some such. But with us ... with us, it kind of worked out t'other way round, wouldn't you say? I mean, when you think about it."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He said it in the TV voice, but his eyes still weren't his TV eyes, reassuring everyone that the world hadn't ended just yet. "Papa was as crazy as Ma, only different, and our names don't signify a thing except he was likely drunk at the time." He slammed his hand on the table, setting all the dishes Susie hadn't cleared off yet to rattling. Esau lowered his voice some. "I never stole *anything* from you, Jake Robbins. I wouldn't have lowered myself to it, any more than I'd have lowered myself to take along a lump of sand-covered catshit from this litterbox of a town, the day I finally got out of here. The one thing I ever took away was *me*, do you understand that, brother? Nothing more. Not one damn thing more."

His face was so cramped up with anger and plain contempt that I couldn't help putting a finger out toward him, like I was aiming to smooth away a bunch of rumples. "You want to watch out," I said. "Crack your makeup." Esau came to his feet then, and I really thought he was bound to clock me a good one. I said, "Sit down. There's ladies in the house."

He went on glaring in my face, but by and by he kind of stood down -- didn't quite sit, you understand, but more leaned on the table, staring at me. He'd cracked his makeup, all right, and I don't mean the stuff they'd put on his skin for the filming. You wouldn't want that face telling you any kind of news right then.

"I bet Papa knew," I said. "Ma just had like a glimmer of the truth, but Papa ... likely it's how come he drank so much, and read the Bible so crazy. It's his side of the family, after all."

Esau said it again. "I don't know what you're talking about," but there wasn't much what you might call conviction in the words. It's an odd thing, but he was always a real bad liar -- embarrassing bad. I'd guess it's because he's never had to lie in his life: he could always make the lie be true, if he cared to. Handy.

I said, "I'm talking about genetics. Now there's a word I hadn't had much use for until recently -- knew what it meant, more or less, and let it go at that. But there's a deal *to*genetics when you look close, you know?" No answer; nothing but that bad-guy stare, with something under it that maybe might be fear, and maybe not. I kept going. "Papa and his Bible. There's a lot in the Bible makes a lot more sense that way, genetics. What if ... let's say all those miracles didn't have a thing to do with God, nor Moses, nor Jesus, nor Adam's left ball, whatever. What if it was all people like you? Two, three, four, five thousand years of people like you? The Bible zigs and zags and contradicts itself, tells the same story forty ways from Sunday, and don't connect up to nothing half the time, even to a preacher. But now you back off and suppose for one moment that the Bible's actually trying to record a world that keeps shifting this way and that, because people keep messing with it. What would you say about that, Esau?"

Nothing. Not a word, not a flicker of an eyelid, nothing for the longest time -- and then, of all things, my brother began to smile. "Declare to goodness," he said, and it wasn't the smooth TV voice at all, but more like the way his mouth was born, as we say around here. "Even a blind hog finds an acorn once in a while. Continue, please. You have all my attention."

"No, I don't yet," I said back to him, "but I will. Because with genetics, it's a family thing. Somebody in a family has a gift, a talent, there's likely to be somebody else who has it too. Oh, maybe not the same size or shape of a gift, but close enough. Close enough."

I surely had his attention now, let me tell you. His hands were opening and closing like leaves starting to stir when a storm's coming. "Willa doesn't have that thing you have," I said, "none of it, not at all. She's the lucky one. But *I* do. Wouldn't have guessed it before, not even seeing what you'd done, but now I know better. That same power to mess with things, only I guess I never needed to. Not like you."

Esau started to say something, but then he didn't. I said, "I turned out pretty lucky myself. I had Middy Jo -- for a while, anyway. I got a job suited me down to the ground. Didn't have nearly so many people to get even with as you had, and the ones I did I have I mostly forgot over time. I was always forgetful that way. Forget my head, it wasn't screwed on." Papa always used to say that about me, the same way he used to say Willa'd make some woman a great husband, because she could get the car started when he couldn't. Never yet heard old Jerry Flores complain.

"What you did to Donnie Schmidt," I said. "What you did to Susie. What I know you did to a few other folks, even though you made sure the rest of everybody didn't remember. It all scared me so bad, I would never gone anywhere *near* power like that, if I'd known I had it."

Esau's voice was sort of thickish now, like he was trying not to cry, which surely wasn't the case. He said, "You can't do what I do."

"You know better than that, Esau. Same way I know you've never bent reality towards even one good thing. I watch you on the TV, every night, just about, and everything you report on -- it's death, it's all death, nothing but death, one way or another. A million baby girls left out on the street in China, a raft full of people capsizes off Haiti, some kid wipes out a whole schoolyard in Iowa, there's more people starving in Africa, getting massacred, there's suicide bombers and serial killers all over the place -- it's you, it's your half of the genetics. It's what you are, Esau, and I'm sorry for you."

"Don't be." It was only a whisper, but it came at me like a little sideways swipe from one of those oldtime straight razors, the kind Papa had. Esau said, "You're the good one." It wasn't a question. "Well, who'd have thought it? My loud-mouthed, clumsy, stupid big brother turns out to be the superhero in the closet, the champion with a secret identity. Amazing. Just shows you something or other. Truly amazing."

"No," I said. "No, I don't care about that. I just wanted you to know I know. About the genetics and so forth." And then I said it -- because he's right, I am stupid. I said, "You're trying to be the Angel of Death, Esau, and I'm just so sorry for you, that's all."

He'd been looking toward the kitchen, like he expected something -- or maybe didn't expect it -- but now he turned around on me, and I'm not ever about to forget what I saw then. It was like we were kids again, and he was screaming at me, "I *would* be a nice God! I *would*!" Except now the scream was all in his eyes: they were stretched wide as wide, like howling jaws, and the whites had gone too white, so they made the pupils look, not black, but a kind of musty, crumbly gray, like his eyes were rotting, nothing left in there but gray anger, gray pain, gray brick-lined schoolyards, where my brother Esau learned what he was. I'd been halfway joking when I'd said that about the Angel of Death. Not any more.

"Sorry for me, Jake?" It wasn't the razor-whisper, but it wasn't any voice you'd have recognized, either. Esau said, "Sorry for me? I'm on television, asshole. I'm a *star*. Have you the slightest notion of what that means? It means millions -- *millions* -- of people inviting me into their homes, listening to me, believing in me, *trusting* me. Hell, I'm a family member -- a wise old uncle, a mysteriously well-traveled cousin, dropping by to tell them tales of the monsters and fools who run their lives, of the innocents who died horribly today, the people murdered to please somebody's god, the soldiers being sent to die in some place they never heard of, the catastrophes waiting to happen tomorrow, unless somebody does something right away. Which they won't, but that isn't *my* work. I can't claim credit there."

He smiled at me then, and it was a real smile, young and joyous as you like. He said, "Don't you understand? They *love* death, all those people, they love what I do -- they *need* it, no matter how awful they say it is. It's built into the whole species, from the beginning, and you know it as well as I do. You may be the Good Angel, but I'm the one they hang out with in the kitchen and the living room, I'm the one they have their coffee with, or a beer, while I smile and lay on some more horror for them. Meaning no offense, but who wants what *you're* selling?"

"Those people who watch you don't know what they're buying," I said back. "Your stories aren't just stories, you aren't just reporting. You're making real things happen in the real world. I see you on the TV and I can feel all those things you talk about, and explain about, and tell folks to be afraid of, I can feel them coming true, every night. It's like Ma said, your stories kill people." He didn't turn a hair, or look away, and I didn't expect him to. I said, "And I keep wondering, how many like us might be doing the same right now, all over everywhere. Messing with people, messing with the world so nothing makes no sense, one day to the next, so most everybody gets run over in the end, like Donnie Schmidt. You suppose that's all we can do? That's all it's for, this gift we've got? This heritage?"

Esau shrugged. "No idea. It suits me." He gave me that smile again, made him look like a happier little kid than he ever was. "But why should it concern you, Jake? Are you planning to devote the rest of your life to writing letters to my sponsors, telling them I'm the source of all the pain and misery in the world? I'll be very interested in watching your efforts. Fascinated, you could say."

"No," I told him. "I've got a store to run, and I meet Earl Howser and Buddy Andreason for breakfast at Buttercup on Tuesdays, and it's not my place to chase around after you, fixing stuff. What I know's what I know, and it don't include putting the world back the way it ought to be. It's too late for that. Way too late for heroes, champions, miracles. Don't matter what our heritage was maybe meant for --

your side got hold of it first, and you won long ago. No undoing that, Esau, I ain't fool enough to think otherwise. I'm still sorry for you, but I know your side's won, this side the grave."

He wasn't listening to me, not really. Just about all his attention was focusing on the kitchen right then, because Susie'd begun whistling while she was clattering pots in the sink. She could always whistle like a man, Susie could. Esau took a step toward the sound.

"I wouldn't," I advised him. "Best leave her be for a bit. What with one thing another, she's not real partial to you just now. You know how it is."

He stopped where he was, but he didn't answer. Halfway crouched, halfway plain puzzled -- I've seen dogs look like that, when they couldn't figure what to do about that big new dog on the block. He said, real low, "I didn't bring her back."

"No," I said. "You couldn't have."

He didn't hear that right off; then he did, and he was just starting to turn when Susie came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a dishtowel and asking, "Jake, would you like me to wash that old black roasting pan while I'm at it?" Then she saw Esau standing there, and she stood real still, and he did too. Lord, if I closed my eyes, I'd see them like that right now.

I stood up from the table, so that made three of us on our feet, saying nothing. Esau was breathing hard, and I couldn't hardly tell if Susie was breathing at all. That made me anxious -- you know, considering -- so I said, "Esau was just leaving. Wanted to say goodbye."

Neither of them paid the least bit of attention to me. Susie finally managed to say, "You're looking well, Esau. That's a really nice tie."

Esau's voice sounded like a cold wind in an empty place. He said, "You're rotting in the ground. You're bones."

"No." Susie's own voice was shaky, but stronger than his, some way. "No, Esau, I'm not. I refuse."

She sort of peeked past him at me as she said that, and Esau caught it. He turned.

"Susie stays," I said. I was madder than I ever remembered being, and I was wound up, ready to go at whoever, let's do it, just pick your weapons. And I was heavily spooked, too, because pretty much the only mixups I've been in my whole life, they were always about hauling some guy off my baby brother one more time. Heritage or not, I'm no fighter, never wanted to be one. It's just I always liked Susie.

As for the way Esau stared at me, it did clear up a few things, and that's about all I'm going to tell you. I looked back into those TV eyes, and I saw what lived in there, and I thought, well, anyway, I've still got a sister. If you can get through the rest of your life without ever having that feeling, I'd recommend it.

Esau said, "She goes back where she belongs. Now."

"She didn't belong there in the first place," I said to him. "Leave her be, Esau. She's got no business being dead."

"You don't know what you're doing," he said. His lips were twitching like they didn't belong to his face. "Stay out of it, Jake."

"Not a chance," I said. "I can't fix up all the things you do, what you've already done. Might be Superman, Spiderman, Batman could, but it's not in me, I'm no hero. I'm just a stubborn man who runs a hardware store. But I always liked Susie. Nice girl. Terrific whistler. Susie's not going back nowhere."

Even a little bit younger, I'm sure I'd have been showing off for her, backed away against the wall as she was, looking like a lady tied up for the dragon. But I wasn't showing off for anybody right then, being almost as scared as I was angry. Esau sighed -- very dramatic, very heavy. He said, "I did warn you. Nobody can say I didn't warn you. You're my brother, after all."

I started to answer him, but I can't remember what I meant to say, because that was when Esau hit me. Not with his fists, but with such a blast of -- I still don't know what to call it ... hatred? Contempt? Plain meanness? -- that it knocked me off my feet and right over my chair. For a moment I swear I thought I'd caught on fire. My head wouldn't work; *nothing* worked; it was like every single string in my body had been cut -- I couldn't even flop around on the floor. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know *what* I was.

Susie screamed, and Esau hit me again. That time I did flop around, after I slid across the floor and fetched up against the wall. To this day I can't honestly explain how it felt -- been trying to describe it to myself for years. Best I can do is that it wasn't like an electric shock, and it wasn't really like being burned, or beaten up either, although I was all over bruises next day. It was more ... it was more like he was *unmaking* me, like he was starting to take me apart, atom by atom, molecule by molecule, so I wouldn't exist anymore -- I wouldn't ever *have* existed, he'd never have *had* a brother. I could feel it happening, and I tell you, I'll never be scared of anything again.

But I didn't die. I mean, I didn't get *lost*, the way he wanted me to. Susie ran to me, but I managed to wave her off, because I didn't want her getting caught between us. Esau went on hammering me with whatever it was he had that let him smash planes out of the sky, trains off the tracks, set mudslides boiling down on little mud villages. But it wasn't hurting me any more, not like it had been. I was still me. He hadn't been able to make me not *be*, you understand?

I got my back against the wall and pushed myself up till I was on my feet. Took more time than you might think -- I work, I don't work *out* -- and anyway Esau just kept at me, like point-blank, coming close up to me now and knocking me this way and that, one belt of crazy rage after another. I couldn't do much about it yet, but he couldn't quite put me down again, either.

I did tell him to stop it. Same way he warned me, I told him to stop. But he wouldn't.

So I stopped him. Or the thing stopped him, the thing that had been rousing up in me all this time, while he was whupping the daylights out of me. It burst out of me like from a flamethrower, searing me -- mouth, throat, chest, guts -- way worse than anything Esau'd done to me, and slamming me back against the wall harder than he had. I couldn't see, and I couldn't hear a thing, and right that moment, that's when I did think I was going to die. Looked forward to it, too, just then.

When my eyes cleared some -- ears took a lot longer -- I saw Esau lying on the floor. He wasn't moving.

If it was just me, the way I was feeling, I'd likely have left him lying there till the neighbors started complaining. But ... see, I already told you how Willa and me, we were always supposed to watch over our baby brother -- protect him in those schoolyard fights, make sure he did his homework, all that -- and I guess old habits die hard. I said, "Esau? Esau?" and when he didn't answer, I tried to get to him, but he seemed an awful long way off. Susie helped me. She'd been crying, but she stopped, and she got me to Esau.

He was trying to sit up by the time we reached him, and we helped him onto his feet in a while. He looked like pounded shit, excuse my French, what with his nice shirt in rags, and that tie Susie liked gone, and an arm of his suit jacket dangling by a few threads. I'd seen him wear that same jacket on the TV, I don't know how many times. His face was gray. I don't mean pale, or white -- it was gray like old cement, old grout, and it was like the gray went all the way through. Susie and me, we might be the only people in the world ever saw him like that.

He actually tried to smile. He said, "I should have made you check your guns at the door. Where on earth did you pick up *that* trick?"

"Just got pissed off," I said. "And I'll do worse if you're not out of here in two minutes by Papa's watch. Susie stays."

Esau shrugged, or he tried to. "Got to catch a plane tomorrow, anyway. Back to the old grindstone." He looked at Susie. She kind of edged behind my shoulder some, and Esau's smile widened. He said, "Don't worry, my dear. You really should have stayed dead, you know, but it's not your fault." He turned back toward me. "Your doing, of course."

"Watching those folks pile in," I told him. My head was still ringing. "That whole crew, all those people come to paint up your homecoming for the world to see. Couldn't help thinking there ought to be someone like Susie there too. Like Donnie Schmidt. I swear, I was just thinking on it."

"Glad it wasn't Donnie who showed up," Esau murmured. He tugged on the loose arm of his ruined jacket; it came free, and he dropped it on the floor. "Sneaky old Brother Jake," he said. "You've likely got more of the family inheritance than I do. Just like in Papa's Bible, after all."

I was still feeling hollowed-out, burned-out, not by anything he'd done, but by whatever it was I'd had to do. I said, "I can't let you go on, Esau."

He smiled. "You can't kill me, Jake. We both know you better than that."

"You might not know me well enough," I said. "Gone as long as you've been. There's worse things than killing you. Maybe way worse."

And he saw. He looked into my eyes, for a change, and he saw what I had it in mind to do. "You wouldn't dare," he said in a whisper. "You wouldn't dare."

"I wouldn't dare *not* do it," I answered him straight. "You're a time-bomb, Esau, you're a loaded gun. Didn't matter before, when I could pretend I didn't really know -- but now, if I don't take the bullets out of you, I'm as bad you are. Can't see that I've got a choice."

He's Esau. He didn't beg, and he didn't bother with threatening. All he said was, "It won't be easy for you. It's my life you're talking about. I'll fight you for it."

"I know you will," I said. "And you'll have a better chance than Donnie Schmidt."

"Or me," Susie said, standing right next to me. "Goodbye, Esau."

He gave her a different kind of smile than he'd given me -- practically kind, practically real. It looked nice on him. He said, "Goodbye, Susie. See you on the six o'clock." And he was away, that fast, vanished into the dark. I looked after him for some while, then said what I had to say, and closed the door.

Susie had heard me, of course. "He always meant to be a good God," I told her. "A good God, a good angel, whatever. Don't know how he got to be ... what he was."

Susie picked up Esau's torn-off sleeve and turned it around and around in her hands, not looking at it, not looking at anything much. She said finally, "I read once, in India they've got gods that are also demons. Depends on their mood, I guess, or the time of year. Or maybe just their lunch."

"Well, I wasn't planning to go into the god business myself," I told her. "Really wasn't looking to set up in competition with any Angel of Death. Piss-poor job, you ask me. No benefits, no paid vacations. And damn sure no union."

Susie shook her head and laughed a little bit, but after that she got quiet again, and sort of broody. By and by, she said, "There's a union. There's always been others like you, Jake. The ones who mend the world."

"The world's no torn shirt," I said. My insides felt like they'd been scooped out, dragged over gravel and put back. "I got a store to run." Susie looked at me, didn't say anything. I said, "There's others like him out there, I don't know how many. Can't stop them all." I put my hand on Susie's shoulder to steady myself.

Willa came in behind us in her bathrobe, looked around at the dining room, and demanded, "What was all that tarryhooting around in here after we went to bed? Did you and Esau get to wrestling or something?"

"Kind of," I mumbled. "Boys with beers. I'll clean up, I promise."

Willa shrugged. "Your house. I was just afraid you'd wake up the kids. Esau already gone?" I nodded, and she peered at me in that older-sister way of hers. "You sure nothing happened between you two?" She wasn't expecting an answer, so I didn't have to fix one up. She studied Susie a lot more closely and carefully than she'd done during dinner, and there wasn't any question what she was thinking. But what Willa thinks and what Willa says never did spend a lot of time together. This time she just said, "Good of you to take the time with Ben, Susie. I was just frazzled out, dealing with those crazy TV people and Carol Ann."

"It's been some time since I've been around children," Susie said. "I like yours."

Willa said, "Stay the night, why don't you? It's late, and there's a spare bedroom downstairs." As she left, she said over her shoulder, "And I make great Mexican eggs. My husband loves them, and *he's* Mexican."

Susie looked at me. I said, "If you aren't worried about compromising your reputation, that is, staying over in the house of a widower man. There's still folks in this town would raise their eyebrows."

Susie laughed full-out then, for the first time. That was nice. She said, "I'm older than I look."

Well.

What else? The network never ran that show, of course, what with one thing another. Didn't get the chance. Seems like it all started turning bad for Esau, just about then, slow but steady. That stock-option business. Those people who sued the whole network about his fouled-up dirty-bomb story. The sexual harassment charges. *Those* got settled out of court, like a bunch of other stuff, but there was a mountain landing on his head and he couldn't duck it all. Still, he hung on like a bullrider. He's almost as stubborn as I am. Almost.

Tell the truth, he might have ridden that bull all the way home, if he'd still been selling the same kind of stories. But the things that had made him who he was, the big disasters and the common-man nightmares, somehow there just weren't as many of them as there had been. The news got smaller, and so did he.

Did I feel bad? Interesting, you asking me that. Yeah, I did feel bad for him, I couldn't help it. I still wonder how he felt when he woke up -- the morning *after* the night he told the country all about those Kansas cult-murders, with the ritual mutilating and all -- only it turned out they hadn't ever happened, even though he'd made them up just as pretty and scary as all the other lies he'd always made real. How's the Angel of Death supposed to do his job with clipped wings?

I got a call in the store that day. Picked up on the second ring, but when I said hello there wasn't anybody on the line.

The guns were the last straw. The automatics and the Uzis and whatever in his office, in the dressing-room, those were bad enough, the tabloids had a field day with those. But trying to go through Los Angeles airport security with a pistol butt just sticking out of his coat pocket ... lord, that did him in. Network hustled him out of there so fast, his desk was smoking behind him. That wasn't me, by the way, all those guns. That was just the state he was in by then. Poor Esau. All those years jumping off things, he still never did learn how to land.

Or maybe I should have chosen my words better as he walked away that night. Probably would have, if I'd had more time. All I knew then was I had to speak up before he did. Jam my foot in the door.

"My brother thinks he's an angel," I'd said. "He thinks he can change anything in the world just by saying so. But that's crazy. *He can't do that.*"

Didn't know what else to say. Might have had a little too much what we used to call *english* on it, but I done what I could.

Lord, don't I wish I had a movie of you for the last half-hour or so, the way you've been looking at me. You'd get to keep *that*, anyway, even though there won't be nothing on your tape tomorrow, nor nothing in your memory. Couple of hours, you couldn't even find this house again, same as your editor won't ever remember giving out this assignment. Because nobody talks about my brother anymore. Nobody's talked about him in years. And it's a sad thing, some ways, because being Esau Robbins every night, everywhere, six o'clock ... that *mattered* to him. Being the Angel of Death, that *mattered* to him. They were the only things that ever filled him, you understand me? That's all he ever could do in his life, my poor damn brother -- get even with us, with people, for being alive. And I took all that away. Stole his birthright and shut down the life he built with it. That don't balance the scales, nor make up for all he did, but it's going to have to do.

Esau Robbins no longer exists. He's not dead. He's just ... gone. Maybe someday I'll go and look for him, like an older brother should, but right now gone is how it stays. Price of the pottage.

Thanks for the Blanton's, young man. Puts a smile on my face, and even though it isn't her drink Susie will certainly applaud your thoughtfulness.

You'll likely be finding a bonus in your next paycheck. Nobody in accounting will be able to explain why -- and you sure as hell won't, either -- but just you roll with it.

Beauty's Folly

by Eugie Foster



Artwork by Liz Clarke

When we lived uptown in the big house with the whirlpool spa in the backyard, Father told me never to talk to strangers, that only criminals and rapists loitered in alleys. He still believed that, even after our fortunes changed and we had to move downtown.

I believed him too until we arrived in the tiny apartment. Our landlady, a woman with purple hair, and her son, a youth wearing a sky-blue skirt that swirled when he walked, welcomed us with a bonsai rosebush dotted with sunny, yellow blossoms. Its pot was painted purple and blue, like her hair and his skirt. I adored the flowers, but I was more cheered by the gesture of goodwill.

Father had been as wrong about the poor as he had been about everything else: Mother, the stock market, and the leniency of the IRS. After that, I became an ambassador, the go-between for the world outside and my family. Someone had to. My sister, Luella, shook with terror whenever she went out, afraid to look up, much less speak to anyone. And Father, when he wasn't pulling double shifts at the factory offices, shut himself in his room.

So it was natural for me, when I heard the music, to chase after it.

I found the musician hunkered in an alley. As alleys went, it was nice. Between a donut store and an all-night laundromat, the air was perfumed by fresh pastries and eau de dryer sheet. Even the graffiti was fanciful. In the middle of a gang logo, someone had painted a window overlooking a forest. And within that, the nearest tree trunk was splashed with street graffiti suggestive of another window, perhaps one overlooking an alley.

I approached with a friendly smile and my hands in view, because despite what Luella says, I'm not a fool. Still, at a yard away, I began having second thoughts. Sitting on the ground, the brim of his hat obscuring his face, his head came to my shoulders. Standing, he would tower over me.

His hat bobbed, and he blew a delicate trill on his instrument. It was a wooden recorder, big as a saxophone. I watched his fingers, remarkably dexterous for their size, skip over the holes. His skin was the darkest I'd ever seen, so black I couldn't tell where his wrist ended and the shadows of his coat sleeve began. His fingernails had a luminous quality, like they'd been glossed with liquid pearls.

"What kind of recorder is that?" I said.

His answer was a fluid scale that spanned astonishing octaves from soprano to bass.

"You're very good. How come you don't play on the corners where there's more traffic? You'd get more money."

A flurry of notes rose, wistful and amused. Conspicuously absent was either donation cup or hat.

"Don't you play for handouts?"

The music stopped, mid-stanza.

"I'm sorry if I offended you. I'll leave --"

"Don't go." His voice was a deep rumble, almost a growl. He moved faster than someone his size ought, and his fingers clamped my wrist. I knew better than to scream, because nothing frightens a man more than a screaming woman, but my heart galloped in my chest.

"Sure, okay. I've got nowhere I have to be. What's your name?"

He released me, and while I longed to bolt away, his legs looked to be twice as long as mine.

"Eloy."

"What tune were you playing, Eloy?" I used the cheerful tone reserved for unknown dogs and lunatics, and took a tentative step back.

"Beauty's Folly."

"That's the title?"

"You are Beauty?" His words were thick and broken, like English was a foreign tongue.

"My name's Annabel."

Despite my best efforts, I flinched when he moved, relaxing again when all he did was offer me his recorder. At a loss, I accepted it. It was lighter than it looked.

"Beauty's Folly," he said. "Play."

"I wasn't -- I can't play."

He waited. Not wanting to anger him, I set the mouthpiece to my lips. I'd never learned an instrument, although once I'd blown through a friend's harmonica. I expected something like the loud and unmelodic bray from that time. Instead, a single note sounded, sweet and clear.

I gasped. "Did I do that?"

Eloy rumbled, deep in his throat -- a chuckle. "Roses. Your folly."

"What? I don't --"

He held out his hand, and I gave back the recorder. The brim of his hat shifted to reveal the shadowy curve of his chin. The line of his mouth emerged beneath a tangle of inky hair that poured in a mane around his face. His lips were thin and pale, and his face sloped back like a wolf's muzzle. When I saw his eyes, I made a noise. They had no whites, no change in color between iris and pupil. They were a pair of liquid orbs too big for his head. Utterly inhuman.

"Marry me?" he rumbled.

I fled, expecting to hear chasing footsteps or to feel his weight smash into me. I reached the end of the alley with only my panting breath loud in my ears. I glanced back once; Eloy was gone.

Back home, I told my family about my encounter. Luella, predictably, was terrified.

"He could have been a rapist," she said. "What were you thinking, approaching him like a streetwalker?"

Father peered from the ledger in his hands. "It's wonderful how you get along with everyone, Annabel, but you should be more careful. I don't like you chatting with crazies."

My indignant reply was lost when the doorbell rang. The grating buzz was so different from the chimes of our last home.

A delivery man stood at the door, his arms overflowing with red roses.

"You Annabel?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Delivery for you."

I stared at the basket of long-stemmed beauties. "They can't be."

He squinted at the number on our door and the card in his hand. "Address on the card matches. Says 'For Annabel.'"

He thrust the roses at me, and I staggered into the apartment with the basket, a confused "thank you" halfway out. Only he wasn't done. He stuck a box into my arms stuffed with rose-colored silk -- yards and yards of tiered evening gown, complete with train. Next came a satin bag that held a crystal vial of rose-scented perfume, the expensive kind sold in posh boutiques uptown. And finally, he tossed a little velvet box on top of the pile. Luella helped me juggle dress, perfume, and roses so I could open it. An antique ring nestled in the box, set with rubies and diamonds. The gems sparkled from a traditional rose cut, framed by curlicues of gold rosettes.

"I didn't order any of this," I said. "I can't afford --"

"Everything's paid up," the man said. "Sign here."

Father stood with eyes glazed and wide. He stumbled over the dress, his face becoming by turns white then flushed. "Who sent this?"

The delivery man shrugged. "Card doesn't say. Maybe you won a sweepstakes or something." He tapped his clipboard.

I signed. What else could I do?

I closed the door after him, leaving me to face the alarm and accusations of my family.

"Annabel," Father said, "when Luella suggested you were playing the tease with strange men, I never once believed her."

"I'm not --"

"But these expensive gifts are the kind a man buys for his mistress." His face crumpled, and his voice broke. "Do you miss all the extravagance we used to have so much?"

"Daddy, no! I swear, whatever you think I've done, I haven't."

"I hope not."

Luella helped me lug my mysterious windfall into the bedroom we shared.

"I'm sorry," she whispered when we were alone. "I know you wouldn't, aren't . . . I didn't mean to make Daddy so upset."

I scowled and pushed the dress to the back of the closet.

"I worry about your reputation. I wish you would too." She took an appreciative sniff from the crystal vial before setting it on our dresser. "And I'm afraid you'll trust someone you shouldn't."

"I worry about you too, y'know." I tucked the velvet ring box in the bottom of my drawer. "I wish you would go out and meet people. If you gave them a chance, you might find someone you like."

Luella grinned. "Now wouldn't that give Daddy a heart attack?"

We giggled, little girls sharing a secret.

There was no space to put the roses in our bedroom, so they clustered around the window beside their bonsai cousin. Father ignored them, and when he was home, Luella followed his lead. But when he was away, she often drifted over to inhale their perfume, sometimes reaching out to stroke their delicate petals.

Days passed, and the roses wilted and died. I threw them out, and our lives settled back into their routines. I ran errands and did the shopping, doing temp work as retailer and receptionist when the agency called me, while Father worked long hours in the factory. Luella kept our apartment tidy and acquainted herself with the moods of the temperamental stove.

Sometimes, when I passed the donut shop, I thought I heard recorder music, but I never ventured into the alley again.

One day, I came home after an afternoon of answering phones and alphabetizing files to find Father already there, with Luella both excited and dismayed. He paced our living room, his eyes alight.

"I'm flying to New York tomorrow," he announced. "One of the factory accounts belongs to an old business associate. He's split from his old partner and looking to expand. I called him up and asked if he'd hear my pitch, and he wants me to give it in person."

"Daddy, that's great!" I said. "And so generous of him to fly you up."

Father lowered his eyes. "He's not."

"Then how did you book the flight?" Credit cards were another indulgence the IRS had appropriated from us, leaving us with only a household debit card for emergencies. Our account balance was nowhere near enough to afford plane fare to New York.

"I'm so sorry, Pumpkin. I should have asked you first, but there was such a rush."

"My ring." His hangdog expression told me before his ashamed nod that I'd guessed right. "You pawned it."

I struggled against the surge of outrage that made me want to scream and stamp my feet. It was childish; I hadn't even worn it. But it had been mine. The thought of it, safe in my drawer, had reassured me -- a pretty, gold safety net.

"I'll make it up to you," Father said. "Once I get this new job, I'll buy you a dozen gold rings to replace it."

"I'm not mad." It was lie, but a necessary one. "I'm sure you'll wow them tomorrow."

Luella packed his overnight bag. I smiled and made the appropriate excited responses throughout dinner. But after Father had gone to bed, I locked myself in the bathroom, turned on the tap, and bawled into a towel. I was a spoiled brat for resenting what Father had done, spoiled and selfish and silly.

After I cried myself out, I had a long, hot soak, and felt better.



The next morning, all of us trooped to the subway station -- the express line to the airport. Luella and I took turns hugging Father and wishing him luck and a safe journey.

The apartment was emptier without him, but also charged with anticipation, awaiting his homecoming and hopeful good news. We scrubbed the place from corner to corner. I defeated the dingy gray walls, forcing them to gleam, and Luella declared war on the dust bunnies and dust elephants.

On the day of his return, we made a sumptuous feast: Luella's signature casserole and homemade biscuits, with strawberry ice cream for dessert. But the hour when Father should have stepped off the subway platform and made his way home arrived without him. I phoned the airport and the subway. His flight had landed on time, and there were no delays on the track.

All that night, we waited. In the morning, I tried to track down the man Father had gone to see. Unfortunately, we didn't have his name or number -- a foolish oversight, in hindsight. Father's supervisor at the factory was at a loss, and the few people who would still talk to us in New York hadn't heard from him either.

We tried to comfort each other and carried on our lives, going through all the obligatory motions of eating, working, and waiting. One day, I woke up and discovered the refrigerator was empty. We were out of everything -- milk, eggs, bread, cheese -- so I left Luella a note and headed out to restock.

As I passed the donut shop, a mournful strain of music stirred the air. It echoed my mood so perfectly; I stood stock-still, caught in the spell of it. Without meaning to, I drifted to the alley's mouth. Where I had thought to find Eloy with his recorder, there was only alley.

The trail of notes led me to the graffiti window of painted brick. Something glittered at my foot. It was my ring, the antique one with the rubies and diamonds, the ring Father had pawned so he could finance his ill-fated trip.

I did what I had longed to before; I put it on. The music soared. In front of me, the graffiti window took on shape and dimension. No longer flat paint, it was a portal through which I could see a living, moving forest. Leaves stirred and flickered in the breeze, and a fluffy seed pod floated by. I could smell the bouquet of green growing things -- moist life and musty decay. I strained to hear the shush of wind as it streamed through branches.

I didn't hear the wind. I heard my name, faintly, as though shouted from a distance. It was Father.

He was in there, past the breezy grove with its swaying trees, somewhere. I lifted my hand, the ringed one, and felt the forest wind. Playful at first, it turned insistent, tugging and finally dragging me forward. My foot came down on a carpet of grass. The light spilling through the canopy dazzled my eyes, and I blinked them shut.

When I opened them, I was in a bright, hospital foyer surrounded by hallways and escalators. On my right, a wall of elevators sat ready, and on my left, an untended reception desk stood spotlighted by the sun.

"Hello?" I called.

The single word boomed, shattering the stillness. Places like this were supposed to be full of noise -- the clamor of busy, waiting, and harried people. But it was silent. No voices, no footsteps, only me.

A file lay on the desk with Father's name scrawled in bold letters on it, and beneath it, a number: 417. I'd swiveled to the elevators and pressed the up arrow before it occurred to me that the folder had been turned so that someone on my side of the desk could read it.

The elevator chimed, and I boarded it and pressed the 4 button. A familiar dizziness fluttered in my gut as it rose. The doors slid apart, depositing me in a featureless, white hospital ward. The air was harsh with disinfectant, an acrid, sterile smell.

Room 417 was the only door with a number. It was a small room with a privacy curtain erected. The curtain jangled and clattered when I yanked it aside. Beyond the plastic barrier was an occupied bed, the blankets rumpled and twisted.

Father was tucked beneath the covers, asleep, his chest rising and falling. I exhaled; I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath.

"Daddy." I touched his shoulder. "Daddy, wake up."

He opened his eyes. "Annabel?"

I fell into his arms. He hugged me, and I was a little girl again, secure that Daddy would take care of everything.

"I was so worried," I sobbed. "We both were. Luella thought you'd been kidnapped."

Father rocked me like he used to when I'd run to him with my childhood bumps and fears. "I'm fine, Pumpkin. I'm fine."

I wiped my damp eyes on my sleeve. "What happened? How did you get here?"

Father frowned. "It's a bit of a blur. I've been trying to get someone to discharge me, but I haven't seen anyone."

"Did you make your flight okay?"

"Oh, yes, I flew to New York. Never realized how badly they treat people in economy. Shameful."

"And you met with the man you were supposed to?"

"Of course. I gave him my pitch. It was a good one too. Reminded me of when I was important, and I could buy my girls everything they wanted."

"You're important to us, Daddy, and we have everything we need."

He continued as though he hadn't heard me. "We were about to call in the lawyers to finalize the deal when the police barged in. Somehow they'd gotten the notion that I was a trespasser. I told my friend to set them straight, but the fool didn't say a word, only watched as they carted me off. Next thing I know, I'm here." He yawned. "At least it's quiet. You don't mind if Daddy takes a nap, do you, Pumpkin?"

"But we have to get you discharged."

"Fine, fine. You do that." Father's eyes drooped shut.

"Daddy?" I shook his arm. "Daddy!"

A knock sounded. Before I could answer, the door swung open. It was the hulking musician in the alley, Eloy. I could not have been more astonished if someone had told me I'd been elected president. He'd exchanged the ragged layers of a street person for a doctor's uniform -- white lab coat and stethoscope slung around his neck. He crowded the room, his uncanny features stark in the hospital fluorescence.

"Hello, Annabel," he rumbled. "You look lovely. Did you like my gifts?" His words, unlike the occasion of our first discussion, were articulate and clear, though still accented.

"I -- it was you that sent the roses and the dress and perfume?"

"And the ring."

The jewel glittered on my finger.

"Are you a doctor?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Can you discharge my father?"

He shuffled his feet like a nervous boy, a fanciful impression for someone his size. "He's not well," he murmured. "The man he flew to see refused him outright on the phone. But he showed up anyway, raving about his starving daughters selling themselves on the street."

"Oh, no." I gripped the bed railing until its edges dug into my palm. "He's been under so much stress. I'll take him to a psychiatrist back home, make sure he gets help."

Eloy regarded me. "No."

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"He must stay here."

"Why?" I had to crane my neck to glare at him.

"Because I insist." He turned to go.

"Wait!" It was a crazy idea, but I ran with it anyway. "I -- if I stayed here with you, would you let Daddy go home?"

Eloy bent his neck, and I saw the glimmer of one black eye over his shoulder. "When I asked you to marry me, you fled."

"You scared me."

"I am repellent to you, even though no longer a beggar performing for handouts."

I could think of nothing to say.

"Still, you would remain of your own will, for his sake?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

The walls blurred and ran, spinning away in a rush of motion. I covered my eyes, sickened and dizzy. When I recovered enough to peek through my fingers, the walls were still, but both Father and Eloy were gone.

I sat on the edge of the newly emptied bed and buried my head in my hands. Long moments passed in this posture, and I began to feel silly. The fright and disbelief I had anticipated had stood me up. Maybe I was in shock. If so, shock was grossly misrepresented in the popular media.

As I didn't feel like throwing a tantrum or gibbering in fear, I went exploring. I got on the elevator and picked a floor at random. The doors opened to an identical hospital ward, except this one was patterned a discreet plaid in pastel blue and grey. I wandered the plaid hall, past plaid doors and over plaid tile.

I'd been avoiding the doors out a sense of propriety. Nice people didn't barge into hospital rooms. But curiosity overcame good manners, and I pushed open the next one I came to. It revealed a tiny room with a wooden folding chair facing a plaid wall. Disappointed, I tried the next door and found an identical arrangement -- chair, wall, empty room. The chair was different, with a taller back and padding on the arms, but it was still a chair. The next room was the same, and the next. Each chair was different, but that was all.

I did the only thing left to do. I sat in a chair. The one I chose was an executive model with cushy lumbar support and coasters. As I swiveled back and forth, the wall switched on, splashing up images and sounds. It wasn't like the portal in the alley; there was a reassuring flatness to the picture, like a television set or movie screen.

The screen-wall showed a party of some sort. The people were tall and graceful, their skin dusky and their hair in shades ranging from burnished mahogany to spicy cinnamon. Their faces were pointed -- like Eloy's fierce muzzle, but softer, more fox than wolf -- and they shared his eyes: dark, liquid orbs with no whites. Their clothes billowed in muted colors with strange folds that flared at hip and leg. Glittering ornaments of metal and stone circled finger and wrists, and dripped from ears and necks.

I couldn't understand their speech, but I didn't need to.

A crowd swirled around a woman with autumn skin and amber hair. She wept golden tears that glistened like pearls as she danced. No one noticed.

That woman could have been me, a year ago at one of the galas Father used to throw. I never told him or anyone how much I hated them, dancing and laughing as though I couldn't be happier, while inside I wanted to cry. I wish I could have told myself then what I had learned since, that the parties were meaningless, and being lonely in a crowd only meant I should have gone elsewhere.

The crying woman lifted her head, her face still wet, but her eyes clear. She pushed through the flailing limbs and gyrating torsos, and without a backward glance, she exited the frame.

The wall went blank.

"You did well."

The low words startled me; I hadn't heard Eloy come in. My heart beat so fast I thought it would bruise my rib cage.

"My apologies, I've frightened you. Would you rather I left?"

"I'm hardly in a position to dictate your comings and goings," I snapped.

"Why do you say that?"

"Hostages don't typically get to order around their captors."

"Is that what you are? My hostage?"

My pulse resumed a closer-to-normal rhythm.

"What else?"

He ducked his head. How could someone so imposing be so bashful?

"Is this a theater, some kind of multiplex?" I asked.

"More an arcade than a cinema."

"That was a video game?"

Eloy regarded the blank wall. "The first time I sat in this room, the woman would not stop crying. She wept until I grew frustrated and departed."

"She stopped fast enough when I was watching."

"Yes. And the fifth time I came here, she stopped for me as well."

I snorted. "What a dumb game."

A roar filled the room. I clapped my hands over my ears and cowered in the chair. The roar subsided and became the throaty rumble from the alley. Eloy was laughing.

"Forgive me," he said, "but that was the most marvelous thing I've ever heard."

"That's okay," I said, although my ears rang, and I think I was shouting. "Unless you're laughing at me, I suppose. I'm not so much upset as deafened."

"I forget how delicate your ears are, sweet Annabel. I will take pains not to distress them again."

Should I be bothered by the casual endearment? "You wouldn't want to let me in on the joke?"

Eloy grinned, displaying a mouthful of very sharp, very dangerous-looking teeth. "Alas, I've been told I don't have a sense of humor."

I couldn't decide whether he was teasing me or not. Probably because of the scene (game?) I'd just watched (played?), Eloy's appearance was no longer quite as unnerving.

"At least can you tell me what the rules are?"

He rumbled to himself. "I can attempt to explain how these rooms work, but there are no rules." Eloy nodded at the door. "If you will accompany me?"

"Where?"

"This scenario is completed. We must go elsewhere for the next."

I tagged after him into the plaid corridor. "Did I win?"

"Hmm? This is not the sort of game with points and opponents. But you did well."

He stopped at a door. "Would you like to try this one?"

"They're pretty much all the same to me."

Taking that as consent, Eloy ushered me in. Within was a director's chair, the green canvas inscribed with Annabel in white cursive.

I froze.

"What's the matter?"

"How did my name get there?"

He hemmed, a vibration I felt through my heels. "Would you rather go elsewhere? I am reasonably certain the next chair will not be personalized."

I grimaced. "No, we're here." I plunked down in my chair.

Eloy hovered behind me. It occurred to me that all the chairs were of average dimensions, human sized. Shouldn't chairs meant for a giant like Eloy be bigger?

"How come you don't get a chair?"

"I don't mind standing."

I scowled. "Quit that."

He blinked. "What?"

"Changing the subject or saying something that's like an answer but really isn't. It reminds me of Sunday School."

Eloy's mouth quirked. "Sometimes I do not have an answer you would understand."

"Then say 'I don't know' or 'I can't say.'"

"I will try. I'm sorry I angered you."

At Eloy's mournful expression, I relented, perplexed at how we had come to this strange reversal -- him anxious and me blustering.

"See, the nuns always gave me the runaround when I had questions. Drove me nuts. All the same, I bet I was pretty aggravating to them too."

"Certainly not. I'm sure you were a model child."

"No, really --" I saw the twinkle in his eye. He was making fun of me! "Hey, I thought you said you didn't have a sense of humor."

"I said, I have been told that I lacked one."

"Seems to me that says more about the shortcomings of whoever told you that than yours."

"Thank you." In his mercurial way, Eloy had become solemn.

"So how do we start?"

As though waiting for an opening, a scene appeared, this one overlooking a thoroughfare filled with the men and women I'd started to think of as Eloy's People. A bedraggled man stood at an intersection, his skin patchy grey and shriveled. As people passed, he greeted them with his hand outstretched in the universal language of panhandlers. A few people sneered, fewer tossed a glittering bead for him to scramble after, but mostly they ignored him, stepping around him as though he was debris in their way.

It made me angry. Sure, I'd been like that once, too wrapped up in myself to look at or talk to the beggar in the road, but I wasn't anymore. It had taken poverty to make me see him, but at least I did.

A man broke from the shuffling crowd. His sapphire hair was braided into a rope, woven through with a chain of jewels. He made his way to the beggar.

At first, the street person wouldn't look at him, too afraid or ashamed. But as the other man continued to speak, his face lifted, and his hand dropped to his side.

"What are they saying?" I asked.

"The beggar is agreeing that the winds have been particularly harsh of late, and now he is inquiring whether the rich man's kin are well."

"They know each other?"

"Not until this moment. Now the rich man is talking about the new fashions and how he does not like them."

"They're making small talk?"

"Now the rich man is expressing that he must depart, and the beggar is wishing him well."

I watched the sapphire-haired man wave and walk away. When he exited the scene, the picture switched off.

I contemplated the blank wall. "Is it some sort of personality test, like a Myers-Briggs, but assessing my reactions by -- I don't know -- galvanic skin response or something? It provides a situation and shows an outcome depending upon how I react?"

Eloy rumbled. "It does indeed respond to your reactions. But in this Myers-Briggs test, is there a correct answer or solution you must attain?"

I contorted my neck until I could see Eloy. "Not really. It's supposed to tell you about yourself, how logical you are versus how intuitive, that sort of thing. It's subjective."

"Ah. These games are also subjective and intended to instruct. But there is always a correct answer."

"How can there be a right or wrong if it's subjective?"

"Hrm." Saving me from a painful neck crick, he stepped around the chair and hunkered down. "Does subjectivity preclude a single answer? If a thing is my opinion, and opinions by their nature are subjective, can my opinion not be wrong?"

"Um."

"What if I were of the opinion that you would thrive best in an environment devoid of air and light? Am I not wrong?"

"I suppose you are when you put it like that."

He made a sound between a burble and a rumble.

"Eloy, who are you? Where are you from?"

"This is where I would normally say something in the manner of your Sunday School nuns."

"Are you an alien?"

"Strictly speaking, no. But it may be simplest for you to think of me as such."

"Are you showing me scenes from a different planet as part of a -- a mission?"

Eloy repeated his burble-rumble. "You have seen too many fiction productions. I have no mission. My people are not waiting to descend upon your world, and I am not gathering data."

"Are we even on Earth?"

"Yes and no." Exasperated, Eloy waved his hand. "I have no answer that will make sense to you. You are safe. You will find no others of your kind or mine within these walls. Is that not enough?"

"Not even a little bit."

"It is the best I can do."

I pulled my knees to my chest. "Eloy?"

"Yes, Annabel."

"Why am I here?"

"I presume you don't mean metaphysically."

"No, I don't mean metaphysically."

He burble-rumbled, a sound I was beginning to equate with a sigh. "I am lonely."

"Lonely? Can't you go back there?" I gestured at the wall. "Wherever there is?"

"No."

"Then why me? If you wanted someone to talk to, wouldn't you rather have someone witty or smart or, I don't know, important? Why did you kidnap my father, and how come you want me to stay here?"

"It is . . . complicated."

I wondered if my human voice could burble-rumble.

"Will you marry me, Annabel?"

He sounded so wretched and miserable. I felt sorry for him. No matter how he looked or where he was from, he was lonely and hurting. But I couldn't marry him.

I hid my face behind my knees. "No."

When I looked up, he was gone.

I sat for a long moment. A heavy something built the longer I stayed, like a weight of unease and sadness in the air. At last, I bolted out of my "Annabel" chair and paced the plaid hall, but I couldn't shake the feeling.

I took the elevators up and down, roamed corridors in different colors and patterns, and picked doors to open and chairs to sit in at random. I watched tribes of Eloy's people in isolated wastelands and nuclear families in teeming cities. I saw men, women, and children go about their lives, some happy, some sad, most neither and both. Eloy's people were a lot like mine. They had their problems and their worries, their weaknesses and their virtues.

But no matter where I went, a restlessness chased me, easing when I entered a new room, but returning doubled when the scenario ended. It was as though my distress, and possibly guilt, had fused with the shroud of Eloy's loneliness and was following me.

After a room where I watched a mother abandon her newborn infant, I felt drained. Not sleepy or tired -- I wasn't hungry or thirsty either for that matter -- I felt hollowed out, stretched thin. I didn't want to do any more rooms; I didn't want to do anything but hide, and maybe cry.

The silence pressed on me, as though it was waiting for something.

"Stop it!" I shouted. "Stop it stop it stop it!"

The sensation grew stronger.

I ran into the corridor and mashed the elevator button until the car arrived. I rode it to the lobby where the reception desk still sat in its beam of sunlight -- although my father's folder was gone. Beyond it was a pastel hallway, indistinct from the other hallways, but surely, surely it had to be where I'd come in.

I hurried along it, taking corners at reckless speeds -- knowing there was no danger of careening into hapless strangers -- until I rounded one that opened on a set of double doors. They were gray and heavy-looking, the kind used in schools and hospitals. And prisons.

A glowing, orange "EXIT" sign hung overhead.

I pushed at the handlebar, but it didn't budge, didn't even rattle.

"What's the point in having an exit that won't open?" I yelled.

The exit sign went dark.

"That's not what I meant!"

I tried again, shoving harder, using both hands. I swore at the door, and finally, I took a step back and kicked it, driving my heel against the stubborn bar. For my efforts, I was jolted foot to chin.

I staggered and ended sprawled on the floor. Hot wetness dripped on my hands, tears of frustration.

"Annabel?" Eloy spoke at my back. "Annabel, are you hurt?"

"It's not fair," I whispered. I turned to see him go to one knee. He leaned to me, hand half extended. But he hesitated, like he was unsure of his reception.

"This door should not be here," he said. "It has never been before."

"That doesn't make any sense," I murmured.

"I know."

"I don't want to go back to the game rooms. They make me feel bad."

Eloy uttered something harsh and guttural in an alien language. "You should not have had to bear the caprices of those rooms. I'm very sorry. I assure you that you won't be troubled by it again."

"What was it?"

He burble-rumbled. "It is meant for me, a manifestation of emotions from the scenarios and the player, amplified to heighten the, err, game play and to encourage participation."

"That was supposed to be an enhancement?" I asked, incredulous. "Like a special effect?"

"I'm afraid so."

I took his hand and let him boost me to my feet. In turn, I hauled him up. Or rather, I yanked on his arm, and he solemnly pretended that I was helping. Face-to-face, so close, Eloy made my breath catch. He was so big. I was getting used to him towering over me, but touching, near enough to feel the warmth of his breath on my face, I was aware of the spread of muscles in his arms and chest, the tawny heat of him. It was like holding hands with a lion or bear -- dangerous, powerful, and alarming. And also fascinating.

I jerked my hand free and backed away.

Eloy didn't say anything, but his eyes were so sad. He turned -- shoulders hunched and head lowered -- and began to shuffle down the hall.

We walked in awkward silence for several yards. "Eloy?"

"Yes, Annabel?"

"Is there any food around here?"

"Are you hungry?"

"You didn't answer my question."

Burble-rumble. "No, there is no food here."

"Will I starve?"

"No."

"I don't need to eat?"

"No."

"Or sleep, or drink?"

"No."

The hair on my arms prickled. "Am I dead?"

"No, you are very much alive."

"That's a relief."

He nodded. "I'm glad I could ease a little of your disquiet."

We were quiet again until we came to the foyer.

"Eloy, do you like that stupid game effect?" I tried to imagine weeks, months, years, all alone with only artificial emotions for company. The thought was unbearably depressing.

"It depends on the room. It is good to share in another's joy, sometimes."

"A fan of comedies, huh?" I sidled close and twined my arm through his. "Me too. So, can you recommend a room to play next?"

He stiffened when I touched him, but then he covered my hand with his own -- not to restrain me, but to let me know I was welcome. "I believe I can."

It was actually fun, playing the room games with Eloy. He translated for me, and occasionally made wry comments about the people onscreen. The scenes he chose were often comical, and I found myself chortling with the heroines and protagonists.

When I tired of the rooms, we rode the elevator up and down, and I invented another game, where I made him close his eyes and guess what color or pattern the walls would be when the doors opened. I smirked when he got one wrong. He missed several in a row after that, I bet on purpose. He never laughed, though. I said the most outrageous things I could think of, but he would only smile, and occasionally give his rumbling chuckle.

At one floor, Eloy fell silent, refusing to guess before the doors parted.

The corridor was white.

"Let us return to the lavender floor," he said. "I know of a room where a lady refuses to open her house in the season of heat, for fear her neighbors will realize she cannot afford --"

I brushed past, leaving him to trail after me.

None of the doors were numbered. Still, I knew the way. Room 417 had changed into a blank wall with a chair, but it was the right one. The chair was a recliner like we'd had in Father's den in our old house. When I was little, I'd loved to sneak in and sit in that recliner. It had made me feel big and grown-up.

"Do not stay here," Eloy said. "Come away with me."

I clambered onto the recliner. The wall showed me the tiny apartment I'd shared with my family. The yellow rosebush was still in the window. It had grown, and someone, probably Luella, had transplanted it into a larger pot.

Father was in the kitchen, talking to someone on the phone. The lines in his face were deeper, and his hair had turned from streaky-gray to all white.

"She's still not responding, doctor? . . . No, we don't have any supplementary insurance."

There was a long pause, and I watched Father grow agitated. "I will not send my daughter to that institution. If our insurance will not pay for her hospital stay, she will come home."

"Are they talking about me?" I pivoted the chair so I could face Eloy. "Is this place a hallucination? Are you a delusion?"

Eloy whuffed at my distress. "No, no. They speak of your sister, Luella. Her mind was always fragile, a weakness she inherited from your father. Your absence was the final blow to sunder an already fractured psyche."

"But Daddy's better."

"Yes. I did my best to ensure that."

I stood and the wall switched off. "That needs an explanation."

Burble-rumble. "Before I sent him home, I fixed the rifts in his self-esteem, giving him the perspective he needed to heal. In time, he recovered."

"You can do that? Wait, how much time? How long has it been?" Without sleep or meals to mark the days and only the constant lighting that never dimmed or brightened, I'd stopped thinking in hours and minutes. Surely, only a couple days, maybe a week had passed in these strange halls, but the white of Father's hair suggested much longer.

"The instrument you saw me with," Eloy said in a rush, "you called it a recorder. It is a tool I use to assist me with the game. It is what allowed me to allay your father's illness. Would you like me to teach you how to use it?"

"How long have I been here?"

"Do not be upset," he pleaded. "Time is different here --"

"How long?" I screamed.

He flinched. "Three years."

My knees buckled, and I floated to the floor. "Three. Years?" The floating was courtesy Eloy, who had caught me when my legs folded.

"Annabel, are you hurt?"

"I've been gone for three years?"

He propped me against the wall and kneeled beside me. "Do not hate me. Please do not hate me. Your father knows you are well. It was a small thing, to give him that reassurance. But I could not ease your sister. She didn't understand or believe him when he talked of me and this place. She worried that your father continued to suffer from delusion. He wonders that too sometimes, but then he looks upon the dress I gave you and is comforted."

"What about Luella? Can you make her better?"

"Do not ask this of me."

"Can you?"

There was such desolation in his eyes. "If I left to tend her, time would steal you away. You would be stranded here, and for each handful of moments I spent there, a decade would pass for you."

"That doesn't make sense. If time goes slower here, then --"

"It is very complicated, and I don't have your words to explain it. It comes to this: though my years are endless, yours are not. I would be gone longer than your life."

My head hurt. "You said you could teach me how to use the recorder. Can you show me how to heal Luella?"

"It is a simple matter --"

"Then let me go to her; let me heal her. I'll come back. The time doesn't matter to you."

"That I have infinite time does not make the passage of it easier," he said bleakly.

"Please, Eloy. Let me go."

"I do not think I can bear being alone again." He cupped my cheek with his hand. "But I cannot bear to be the cause of your unhappiness either." His hand slid to take mine, lying limp in my lap. He wrapped my fingers around the smooth barrel of the recorder, summoned magically from the air.

He lifted me in his arms, and the walls melted. When he put me down, we were in a forest grove. Before us was the tree trunk painted with graffiti. The painting was indeed a window, or rather a portal, and it opened onto the alley between the donut shop and the all-night laundromat.

Eloy nuzzled his chin on my cheek. "Take what you have learned in the rooms of my house. You are a creature of empathy and compassion, my Annabel. You should be with those you love, not a captive to my seclusion. Go to your sister and play for her. Be patient, for minds heal slowly, but she will mend."

"Eloy --" I tried to turn, but his hands on my shoulders wouldn't let me.

"Peace, sweet Annabel. My will is not so strong. Go now. Be with those you love. And if you should think of me, try to remember me fondly."

He gave me a gentle shove. I stepped forward, and I was in the alley. At my back, there was only the graffitied brick wall. I clutched the recorder in both hands and ran home.

My key was in my pocket where I had put it, days or years ago. It slid as easily into the apartment's lock as it ever had.

"Daddy! Daddy, I'm home!"

Father hurried in, open ledger in hand. "Annabel?" Papers fluttered to the floor. We came together in a crash of arms and laughter and tears.

"What happened? How did you get here? And what is that?"

"I don't have time to explain. I need to see Luella."

"She's in the hospital," Father said. "They have her in the psychiatric ward."

"I know. Eloy told me."

Father's forehead creased. "The doctor in that sanitarium you found me in, his name was Eloy." His eyes hardened. "But he wasn't a doctor, was he? He stole you away."

"He also helped you. Do you remember that?"

Father nodded, slowly. "Sometimes, when I'm about to fall asleep, or before I wake up, I remember music, a melody without words."

"It's from this recorder. I have to play it for Luella. Please, Daddy, can you take me to her?"

He was brimming with questions, but he reigned in his curiosity and called a taxi. At the hospital, we bypassed the elevators -- leaving me inexplicably relieved -- and tramped up the stairs. The psychiatric floor was dark, and it smelled of despair. The nurse at the reception desk raised her eyebrow at the hour, but then escorted us through a secured door.

This place was familiar and unfamiliar. The stark whiteness and the doors I knew, but the sounds of people, their movement and smells, that was alien. My disorientation intensified when I saw the room they had given Luella: 417.

My sister wasn't asleep. Her eyes were wide and darting as she lay in four-point restraints. She didn't react to us. The nurse left with a curt directive to press the buzzer when we wanted to go.

I crept to my sister. "Luella, honey, it's Annabel. I'm back."

Her eyes chased after shadows or visions I couldn't see.

"How long has she been like this?"

Father shook his head. "It's hard to say. She never truly recovered from having to move downtown, and there's a time in there that's all jumbled in my head. But she got to be in a pretty bad way, hearing things, convinced people were watching her through the cracks in the walls." He rubbed his eyes. "I tried to take care of her. She seemed almost lucid sometimes. I don't know how she got the knife. She attacked Ian, cut him before we could wrestle it away from her. She kept shrieking he was going to kidnap you."

"Who's Ian?"

"Sorry, Pumpkin. I forgot how long it's been. Ian is our landlady's son, the woman with purple hair, you remember? He'd taken to helping Luella when I was sick -- errands, the occasional fix-it job, that sort of thing. I'm pretty sure he wanted to ask her out."

"Is he okay?"

"He needed stitches, but he's fine now. He stopped coming around after that, of course."

I rubbed the recorder's satin finish. "When Luella's better, you'll see she gets out and meets people, won't you? Maybe even see if Ian will consider giving her another chance?"

"You say that like you won't be here."

I lifted the recorder to my mouth so I wouldn't have to answer. But then I didn't know what to do. How did I start? What if I did it wrong? I inhaled and thought of Eloy in the elevator, delighted by my glee. He'd called me a creature of empathy and compassion.

A steady note filled the room, my breath transformed into sound. A melody began, grave and thoughtful. It reminded me of Luella as a little girl, always serious and so afraid of getting into trouble. But as her sister, I had also been privy to her mischievous side. The tune turned lilting and joyous. When we were little, the world had not been a place of demons and sorrow, but one of wonder, to explore unshackled by phantom terrors. They were such absurd things, her fears, monsters out of proportion to any reality. Wouldn't it be better if they could be put aside like ill-fitting garments she had outgrown?

When the music was done -- I knew when, somehow -- I set the recorder aside. Luella slept. It was a tranquil slumber, without dreams, without grief. Eloy had said minds heal slowly, but swiftness didn't matter. That she would get better was the important thing. And she would, for I'd given her the clarity and serenity she needed to find her way.

Slumped in a chair, Father slept too, a smile curving his lips.

I should buzz for the nurse and go. Eloy was waiting for me. How much time had passed for him, alone in that place of endless rooms? My heart ached, thinking of him drifting among the scenes of his people, reminded of the comfort of family and the camaraderie of friends, and never able to be part of it. But I was so tired. After all, I hadn't slept in three years.

— *igms* —

I dreamed. I had the certainty sleepers get when they're trapped in the landscapes of slumber. In my dream, I ran along a white corridor, calling for Eloy and crying. He was in room 417, but I couldn't find it. I threw open doors, and inside each room, a blanket of dust covered solitary chairs -- bar stools, futons, hammocks, benches.

When I came to the last door in the long hall, it was clearly numbered, 417. Inside, Eloy curled around the recliner from Father's den. His beautiful eyes were closed, and he was still as death.

— *igms* —

"Annabel?" Father jostled my shoulder. "Annabel, wake up." The concern in his voice swept away the haze of sleep.

"What is it?" I mumbled.

"You were crying in your sleep."

I jolted awake. "What time is it? How long did I sleep?"

Father checked his watch. "It's a little after five a.m. What's the matter?"

I jammed my finger on the call buzzer and held it down.

"I fell asleep!" I wailed. "And he's waiting for me all alone! It's years and years for him. Oh, God, why did I let myself sleep?"

Father pulled me from the buzzer. "Pumpkin, this Eloy makes you happy?"

I stared, wild-eyed. "Yes."

"Then run to him. As fast as you can." He took out his wallet and dumped bills into my hand. "For the taxi."

I hugged him. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Pumpkin."

At last, the nurse came, grumpy and cross. She unlocked the gate, and I bolted down the stairs and out into the emergency admittance bay. There was a cab in the circle drive, depositing an old man in a wheelchair and his fretful wife. I all but shoved them aside.

I rattled off the address and waved my handful of cash at the driver. "You can have it all if you hurry."

He stomped the gas pedal, and we careened away. Thankfully, because of the hour, traffic was light. The driver, my wonderful, reckless cabbie, ran stoplights and took corners at full speed. When he turned the wrong way down a one-way street, I sank my fingernails into the upholstery, but I never considered telling him to slow down. I chanted under my breath for him to hurry, please, please hurry.

He braked so hard I was hurled against the back of his seat. Bruised and stunned, I recognized the donut shop out the window, and beside it, the brightly lit, all-night laundromat. I shoved money at the cabbie and scrambled out. Stumbling like a drunk, I ran to the graffiti-portal.

I lunged for it.

Pain stabbed through my arm and shoulder, and the world went twisty and sick. I lay on my back in the alley, head throbbing, pain filling my temples and rolling down my skull. Had I broken something? I groaned and levered myself to my knees. With my good arm, I reached for the portal. Except it wasn't a portal; it was hard bricks and paint.

"Eloy!" I pounded my fist on the wall. "Eloy, I can't get in!"

Far away, someone shouted at me to shut up.

Pain coursed through my arm, and I cradled it. "Think, Annabel. Calm down and think!" The antique ring on my finger gleamed in the grey predawn, and I knew what I needed.

I rushed to the apartment, each footstep like a hammer to my skull. Out of breath and with a stitch like a searing needle, I burst in. I ricocheted off the wall -- had I concussed myself? -- on the way to the bedroom and wrenched open the closet. I flung aside blouses, skirts, and pants until my fingers closed over the sleek coolness of silk, the rose-colored evening gown Eloy had given me.

Getting out of my clothes and into the dress was an exercise in frustration and agony. I couldn't make my hurt arm go through the sleeve, and I tore several buttons trying to do up the back. I gave up on the buttons and gathered the awful train -- yards and yards of silk -- under my arm. The straps slipped off my good shoulder, but I kept the dress on, mostly by willpower.

No doubt I looked like a refugee from a lunatic debutante's ball as I reeled back to the alley, cursing my head, my arm, and the godawful dress. I was sure I would be sick before I reached the graffiti-strewn wall. Somehow, I managed to keep head, dress, and stomach under control.

I clenched my eyes shut, reached my hand out -- my train tumbled free -- and marched forward. When I didn't bash into anything, I opened my eyes.

The sun was a pink glow on the horizon, obscured by spreading branches and tree trunks. I cried out in relief and swore as it set off a flare of explosions in my head.

Sunlight piercing through the canopy blinded me. I cursed it too. When I could see again, I was in the hospital's foyer. I leaped for the elevator and pushed the button.

It didn't light.

Then I got mad.

I kicked the closed doors and stabbed the button again. I howled at the unfairness, not caring anymore when the pounding in my skull doubled.

I stomped to the escalators in the foyer. They were shiny, pristine, and unmoving. I plodded up them, fuming. By the time I reached the fourth floor, my legs felt like lead, my vision had narrowed to a blurry tunnel, and the hem of my dress was tattered from catching on the escalator jags.

"Eloy!" I shouted. "Eloy, I'm here!"

He didn't reply, of course. In my dream, he had been at the end of the corridor, behind the very last door.

I hurried to it, hating the tangle of silk that slowed me. My fingers slipped on the knob. I screamed at the door, wrenching and tugging at it until I wrestled it open.

The tableau was the same as in my dream. Eloy lay curled around the recliner, motionless.

"Oh, no." After all that rushing and fury, I went reluctantly to his side. I kneeled, afraid to touch him, afraid he would be cold.

"Here I am," I whispered. "I'm back." I blinked, and tears coursed down my face. "You told me I should be with those I loved, so I came back. I love you."

My throat closed, but I'd said what I needed to say, so it didn't matter. I slumped forward, giving myself over to the heaving, ripping sobs of grief.

"You are hurt," he rumbled.

I gulped and sat up, scrubbing the wetness from my face with my sleeve.

His eyes were open, their beautiful blackness gazing at me. "What have you done to yourself? Is that the dress I gave you?"

I laughed. It didn't come out right and turned into a hiccup. At least my head felt better, although that probably meant I was going into shock.

"Th-the wall w-wouldn't let me in," I hiccupped. "I r-ran into it."

"I see. You do have a knack for making things difficult."

"Th-that's gratitude f-for you."

"Where is the recorder?"

I groped at the folds and layers of silk. "I left it with Luella," I wailed. "I w-woke up so scared, I forgot it."

He pushed himself up and tugged me into the cradle of his arms. "That is unfortunate, but there is no great harm. Don't cry."

Cuddled against him, the knot in my chest eased, and all the pain from my assorted injuries diminished. "I'm sorry."

"I meant that it is unfortunate because if you had taken it with you, it would have opened the portal, and you would not have had to resort to, err --" He plucked at my dress.

I gawped. "Isn't that what you meant the dress for? Like the ring?"

"Not as such. The ring, yes, but it had only the one use, as you discovered. The dress was merely silk and thread, a pretty thing I thought you would like."

"Then how did I get in?"

He burble-rumbled. "This place is a sort of dimension, a prison and a school made for me by my people."

"You're a criminal?"

"I'm a prince, actually. But also something of an aberration. I suppose you might call me a sociopath."

"Did you murder someone?"

"No!" He sounded affronted. "I never acted upon my disdain. But while my affliction was deemed curable with time, I was judged too dangerous to leave free. They were afraid I would bore of an existence of peaceful contemplation. Seeing the sense of it, I agreed to exile and rehabilitation until such time as I could overcome my disease."

"That's what the rooms are for?"

"Yes. And by a quirk of their design, a fissure can open from here to elsewhere, which is how I came to be where you first found me. They form during storms of emotional turmoil -- mostly madness that I have observed. Unfortunately, the complexity of different time flows and the varying atmospheres is hard on me. My excursions had to be limited."

"I'm pretty sure I understand your words, but they're not coming together into any sort of sense."

"The load of your family's dementia opened the way for me, sweetness. All of your family are touched by it, even you."

"You're saying that's how I got through the portal?" I took in the torn, half-on/half-off dress, remembered how I had staggered and ranted in the alley. "You're saying I had to be unhinged to get in."

Eloy roared. He was laughing, the way he'd laughed only once before. I lifted my hands to cover my ears, but it turned out I didn't need to. His laughter didn't overpower me.

"I think I missed the joke again."

"Marry me, my darling, lunatic Annabel."

"Of course I will."

"Do you love me?"

I scowled. "I said I did. We're going to be one of those couples that bicker a lot, aren't we?"

He hefted me into his arms as though I weighed nothing and stood. "It is time for me to return to my people. I am no longer an exile, and this is no longer my prison. You have set me free."

I was suddenly shy. "What will your people think of me? I'm different from them."

"My love, you are indeed different. I hope you will not mind too much." He faced us to the wall, and it became a sheer, reflective surface, the biggest full-length mirror I'd ever seen.

Eloy held a woman in his arms, but not a human woman. She had dusky-indigo skin and hair as blue as the evening sky. Her face was pointed like a fox's, and her eyes were pools of black. She wore an ugly, pink dress that didn't suit her, but even so, she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

As I gaped, Eloy set her on her feet. I tottered forward, and only when my hands touched the wall, fingertip to fingertip, did I believe it.

"How --"

"It is complicated. May we just call it magic and let it go at that?"

I burble-rumbled.

"You don't mind?"

I laughed. It was a roar. "Mind? I love me!" I threw my arms around him.

"You are also taller," he rumbled, "which will prove convenient."

"It will?"

"Yes, it will." He tipped my head back and kissed me. And I had to agree that yes, it was indeed more convenient.

Secure in the arms of my beloved, I was eager to discover the marvels of a new world, embrace my new people, and most of all, to revel in the madness of love.

Under Janey's Garden

by Margit Elland Schmitt



Artwork by Nick Greenwood

This was Janey's garden. Peas and beans climbing over the back fence, corn standing in a crooked row right next to lacy-topped carrots. Pumpkins sprawling in a tangle with the squashes in the corner, bragging up their yellow-gold blooms. Cucumbers, pretending to be all innocent while they hid under the pumpkins' prickly leaves and thought about taking over the unsuspecting herbs in the patch next over. Marigolds bright and gold, buddied up with the tomatoes.

Janey's garden, and ten-year-old Janey sat in it with her eyes squinched nearly shut while the sun baked down on her old, straw hat, and the ice cubes clinked and melted in the glass of lemonade at her side. She was waiting for Mom to finish her phone call.

Janey's back itched where the sweat was trickling down between her shoulder blades. It wasn't as if it'd be less hot for her scratching, but she did it anyway in an absent-minded way. Her dusty fingers, dirt ground into black crescents under each nail, would leave a smudge across the back of her t-shirt. She didn't care. She was watching the back corner, the spot near the biggest pumpkin, and yeah, something moved.

"Rabbit's back again," she said.

Mom was busy. She was watering the roses up against the back porch. Those roses weren't properly part of the garden, but they were pretty, blooming big and soft and yellow up against the wood. Mom thought she was watering the roses, but she was really talking on the cell phone, so most of the water from the hose was runneling off in another direction. If the clients and distributors didn't get their acts together soon, there wasn't going to be anything left on that side of the house but one drowned and sorry-looking apple tree.

"Mom," said Janey, and waved a hand to try and catch her eye. That didn't work. It used to work, before Mom's job went nuts and cut half the people working there, before Dad left, and before Mom had to do twice as much work as before, most of it on the phone. Not that she wasn't good at it. She was. She was a killer, Dad said. She was a wiz on the phone. "Mom," said Janey. "Mom. Mother. The rabbit's come back."

"What's that honey?" said Mom, but at least she turned, so the water could chase off after the artichokes for a while.

"I said --"

"Oh, the rabbit," said Mom. "Don't let him get into the gourds again. You remember last year we . . ." But then the distributor or the client came back on line, so it was just as well Janey did remember reaching for the big orange pumpkins last fall and pulling up one half-eaten shell after another. Mom had more important things to talk about.

Rabbit -- he was a problem they couldn't talk away. They didn't have a dog to chase him, and fat old Tombow was strictly a windowsill cat. Mom had talked about setting traps, but Janey had been creeped out by the idea of picking up dead rabbits and so the traps had never got set and were still sitting in their boxes gathering dust under the kitchen sink. It was Janey's garden anyway, so she got up, scratched at the sweat-prickles in her hair underneath the floppy hat, and walked on over to the back corner, wishing there was such a thing as a scarecrow for rabbits.

Only up close, Rabbit looked too big to be scared by anything made of straw and old socks. He looked too big to be a real rabbit, in fact, when she got right up next to him. He thumped his big hind leg on the ground, then reared up and looked at her. He came almost up to

Janey's shoulder, and that wasn't even counting the ears. She didn't remember him being this big the last time she'd seen him, but that had been a year ago, and from the back door besides. How big did rabbits get anyway?

This particularly big rabbit didn't run away. He didn't seem timid. He didn't seem scared. He was brown-furred, and brown-eyed, and his nose and whiskers twitched busily, and Janey really wished she hadn't walked quite so close after all. He wasn't doing anything much, this rabbit. Not yet, but no matter how weird it felt to be staring eye-to-eye with a big rodent, Janey didn't run away, even though the rabbit had these teeth. Bigger than they ought to be, and slightly crooked, but she didn't run. It felt like that would be overreacting, somehow. She didn't want to look like an idiot being chased out of her own garden by a stupid rabbit. Sure he was big, but he was just a rabbit!

Then he started talking. "Janey," said Rabbit. "You're even prettier than I thought."

"Um," said Janey. Don't talk to strangers, was the general rule, but she had to wonder, under the circumstances, if there was some kind of dividing line where the strangeness got so huge you had no choice but to talk. "Thanks, I guess."

"Bigger, too," he went on. "But that's no problem. I like tall girls. Might be a problem fitting the wedding dress, but we can work something out. And the house -- but you'll get used to ducking."

And before she could even ask what that was supposed to mean, Rabbit thumped his big back leg. This close, she could feel the ground shake. Then he grabbed her. His paws were just paws, but when they got hold of Janey's wrist, she couldn't pull away, no matter how hard she tried. And she did try, because Rabbit was dragging her, hopping along the fence line. He moved fast, too fast for her to keep up by running, and it hurt every time she bounced down against the dirt and the rocks and once even up against the stakes she used to tie up the tomatoes, but she still couldn't get away. She lost her hat. She lost a shoe. Those hairy paws were hard as rock, and the claws were sharp, and even if he held her tight enough to bruise, that was nothing compared to when Rabbit tried to dash down the hole he'd dug under the fence, one that looked too small for either of them to fit through, and Janey bashed her head against the side.

That hurt. Even if she didn't exactly see stars, it made her wish she could. Stars would be a relief about now. They'd make everything look more like a friendly little cartoon, and a lot less like the middle of a monster movie: Killer Rabbits from Outer Space. Except, this rabbit didn't live in outer space. He lived under Janey's garden.

When they reached the bottom of the burrow, Rabbit let go, and Janey finally had a chance to look around. It was not quite what she expected, but after a moment, she realized that was because when she'd originally thought about a rabbit at all, she'd figured it must be of the hole in the ground variety. And the minute she'd been kidnapped by a rabbit, she'd been thinking cartoons and storybooks. She'd expected to end up in some airy little bungalow with chintz curtains and a bubbling teapot. Someplace with a rug by the cheery fireplace, and cakes and jelly, and only a vague hint that there was anything like dirt or digging involved in the construction.

This place, Rabbit's burrow, looked as if he'd read exactly the same stories as Janey, only he hadn't got the point. The hole was big. Big enough for Rabbit and herself, though she had to hunch down a little to keep from snagging her hair on the tree roots that made up most of the ceiling. There wasn't a teapot and there wasn't a rug. There was a table, sure enough, in the middle, a three-legged sawhorse with a tatty, red beach-towel thrown across it to suggest a tablecloth. Instead of cheerful little pictures of Rabbit's bunny family on the walls, he had stuck up a row of human skulls -- four of them, one after the other. There were some hunks of pumpkin rind and guts muddying up the ground near the sawhorse, and Janey guessed those were supposed to stand in for the cakes.

There was a wedding dress, too, just as Rabbit had said. It was white. Really white, as if it had been made out of the petals of the sweet pea blossoms from her garden. As if it wasn't hanging from a rabbit skull in the bottom of a rabbit hole. And it was lacy. It even had a veil. There was a bed, too. "Our marriage bed," said Rabbit proudly. He'd got that right, too. It had a frame, a mattress, blankets and a pillow. Even a dust ruffle. It was cute. It was clean. Janey was absolutely sure she never, ever wanted to lie down on that bed.

She could see all this perfectly well, because there actually was a window: a hole about as big around as her head, high up on the wall, almost level with the ceiling. When Janey looked out, she saw a neat patch of mowed lawn, an apple tree, and a faded lawn chair. All that, and a fat tomcat dozing on the windowsill. She realized all at once they were underneath her own front yard.

"You're crying," said Rabbit. He seemed surprised. No, she realized, he seemed delighted. She was sure there was a sort of sniggering upturn to that weird bunny-mouth. "All brides cry on their wedding day."

It was such a ridiculous thing to say, it made her mad. "I'm not crying," Janey said. It didn't count as crying if you weren't actually snuffling. If you didn't blow your nose. If you didn't admit it, it wasn't happening. Anybody would get a tear in their eye if they got dragged across the yard and had their head nearly bashed in by a giant rabbit who was really kind of a jerk. "And I'm not getting married. I want to go home."

"You live here now," Rabbit said. "You're going to be my wife."

"I'm ten."

"That's a respectable age. I'm only six myself."

"I mean that ten-year-olds don't get married," Janey said. Right, she thought. Logic is always the best way to get out of marriage to rabbits. I can't believe I'm actually saying this out loud. "They just don't."

"They will today," Rabbit said. "See, I've been thinking. You've got that lovely garden. It's full of all sorts of nice things. A fellow my size likes regular meals, and soon as we're married, everything in that garden will belong to me, too!" And he bounced around the room on his big, hind legs. The room turned out not to be big enough for them both after all, she realized when she got shoved hard into the wall once, and then again. She had to dodge fast to keep her feet out from under his heavy paws. "I'm just going to hop over to fetch the minister and the wedding guests. You can start cooking up the feast."

"I can do what?" Janey looked over at the sawhorse and the dripping yuck near it. "That's a pumpkin." A squishy, drippy, pile of pumpkin bits, really. Although to a rabbit, maybe that was a feast.

"You grew it," said Rabbit. He paused in his heedless bounding to stop and his foot stamped on the floor. Hard. "Don't you know what to do with it next?"

"Well, I do," she said, and the idea came to her without even having to think about it. "I can make pumpkin pie, but not without a spoon to mix the dough with."

"I'll bring you a spoon," Rabbit said. "But no tricks now. If I catch you trying to escape from me, I'll bite off your thumb." Janey saw the way his huge, yellowish, teeth glimmered under his whiskers and felt scared enough to be sick. "I'll bring a spoon for your dough, but you'll have to wait here while I fetch it. Janey my bride, you can't go outside." And he stamped his foot until a fine layer of dust sifted down and covered everything, even the wedding dress, with a layer of brown gloom.

"All right," said Janey, picking a bug his stomp had shaken from the ceiling out of her hair, but she was only pretending to be cool and brave by this time. "Whatever."

Rabbit wasted no time in bounding out of the room and scrabbling up the hole to the top again. Janey made herself count to twenty before she tried to follow him. Long enough, she hoped, that by the time she climbed to the top of the hole herself, he'd have bounced out of sight and wouldn't catch her again, but not so long that he'd already be on the way back with an armload of whatever. Except that when she tried to climb out of the hole, her hands couldn't find anyplace to grip. She could see roots and rocks well enough, and they should have been fine, but every time she reached for one, her fingers slipped right off again. As if what looked solid and stable was really slick and covered with some kind of oil. Same thing when she tried to use her feet. The rabbit run looked like it would be easy enough to climb, until she actually tried to climb it. Then it was impossible.

She tried the window next. Sure, it was high up and looked only as big as her head, but there was no way Janey wanted to be down in this hole when the Rabbit came back. It wasn't like there was any glass to break. All she had to do was enlarge the hole, but when she tried, she had the same trouble as before. She couldn't get a grip on anything more substantial than sand, and no matter how much of that she knocked down on herself, there always seemed to be plenty more.

So, she tried waving. She didn't remember seeing Rabbit's hole in the yard before, but if she could see her house now, it seemed reasonable to think Mom could see her, too. Janey waved. She yelled. She stuck her arm out the window and flapped it around until it ached. But Mom was still on the cell phone. Still drowning the artichokes. She didn't see. Even Tombow slipped down off his window sill after just one, slow glance.

Then Rabbit came back. Janey heard him coming down the run and hurried away from the window. When he bounded in, so hard and fast he knocked over the sawhorse and its towel tablecloth, she was standing there trying to look at the bits of old pumpkin rind as if she couldn't wait to put them in a pie shell. He'd missed her by inches, but he carried a trowel which he dumped onto the floor just underneath the window.

"There you are," he said with that cheerful, unpleasant smile. "Straight from your own garden. Now you'd better start cooking. The wedding guests are already starting to arrive, and they're hungry. I invited the squirrels. They pelted my last bride with nuts. And the crows, who will peck at you. The shrew from down the lane, she'll bite, if you hold still too long, and Badger will perform the ceremony. Don't ask him too many questions. Badger the minister, get it?" And he laughed.

"Yeah, except I still don't want to get married," Janey said. "So there's not going to be a ceremony."

"Don't be stubborn," said Rabbit. "Just stir up your dough and bake your pie."

"But I can't!" she protested, and suddenly he was much closer than he had been, so close she could feel his breath on her arm and the way the muscles all shook and jumped nervously under his skin. She felt nervous herself.

"What do you mean you can't?" he asked. "Didn't I say no tricks? You asked for a spoon. I brought you a spoon. If you can't make our wedding feast, why did you say you could?" And he wriggled his whiskers at her, and nibbled the air with his oversized teeth.

"Oh, I can stir up the dough with this great, really great, spoon," Janey said. She said it fast, and was relieved when that too-big head backed away a little. "But I can't bake a pie without a dish to put it in. Can you get me some kind of a dish?"

The head retreated still further, and Rabbit nodded. It turned out to be a pretty creepy gesture on something that wasn't built for it. "All right," he said. "Nobody can say I'm not fair. And you are going to be my wife. I should be nice to you now and then. I'll get your dish, but no tricks now. If I catch you trying to escape from me, I'll bite your hand off." Those big teeth swooped near again, and never mind how hot it was out in the sun, down in the hole, Janey shivered.

"I won't," she said, and the whiskers stopped tickling her wrist.

"That's what I like to hear," said Rabbit. "You get your dough ready, and I'll be back shortly with the dish. Then we'll join the others and hold the ceremony. I'm thinking traditional vows. But you'll have to wait here. Janey my bride, you can't go outside," and with a stomp of his hind leg loud as thunder, he left again.

Janey only counted to ten this time, before she grabbed the trowel and tried to use it to help her climb up and out of the hole. It didn't work. Just as her hands had done, the rusty little would-be spoon sank into the softness and came right out again. She might as well have been trying to climb a mountain made of flour.

When Rabbit came back, he came in a rushing bound, and a hail of gravel kicked loose from the scree at the mouth of the rabbit hole. His big feet seemed even bigger and they hit the ground even louder. "I've brought your dish," he said. And he had. It was one of the saucers Janey stuck under the potted plants out back of the garden to catch the overflowing water, and it wasn't very clean. Not that Janey cared, since her pumpkin pie dough was nothing more than the old pumpkin guts she'd found on Rabbit's floor, mixed with mud. She didn't plan to stick around long enough to eat it.

"Finish your pie," said Rabbit. He leapt onto the sawhorse and it fell over. He leapt onto the bed, and it creaked. "Finish it. The guests are waiting. The owls are wanting to eat the mice, but that's bad luck before the ceremony. Besides, I think the mice are planning to climb into your ears. I've almost got their promise. They'll climb in, and if you forget to say 'I do' when Badger asks, they can each bite off one of your ears to help you remember. Is the pie done?"

"There's one thing --" she started, but Rabbit knocked her down while she was still scraping the pumpkin-mud into the saucer. Knocked her down and held her down with both paws pressed hard to hold her there.

"No more things," he said. He didn't shout it. He said it very softly, and Janey couldn't breathe for fear. "I've given you enough things. I've waited enough. I'm ready to get married."

Janey wasn't ready. Not by a long shot. She imagined she could hear Mom calling. She pretended. And she thought of something. Something that might help. "Just one more," she said. "I should have thought of it before. But I can't bake a pie if I don't have an oven."

"I'm not bringing you an oven," said Rabbit.

"Well, a fire of some kind," Janey said. "Or even wood. I could bake the pie if I had enough wood. I could light my own fire. I could do it then."

Rabbit watched her. His dark eyes were glassy-bright and wary. She wondered what he was looking for, what he saw. "No tricks," he finally said. "If I catch you trying to escape from me, I'll bite your whole arm off."

"I won't," said Janey.

"I mean it," he said. "I could just start gnawing. It's not a very big arm. I could have it off in no time at all."

"I know you could," she said.

"I could."

"I know."

"Well," and with a sudden burst of cheer, Rabbit was up and Janey could breathe again, could get back onto her feet. He shook the skulls out of the wall with his bouncing. He knocked the bed on its side. "Well, I'd better get going. Can't keep the guests waiting forever. They all know how nervous brides get, don't they? They all know. They've all had their own marital woes now and again. I'll just get your wood, and watch you bake the pie. I've never seen a pie bake before. This should be fun! How I wish you could come with me. I'd bounce your pretty head against a rock. Such fun. But Janey, my bride, you can't go outside."

He left then, and Janey didn't wait at all. She attacked the walls with the trowel, she dug at the rabbit's run with the dish. Neither worked. The walls were too solid for her trowel to do more than scrape, and the run was too soft for the dust to even stay on the dish.

"That's the dumbest looking game I ever saw," said a voice from behind her.

Janey whirled around in a panic and only stopped herself from throwing the trowel at his head when she recognized the shape in Rabbit's window. "Tombow!"

It was Tombow indeed. Her own cat, and she was relieved to see he looked exactly the same size and shape he always had been. He had simply relocated himself from one windowsill to another. Now, he twitched his tail at her. "Trust me. I'm a cat. We think chasing wadded up balls of paper is high art. What you're doing with that shovel-thingy. That's stupid."

"I'm trying to get outside," Janey said. Given freaky Mister Rabbit, she was willing to accept that Tombow had decided to start talking today.

"You can't do that," the cat said.

"I know, I keep slipping!" she said. "I thought the shovel would, you know, give me more traction." It had seemed a sensible idea at the time. It really had. Explaining things to a cat with that expression on its face was bound to make anybody feel like a complete idiot.

"Yes, but what I mean, Janey, is that you can't do it because you're under a spell. You're not able to leave this charming little dwelling. You can't set hand or foot outside. That Rabbit who caught you is a pretty good wizard, for his kind."

"A wizard," said Janey.

"Yes."

"A rabbit wizard?"

"Yes."

"I want to go home."

"So noted," said Tombow. "I can help you, if you want."

She wasn't in the mood for riddles, and Rabbit was going to be back any minute. If she wanted? Talk about stupidity. She was more than ready, if only the trowel could have made a dent on the walls or the floor. Now Tombow said he could help her. "How?" she asked. "Can you break the spell he's cast on me?"

"No," the cat said. "He's got your comings and goings tied up in knots only a Rabbit can undo. But it happens I'm also a pretty good wizard, for one of my kind." From the sound of it, the standards he held himself up to were a bit higher than anything he expected a mere bunny to achieve. "When your husband-to-be comes back --"

"Don't call him that," said Janey.

"Well, what is one to think? He's already sent out the invitations." Tombow winked, much too self-satisfied for comfort. Janey tried to glare a burning hole right through that smirk, and was glad when her cat stopped with the jokes. "When Rabbit comes back, you make your fire."

"What happens then? I haven't got any matches," she said.

"My dear, I believe I already mentioned I'm a wizard. I'll light the fire for you. Trust me. Rabbit will panic. Just don't let him put it out. The more it burns, the more frightened he'll become. You can make him break the spell when that happens."

"Okay," she said doubtfully. "But wouldn't it just be easier if you went around the house and got Mom? I mean, you can talk now. You can tell her what's wrong."

Tombow yawned. Janey took it as a negative. "She never listens to me, either," he said. And that was that until Rabbit came back.

He came more slowly this time, but that was because he was bigger than ever. Almost too big to fit down his own hole, and giggling with pride. "Look at this," he said as he lay armloads of kindling at her feet. "Look what I can carry. Look how strong I am. Here is your wood. Here, and here." It all clattered down at her feet, and Janey hurried to pick it up again and stack it up in a way that looked the most flammable before Rabbit got angry and knocked her down again. She hadn't ever built a fire before, but then she didn't really have to get this one going either.

She picked up the saucer of muddy pumpkin-yuck and stole a glance at Tombow in the window. "For Rabbit dire," he said. "Smoke and fire!" The wood blazed up so quickly, Janey had to jump backwards to keep from being singed. She bumped right into Rabbit, but he was lunging after the cat in the window and didn't seem to notice.

The fire frightened him. Tombow had been right. Rabbit was in a panic, trying to run away. Trying, in rabbit-fashion, to get underground to safety, but there was nowhere to go. They were already both under the ground already. He circled the room, his big, heavy paws shaking the earth with each leap, and circled it again. Janey ran, too, to try and stay out of the way, but couldn't. Rabbit was too big, and too clumsy. He knocked her down and when she got up again and tried to move, she couldn't see for smoke and barked her shin against the broken sawhorse. She finally let herself stay down, at the base of the run. She reached out and caught the red towel from under the sawhorse and covered her mouth and nose with it.

The towel helped, but smoke was everywhere. It rushed towards the window. It rushed towards the rising slope of the run as if they were both chimneys, and Rabbit didn't dare try to use either as an exit. There was so much smoke, it made the fire seem even more terrible, more bright and awful than it could possibly have been. Janey didn't believe the fire was big enough to kill them, but Rabbit did.

"Make it stop!" he said. "Make it go away."

"I can't stop it," she said. "I'm baking the pie you wanted."

"I don't want the pie anymore," he said. "I want to get out of here. That fire, it will burn me up!"

"I can't help you," Janey told him. He knocked her down harder than before, and shook her, rocking her back and forth between his hard, heavy paws.

"You have to," he said. "You're my wife. You have to help me escape!"

"I can't," she said. "You've made it so I can't. It's your spell. Take it off."

Rabbit stared. His eyes were wide and round, the whites showing clearly as he looked this way and that. "The fire!" he said. "It's going to burn me up!"

He had a point. The fire was spreading. It was already well on the way to devouring the wood he'd brought, and had jumped to where the bed was lying on its side and had started in on the blankets there. At this rate, the wedding dress, and the stupid lacy veil, would be next. Janey liked the idea, but really hoped she wasn't there to see it.

"Let me go," she said. "Take off the spell."

"All right," said Rabbit. "All right." He stamped his foot, hard enough that she felt it break through the hard-packed ground so it cracked and split apart beneath her. "Janey my bride, you're free. Go outside."

So she ran. That's all, a mad, scrambling dash. She could feel whiskers and hot breath on the foot that was bare. Kicked back hard and lost her other shoe. Rabbit. Rabbit was coming, but so was Mom. Janey ran up the smoky tunnel and out into the open air. The ground was firm under her hands and feet. She did more crawling than running, but she got out. She was out, where the sun was bright and hot, and the wind blew the smoke to nothing.

And where, Janey saw, the wedding guests were gathered. Just as Rabbit had said.

They knew her at once. Probably there weren't a whole lot of girls desperately climbing out of rabbit holes in the neighborhood. They growled at her. Like Rabbit, they seemed larger than was natural. Unlike Rabbit, they didn't have much to say. There was just fur, and teeth, and wings. A screeching, screaming, skittering, clawing rush towards her. Janey screamed.

She tried to run. Something caught her t-shirt in its claws, and as she jerked away, something else snagged her jeans. Just a rip, she told herself. Kids do worse to themselves all the time falling off their bikes. Keep running, don't look back. If you can just get to Mom, you'll be okay. Never mind how she knew that, she knew. The problem was the wedding guests seemed to know it, too. She turned one way, and Badger was there. He didn't look like a minister, he looked like he could literally tear her to pieces. She turned another way, and the birds dove and clawed at her eyes, pulled her hair.

"You left me," growled Rabbit. "You tricked me."

She turned again, and Rabbit was there. In the hot, bright sunlight, standing just outside his hole, he wasn't a nightmare ready to fade away. He was angry. He was betrayed. He looked scarier than ever. If he'd looked this horrible in the beginning, Janey would never have got within ten feet of him. He was huge. His fur stood out in quivering, muddy bunches. His eyes were wild and gummy and red from smoke. He wasn't even pretending to smile anymore, and his teeth. His teeth. "Now Janey," he said. He lifted his big, back foot to stamp. "The wedding. Our wedding. I'm going to marry you, Janey. And then I'm going to bite you. The guests are here. Now. Janey my bride --"

And there wasn't time. There was just the wedding, and Rabbit's guests. Only, if it was a wedding, a real wedding, Janey realized, shouldn't she have guests of her own? Where was Mom? Why wasn't there anybody on her side? And she realized it was because they couldn't come if they weren't asked. But now she knew. The guests were here. She knew who could help.

Janey invited the garden.

The roses caught Rabbit in their thorns. The tomatoes picked up stakes and threw them. The pumpkins bowled into Badger and wrapped him a tangle of prickly vines until he couldn't move without strangling himself. Beans and peas shot up like green bullets aimed at the owl and diving crows. The corn rustled and swayed, driving the squirrels away with blow after blow from silk-topped ears. And the cucumbers, unleashed at last, rose up and gleefully overpowered the mice and the shrew, bludgeoning them to death one after the other. The garden was holding the guests at bay, but it couldn't quite hold Rabbit.

"I'm going to bite your leg off," he said. He was moving now. Moving slowly, because it was more horrible. He wanted to scare her. He was scaring her. She could hear his heavy body straining against thorns and breaking branches as they tried to hold him. The garden fought, leaves and roots and everything straining to keep him back as long as they could. Just a few seconds more. A vine snapped under the weight of those paws. Rabbit lunged.

But Mom got there first.

Mom stepped forward with her cell phone still glued to her ear, and suddenly Rabbit didn't seem anything near as big as before. She stepped down hard and crushed Rabbit's head, grinding his skull beneath her heel with a sick, wet crunch while Janey shut her eyes. When Janey dared look again, Rabbit was unmistakably dead, and Mom was turning towards the house without a backwards glance, without missing one word of her conversation with the client or distributor on the other end of the line. Janey nodded to herself. It was just like Dad always said: Mom was a killer. Mom was a wizard on the phone.

Mom went up on the porch and closed the screen door behind her. On his comfortable windowsill, Tombow gave the world a sleepy wink. And Janey shared a long, long glance with the marigolds, nodding in the breeze. Then she went off through the rest of the garden to see if she could find her old, straw hat.

Rumspringa

by Jason Sanford



Artwork by Walter Simon

The English arrived at the farm shortly before supper, their ship buzzing my draft horses and baling combine and kicking a cloud of hay dust into the dry air. Even though I wasn't impressed with the ship's acrobatics, my younger brother Sol, who'd been wrapping the hay bundles with twine, stared at the English with excitement. Knowing I wouldn't get any more work out of him, I stopped the horses. The socket beneath my straw hat itched in resonance with our new visitors, which I took to be a particularly bad sign.

The ship landed by the barn and three English stepped off. One, an older woman named Ms. Watkins, had served as New Lancaster's mediator between the Amish and English for the last three centuries and always respected our customs, as demonstrated by the plain gray dress she wore. The other English, though, didn't share her regard. The man behind Ms. Watkins wore a blue militia uniform, a definite slap at our nonviolent beliefs, while the teenage girl beside him was naked except for a swirl of colors obscuring her private parts. She gazed around the farm and smiled when she spotted me.

"What do you think they want, Sam?" Sol asked as he stared at the naked girl. I shook my head, even though I had a good idea. A new comet had shone in the sky for the last few weeks, growing massively larger with each passing day. My father and I had discussed its looming impact several times. Now, as my father walked toward the English, I knew he had come to the same conclusion as me. I quickly handed the horse reins to Sol and joined him.

"Ms. Watkins," my father said, shaking her hand.

"Bishop Yoder," Ms. Watkins said. Then, turning to me, "This can't

be Samuel? Last time I saw him he was just a little boy."

"Sam hasn't been a boy for almost five years," my father said without a trace of pride, just like any proper Amish man. "In fact, he will turn twenty-one next month."

"Ah, rumspringa," the naked girl said, rudely stepping between my father and Ms. Watkins. "I assume you'll be baptized on your 21st birthday?"

"I hope to be," I said, annoyed at an outsider asking such a personal question. In addition, these English surely knew exactly who I was. Their pretense of ignorance was merely another of their endless, convoluted games, although it would be rude to say that.

"Well, I hope you'll reconsider. After all, there's more to life than working a left-behind farm." The girl dimmed the colors flowing across her chest, allowing everyone a full view of her bare breasts. "It's not too late, you know. You can still seek forgiveness for any deadly sin that comes your way."

My father coughed awkwardly. Even Ms. Watkins blushed a solid, scarlet red, testimony to the proxy she'd downloaded before coming here. The militia man, of course, didn't respond and stared stone-faced at everyone.

"Rumspringa isn't a time to simply run around and sin," I said. "It's when one 'puts away the things of a child' and becomes an adult. Nothing more. Nothing less. And I'm well aware of what life has to offer." As I said that, I readjusted my straw hat, feeling the skull socket I would give anything to have removed.

My father nodded to my words, indicating I had spoken a solid truth, then waved for Ms. Watkins and the others to follow him into the house. I wanted to follow but, glancing back at Sol, I saw he'd somehow tangled the horse reins in the baling combine's gears. By the time I reached him one of the horses had kicked the baler, damaging the main driveshaft.

I groaned. It would take all night to undo the reins and repair the driveshaft. Wanting to join my father inside, I glanced over at Sol, who was backing the horses up to give the reins more slack. Luckily for me, when the English created antique machines for us with their nanoforges, they included the same repair gollums as on their own equipment. With Sol distracted by the horses, I reached my mind through my socket and accessed the baler's gollum. The driveshaft's metal flowed and reworked itself until the reins lay free in my hand and the driveshaft looked as good as new.

As Sol and I led the horses back to the barn, he glanced once at the baler. But he didn't say a word as we unharnessed the horses and washed them down for the night.



By the time we finished, the sun had set and the new comet glowed brightly across the sky. I led Sol into the house, where my mother intercepted my brother at the doorway.

"The men are on the back porch," she said as she led Sol upstairs to bed, to my brother's obvious disappointment. "There's chicken and mashed potatoes on the table, but it'll keep."

I nodded and headed for the back porch, fighting down a combination of pride at being considered a man and nervousness at why the English were here. The pride worried me the most -- right after violence, our worst sin was *hochmut*. Before stepping onto the porch, I took a deep breath and calmed myself until I felt humble before God and life and the world.

"Sam," Ms. Watkins said. "Glad you could join us. Please, have a seat."

Ms. Watkins sat in a wicker chair, while several elders from nearby farms sat on a bench beside my father. I walked toward my father, irritated at Ms. Watkins offering me a seat in my father's house. Beside her sat the militia man, while the teenage girl leaned on the porch railing with her body colorings flowing to the slight breeze. As I passed the English, my socket buzzed slightly and I wondered what they were discussing among themselves. As if knowing my thoughts, the teenage girl smiled a most wicked smile and slid her tongue along the top of her red lips.

"We have been discussing a problem," my father said, stroking his beard in irritation at the girl's behavior. "The comet will impact near here next week."

"How far?" I asked.

The militia officer, whose name holo read Captain Stryder, looked over. "Just over 500 kilometers from this settlement. As I told your father, there will be some modest damage at that distance -- windows blown out, that type of thing -- but your community should survive. Still, we need to do a temporary resettlement to be safe."

"Why are we just being notified?" I asked.

Captain Stryder didn't even blink. "Until yesterday, we didn't need to. A massive outventing changed the comet's course. Otherwise it would have impacted well away from here."

I nodded. New Lancaster was an earth-size planet, but lacked sufficient quantities of water, with little standing liquid and only modest underground reservoirs. Since settlement began four centuries ago, periodic comet impacts had been used to terraform the still mostly deserted planet.

Captain Stryder looked at me with the calm, reassuring gaze generated by his militia leadership proxy. But despite Stryder's attempt to put me at ease, I didn't trust him. I also recalled his name from somewhere. But short of accessing my socket, I couldn't figure out what I'd once known about him.

"There really is no choice," Stryder said. "We'll move everyone to a safe holding location, then move you back after impact."

Assuming nothing goes wrong, I thought, filling in the unspoken words.

My father opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say anything the teenage girl jumped up from the porch railing. "This is ridiculous," she said in agitation. "Why are we even discussing this?"

My socket again buzzed as, I assume, Ms. Watkins and Captain Stryder told the girl to shut up.

"No," she shouted. "These people depend on us for trips across the universe and machines and everything else, but they still don't want anything to do with us. Why do we bring them to each new world and baby sit them? I'd say it was nostalgia, but who even understands that emotion anymore."

In the faint glow of the gas lantern, Ms. Watkins blushed while the elders looked away. My father, though, kept a steady face. "I don't believe you've been properly introduced," he said. "This is Emma Beiler. She is an expert." He paused. "On the Amish."

"I see," I said, struggling to find a suitable response. "How does one become an expert at such a young age?"

Emma snorted. "Watch your manners, boy. I'm 641 years old come September. Born on old earth herself."

I was quite familiar with life extension, having witnessed it up close among the rich and powerful in New Lancaster's main city. A millennium ago, our Amish order decided that life extensions were not part of our *ordnung*, or rules of living. While there was nothing sinful about preserving one's life, extending it indefinitely was extremely expensive, more so to revert to a vastly younger age. This expense would have caused dissension in the community. In fact, I had no doubt that Emma's teenage body was an attempt to create jealousy among her much older-looking colleagues. I shook my head in sympathy. While I refused to judge Emma, the fact that she'd lived so long and understood so little of life saddened me.

"As I was telling our guests before you arrived," my father said, "we will send someone to their ship to examine the data on the comet impact. Once that's done, we will discuss this among the entire congregation."

Captain Stryder nodded. "We'll need an answer in four days."

I felt the far-too familiar buzz in my socket, meaning the English were heavily involved in matters among themselves. Even without accessing their data streams, I doubted they had come here out of concern for our Amish settlement. I wondered what Captain Stryder and Ms. Watkins would do if we refused to leave.

As the English walked back to their ship, Emma glanced at me. For a moment her eyes looked old and sad, as if she'd lost something she'd give anything to regain. But then, with the flash of a new proxy, her eyes became young again and she giggled in her teenage voice.



After the elders left, I walked to the barn with my father to make sure everything was in order. Because of the excitement, I hadn't properly taken care of the hay baler, a fact my father pointed out almost immediately. Embarrassed, I picked up a rag while he grabbed the grease gun.

"What do you think?" I asked.

My father placed the grease gun's nozzle over a lubrication nipple and squeezed the handle. "I think it's suspicious. During your time with the English, did you work on their comet program?"

"No, I worked in high orbit on the nanoforge assemblies. But as part of my advanced training, I studied comet work." What I didn't tell my father was that everyone working the assemblies downloaded complete work proxies covering any possible job one might do. All I had to do was access the proxy in my socket and I would become an instant expert on comet movement and impacts.

"That's good," my father said. "The elders and I will present this information to the congregation on Sunday. While God's will always prevails, any information you can provide -- without using your socket -- will be appreciated."

My stomach sank at his mention of the socket. While my father had lived his entire life among the Amish, he always knew far more than he let on about the English world.

"What if that's the only way to find out the information we need?" I asked.

"Then we don't need it."

I nodded, remembering my years among the English. Every Amish adolescent was expected to make his or her own decision about whether to commit to our faith. Like many of my friends, I'd wanted to see the life I'd be giving up. Unlike them, I stayed away for over four years, only returning shortly before my 20th birthday. I hadn't talked much with my father about my life among the English, or why I had returned, but I wouldn't be surprised if he knew a good deal about what I'd done.

My father finished greasing the baler, then placed the grease gun back on the tool bench, where he eyed the damaged horse reins Sol had jammed in the combine's gears. "Do you remember when I was chosen as bishop?" he asked.

I said yes. Our congregation cast lots to select our deacons and bishops, letting God decide who should be chosen.

"A few weeks after I was chosen, Ms. Watkins flew in to congratulate me. I didn't know what to say. Until then, all anyone had expressed to me was sympathy at the heavy burden I'd been chosen to carry. Still, Ms. Watkins meant no ill. She just doesn't understand us. No English can. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"I believe so."

"I'm not sure you do." My father opened the access panel on the baler, revealing the clean, new-looking driveshaft.

I hung my head in shame. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

My father sighed and rubbed his beard. "Sam, you need to understand. Before you are baptized, the community can overlook these transgressions. But after baptism, if you keep using that socket, they will shun you. I don't want that to happen. I know you use the socket to help out, but it's not allowed. Don't give in to temptation. That's your burden to bear, just as mine was being selected Bishop. Embrace the burden and God will show you the way."

I nodded. I started to ask my father if he knew what had been required of me to live among the English, but I couldn't stand mentioning this to him. "I don't trust them," I said. "Few of the English care about anyone but themselves. Plus, this planet is almost totally empty. They could have easily aimed the comet to a place where it'd pose no risk to anyone. They're up to something."

"All the more reason to see what you can learn. English claims to the contrary, they have less understanding of life than we do. Perhaps something has tempted them. If so, we need to know."

As we left the barn, I glanced up at the sky. Just last night, the comet had been a object of beauty, a sparking exclamation of God's power in the universe. Now it was one more sign of humanity's ugliness, aimed directly at everything I cared about.

"Remember," my father said, patting me on the back as we walked in the house. "To the English, being chosen is an honor. Don't be like them. Don't be proud at being chosen."



Shortly before dawn, Sol and I woke up and fed the pigs and chickens. We then finished bailing the hay. I worked quickly, urging the Clydesdales faster and faster, unable to focus on the truth contained within this hard work. Instead, I continually glanced at the comet as it slowly disappeared below the horizon.

I finished my work around noon. After parking the baler in the barn, I walked by the water trough and noticed that the water flow had stopped. Because there was no rain on New Lancaster, we used large canvas water catchers in the foothills above our farms to collect the morning mists. Pipes carried the water down into large metal reservoirs for use in drip irrigation to grow crops and as drinking water for the animals and ourselves. While it rarely happened, the pipes sometimes clogged at different points. Not wanting to waste any more time, I told Sol to find the clog and remove it.

After washing up, I pulled on a plain gray shirt and pants, two suspenders, and my wide-brimmed, black-felt hat. I then harnessed a paint mare to our family's buggy and rode off to the English ship.

The ship had landed on a nearby foothill, which rose five-hundred meters above the plains. A stubby native grass called thickens, which stored their own water like a cactus, grew along the top of the foothills. Thickens were extremely difficult to remove from the land and the main reason we didn't farm near them. Luckily, they only grew at higher elevations, where they could condense water from the nightly mists.

When I reached the English ship, I parked the buggy and hobbled the mare's legs. I also slipped on her feedbag. Thickens were toxic to earth animals and I didn't want her to be tempted.

Captain Stryder waited for me at the foot of his ship. "About time," he said in an arrogant tone. "I expected you this morning."

"I had to finish bailing the hay."

For a moment Captain Stryder's proxy cracked as a smirk crossed his face. I knew what he thought: How could I bail hay with possible destruction heading toward us? But that just showed Stryder didn't understand the Amish, for whom everyday work was an act of devotion.

I followed Stryder inside the ship, where I was struck yet again by how few people were needed to run English technology. While we used hundreds of Amish to build a barn, Stryder only needed himself to run his entire ship. He led me through the empty ship to the bridge, where Ms. Watkins and Emma waited. As I sat beside them, Ms. Watkins shook my hand. Emma nodded in the overly polite manner of an automatic proxy, meaning her other proxies were off diving into another socket-accessed reality.

For the next hour, Captain Stryder presented his data on the comet. A kilometer and a half in diameter, the comet had been directed toward the planet for the last century. While Stryder's data indicated our settlement wasn't vulnerable to the impact's electromagnetic pulse -- aside from the unused repair gollums in our nanoforge-created machines -- we would suffer minor air blast and seismic damage. That said, if the comet changed course even slightly our settlement would be destroyed.

To make clear the danger we faced, Stryder proceeded to show me startling images from a recent megaton-range weapon impact. That's when I remembered where I'd heard his name before. Stryder's unit enforced quarantine, making sure no unapproved biomatter reached the surface and interfered with terraforming. The images of mushroom clouds now boiling before me came from his controversial decision to destroy a large, unoccupied section of New Lancaster after an unapproved animal species was released. As Stryder spoke with pride about that destruction, I wondered why he was involved in relocating us. Perhaps the militia figured Stryder's experience using megaton-range weapons helped him understand comet impacts.

The fact that I hadn't remembered all this until now made me miss my socket even more. Even the most basic of sockets could spin Stryder's facts and figures and words a billion different ways to see through his flash and bang to the truth of this matter.

"That's all very nice," I finally said, trying to keep the English sarcasm I'd picked up out of my voice. "I still don't understand why we weren't informed until now."

"The outventing," Stryder repeated, as if I were an ignorant child.

"When I worked on the nanoforges, I downloaded a comet worker proxy. Based on what I know, any outventing big enough to cause such a large course change should have been easily predicted. I don't believe this happened by chance."

I was bluffing, since I'd never actually opened that proxy. While bluffing wasn't the most Amish of traits, I needed to know if Stryder was telling the truth.

Unfortunately, his proxy didn't waver. "That's perfect," he said. "Let's dispense with this charade. Download my data and use that little socket of yours. You'll see I'm telling the truth."

My socket almost screamed at the chance to access Stryder's information. Unfortunately, while my gut told me Stryder was also bluffing, unless I went against my community's rules I couldn't be certain. I glanced at Ms. Watkins, who refused to meet my eye.

"Can you provide the data in a printed format?" I asked.

"It would comprise a hundred million of your printed pages."

My heart sank.

"That's what I thought," Captain Stryder said with a sneer. "I knew you would act this way. Distrustful. Outwardly humble yet inwardly proud. Wanting to explore the world beyond your precious Amish, yet afraid of all the 'English' can do. Is that why you returned to your people? Out of fear?"

Not for the first time, I felt violated as a stranger accessed my memories. Instead of responding, I took a deep breath and reminded myself that the memories Stryder had access to had been sold years ago. They weren't the man I was today.

To my surprise, though, his words woke Emma from her socket-induced stupor. "Stop tormenting him. Provide the child with any analysis he needs. He wins, we win, we get to save these backward idiots and go home."

Captain Stryder thought about this, then nodded. "Yes, this is a waste of my time. Do you have any old-grade computers in your settlement?"

"Yes, in the school house." Our order allowed a few higher tech machines for community use, in this case for accessing New Lancaster's weather and emergency net. While the school computer was more advanced than anything else in our community, it was still a millennium behind anything the English used.

"Perfect. Emma can download the data and enter it into your computer. Run a simulation on it. You'll see I'm telling the truth."

For a moment, my socket tingled as Captain Stryder and Ms. Watkins and Emma engaged in a ultra-fast and obviously high spirited argument. The communication ended with Emma apparently satisfied.

"What's the catch?" I asked. The English never did anything without payment in return.

"They said I can spend some time with the Amish," Emma said. "My research on you silly people is out of date."

I sighed but, seeing no alternative, agreed. For the briefest of moments Emma's eyes shivered as her socket downloaded the massive data on the comet, causing my own socket to ache for the power and ability it had once possessed. I muttered a silent prayer for God to deliver me from this temptation.

Instead of God answering, Emma grinned and blew me a kiss with her red, red lips.



Emma rode back to the farm with me. As the buggy creaked along the dirt road, she sat with her eyes glazed over as she dived into her socket without even bothering to generate a cover proxy to interact with me. I had insisted that Emma dress modestly, so she'd created a typical Amish outfit, in this case a full-length gray dress with long sleeves and a cape and apron. On her head she wore a black prayer covering, signifying, just like my lack of a beard, that she was not married. While Emma dressing as one of us annoyed me, I figured it was better than her running around naked.

We arrived home well after dark. After unhitching my horse, I turned on the faucet and found that the pipes were still blocked. After giving my horse some of our reserve water, I explained the situation with Emma to my parents and they showed her to the guest bedroom. I then woke Sol up and asked him about the pipes.

"I unblocked them," Sol mumbled, half asleep. "Thickens had gotten inside. But I cleaned them out and patched the pipe."

I told Sol to go back to sleep. I'd take care of the water problem in the morning.

At first light I watered the animals with the remainder of our reserves, then hitched up the horse and loaded the buggy with all the tools I might need. The distant water collectors in the foothills glittered with moisture in the rising light. Obviously the nightly mists had arrived, so the pipe must still be blocked. While running the simulation on the computer was important, more important was getting water for the animals and crops. In New Lancaster's dry air, they could die from dehydration well before the comet impact.

Once the horse and buggy were ready, I walked back in the house. To my surprise, Emma sat in the kitchen talking with my mother. I panicked -- afraid that Emma would insult my mother, or worse, reveal what I'd done among the English. To my surprise, though, my mother enjoyed talking with her.

"Is everything okay?" I asked warily as Emma handed me a plate of bacon, eggs, and oatmeal, which she'd evidently cooked by herself.

"Everything's perfect," my mother said. "Emma's a delightful young lady."

I glanced at Emma, who was again dressed like one of us. I wondered if my mother remembered Emma parading half-naked through our house only two days ago. Emma's eyes flickered for a moment and I realized she'd used yet another proxy to modify her behavior.

Not wanting to leave Emma alone with my parents, I told her we were riding up to the foothills to fix the water pipes.

"What about the computer sim?" she asked.

"We'll do it when we get back."

Emma shrugged and followed me out of the house, much to my relief.

The ride up was uneventful. Emma sat silently beside me, lost in whatever socket-derived world she wished to create. My own socket tingled to her presence and, as the buggy rolled slowly through the empty kilometers, I wished I could patch in with her. All I'd have to do was create a proxy to drive the buggy. I could then expand my mind into the endless connections and worlds used by all the English on New Lancaster.

As if knowing my thoughts, Emma turned to look at me. She seemed pleasant and I assumed this proxy was the one she'd used with my mother.

"Why were you so anxious to get me out of the house?" she asked.

I started to yell at her -- another habit I'd learned among the English -- but the look in her eyes said she truly didn't know. Proxies could compartmentalize knowledge and memories, so a person with a particular proxy literally wouldn't know what they'd done only moments before with a different proxy.

"To be honest, I'm afraid you'll tell my parents what I did among the English."

She stared at me with uncertainty until her socket supplied the missing information. "You sold yourself," she said.

I nodded. The problem all Amish face if they leave the faith is that, according to the current standards of humanity, we aren't truly human. We lack sockets. When humans can create new personalities and emotions at the drop of a pin, when humans have nanoforges to satisfy every whim and desire, what are the Amish, who've changed only a little across thousands of years?

As all Amish youth discover during rumspringa, an eighth-grade education can't compete with enhanced humans who can download libraries of information. While charity ensured that none of us starved -- after all, what were a few crumbs to nanoforges -- there was little hope for advancement in a society where only access to a socket ensured one's success.

Enter the devil's bargain. Any Amish kid could earn their own socket in exchange for the one thing we had which others wanted: Our lives. In an age where nothing about humanity was stable, where any person might possess a thousand distinct personalities, what the Amish owned were our experiences. Our beliefs. Our years of hard, physical work. Our secure love from growing up in a deep, nourishing community.

Most Amish youth refused to sell their lives and returned to their family farms. Not me. I not only uploaded my memories, I allowed others to experiment on me, to expose me to endless personality proxies then share in my reaction. I became a woman, a baby, a genius, a warrior, an idiot, a bird, a whale, and more. For a bit of money, anyone could see through my naïve eyes as I reacted to each startling mental change.

After four years of this, though, I began to yearn for what I'd given up. Ironically, this nostalgia made me even more popular. Those who had everything had no way of missing anything. I tried to upload an explanation about the emptiness I saw all around me, how even if one connected into a million different lives these proxies were nothing but a distraction from life. However, no one understood. So I collected the scattered pieces and memories of my original life, stitched them together into a new/old personality, burned them back into my brain, and returned home to beg my God and community for forgiveness.

I didn't explain any of this to Emma. With her socket, she downloaded all the information about me and understood in an instant. "I'm sorry," she said. "Believe me, I understand."

Before I could ask her how she understood, my socket buzzed. I started to tell Emma no, but as I stared into her face I felt her utter sincerity. Asking God to forgive me, I opened my socket for the briefest of moments.

Emma's life flooded into me. I saw her as a child more than six centuries ago, growing up in Lancaster County on earth. She too was Amish, and she too yearned to see the universe beyond her one patch of ground. Like me, she sold her memories and life, but unlike me she never returned, instead living and aging across the years until she immigrated to New Lancaster as an Amish expert for the government.

But even as I learned this, I also saw her anger and regret. She hated her life, hated the emptiness of a society of self-centered people who could create anything they wished for. Emma only wished for one thing and that was the one thing she couldn't have -- to return to her family and community. Like me, she had created the proxy she now wore from the memories of her childhood and had embedded it into her brain by rewiring her very neurons. She used this hardwired proxy as an escape from her socket-driven life, or, occasionally, to interact with the planet's Amish. The rest of Emma's memories and personalities lived in her socket, connected forever and irrevocably to the very life they abhorred.

I closed my socket and said another prayer as I urged the horse up the gently sloping foothills. All the anger and hate Emma's proxies felt showed me how I might have turned out if I hadn't returned to the faith. I thanked Emma for sharing this, but instantly saw that the hardwired Emma was gone, replaced by a new proxy who sneered and called me a weak, backward idiot. I ignored her words and urged the horse to go even faster.



By the time we reached the water collection system, Emma was in rare form. She was so angry about her hardwired proxy giving me such a personal download that, as I unpacked my tools, she grabbed a knife and ran to the giant mesh nets which covered acre after acre of these hills.

"Screw Amish nonviolence," she said, dangling the knife under a section of mesh. "What'll you do if I cut this?"

"Repair it," I said. Emma smirked and sliced a long gap in the mesh. I shook my head and walked over to take the knife, but she wanted to fight for it. Refusing to do that, I simply ignored her. After cutting a few more nets, she hacked in anger at the yellow thickens growing beneath the nets then jammed the knife in the ground.

"That's why Stryder and Watkins will win," she said. "You won't fight them."

"One can still win without fighting."

Emma snickered, then zoned out as she retreated into the hedonistic paradise of her socket. While she zoned, I ran a rooter into the blocked section of pipe and pulled out a clump of thickens. While thickens grew all along these hills, I had never known them to clog the pipes. After estimating the distance to the clog, I grabbed my shovel and dug up the buried section of the nanoforge created pipe, which we'd been given in exchange for a crop of hand-grown tobacco. The pipe had cracked and thickens had grown inside, attracted by the abundant water source. It took me two hours to clear them out, an amazing fact since I could see where Sol had cleaned out and patched this very pipe the day before. Obviously thickens grew explosively fast when exposed to large amounts of water.

Once the pipe was clear, I reached for my patch kit before realizing that was exactly what Sol had done the day before. Knowing I didn't have the time to keep returning to the foothills, I opened my socket and activated the pipe's gollum. Instantly the pipe sealed shut.

Emma emerged from her socket trance to tease me. "You're addicted," she said, "so don't you dare look down on me." She then disappeared back into her socket.

I didn't say a word as I drove us back to the farm.



Over dinner that night, Emma and I explained what we'd learned. After returning from the foothills we'd had time for Emma to download the comet's data into the school house computer, where I'd run a number of simulations. Each one suggested Captain Stryder and Ms. Watkins were telling the truth.

"So there's no ulterior motive for wanting us to leave?" my father asked.

"I couldn't tell," I said. "But the information on why the comet is impacting nearby appears to be correct."

My father nodded. He ate another bite of chicken and looked out the window at the comet, which shone brightly across the darkening sky. "When the congregation comes over tomorrow for worship services, I'll tell everyone about this and suggest we evacuate until after the impact."

Before I could I agree with my father, Emma spoke up in the pleasant voice which meant she was using her hardwired Amish girl proxy. "Ms. Watkins and Captain Stryder are lying to you. They don't care about the Amish."

My father stared at his fork. "Excuse me?" he asked.

Emma stared at her plate, obviously embarrassed at having said anything.

"What do you mean, they don't care about us?" my father asked. "No offense intended, but I'm not sure you care either."

Emma nodded, and suddenly the arrogant, hateful Emma appeared. "You are correct. Concern among my people changes like the wind. Are Ms. Watkins and Captain Stryder concerned? No. Ms. Watkins believes the Amish are needed for colonization because you provide an underclass we 'English' can look down on, making our powerful yet disjointed lives seem better in comparison. Captain Stryder's proxy cares only about defending English civilization and terraforming this planet. You're fools to trust either of them."

As soon as she finished speaking, Emma's eyes flickered and she blushed a deep red. "I'm so sorry," she stammered, standing up from the table. "Please forgive me." She then ran from the house. I explained to my shocked family how the English used personality proxies, which changed from moment to moment. I also explained that Emma had been born Amish and left during rumspringa. The personality we liked was created from the centuries-old remnants of Emma's Amish memories. My father nodded with a sad look on his face, as if we'd just witnessed a horrible accident, but could do nothing to help.

"When you disturb the most basic things God has given us -- memory, emotion, soul -- can you call what remains human?" my father asked. "But that's for God to decide, I suppose."

I nodded, even as I wondered if my father would consider me human if he knew how much I resembled Emma.



The next few days passed quickly. After Sunday church services in our house, my father explained to the congregation about the comet and why he believed we needed to temporarily evacuate. The congregation discussed the situation for hours, but eventually agreed we should leave. My father and I volunteered to stay until the last minute to take care of the animals on the nearby farms while the rest of the families flew to a relocation camp four hundred kilometers away.

Captain Stryder wasn't happy with me and my father staying. Still, he said he'd spare a small AI piloted shuttle to pull us out at the last minute, as long as we accepted responsibility for our deaths if anything happened.

The next day the ships landed and our families boarded. Sol hugged me so long that I didn't think he'd board the ship. I then kissed my mother, who told me to watch over my father. They then flew away to safety.

That night, with the comet lighting up the entire sky, my father and I rode our buggy from farm to farm to check on the animals, making sure they had enough food and water and were protected from the coming blast. Now that we had time to talk, I mentioned how the chickens had grown into the pipe. He said he'd heard rumors they could grow explosively fast around standing water. He asked me how I'd fixed the pipe, to which I didn't respond.

"No matter," he said. "In the last week you have behaved very much like the man God intended you to be." He didn't say he was proud of me -- because that wouldn't have been fitting -- but I still felt a sinful pride at his words.

We woke the next morning a few hours before impact. After a final check on the animals in the area, we bedded down our horse and waited for the shuttle to arrive. It did so with a mere fifteen minutes left before impact.

"We English like to cut it short," Emma said as the shuttle's door opened. "Life's boring without a little drama."

My father started to ask why she was here, but I saw the wild look in her eyes and told him to get onboard before she changed her mind. While I didn't trust this proxy of hers, I doubted she'd do anything to endanger her own life.

Naturally enough, I was totally wrong. Emma flew the shuttle directly toward the impact zone, buzzing so low over the foothills that I saw our buggy tracks from the other day.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm doing you a favor, Sammy boy. I downloaded your life last night and had a revelation. If I can't go home, I might as well save your worthless community."

My father glanced at me, but remained silent. I was about to say something when I saw Captain Stryder's ship appear on one of the foothills, where it'd been hidden from view. Emma landed the shuttle by the ship in a small explosion of dirt and thickens.

The door opened and Emma jumped out. My father and I followed. Even though I didn't want to, I accessed my socket and learned we had eight minutes until impact. I nervously glanced at the comet, which burned in the sky directly over the horizon.

As we approached the ship, a door opened and Captain Stryder emerged. "What the hell are you doing here?" he yelled, his calm militia proxy obviously overwhelmed.

"I'm on to you," Emma shouted, hitting Stryder across the face. "I won't let you do it."

With a quick motion, Stryder reached into his tunic and pulled out a stun gun, which collapsed Emma into pain on the yellow thickens. He bent over to make sure she was alright, then looked at us and shook his head.

"I sincerely want to apologize for this," he said. "I knew she was unstable, but I had no idea her disjointment went this far."

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Stryder aimed the stun gun at us. "We don't have time to fight," he said. "I'm alone on the ship. If I hurt you, I can't carry all of you onboard to safety before the impact."

"We won't fight you," I said. "But what are you doing?"

Stryder wavered for a moment, then kicked at a thicken. "They're spreading," he said. "The damn things used to only cover places like these foothills, where the mists fed them. But as the planet grows wetter they're starting to spread. What's the point of terraforming if a native plant spreads everywhere and keeps out our own vegetation?"

I stared for a moment at the thickens and thought about how hard a time we'd had removing them from a few isolated spots. I then remembered Stryder's role in removing any unauthorized biomatter which threatened terraforming. "You're going to destroy them," I said, even as my socket warned me there were only three minutes until impact. "You're going to vaporize the entire region, just like you did a year ago."

Stryder sighed. "This is the only group of thickens near a settlement. With the comet hitting nearby, we could burn the region away and say any harm to your settlement was merely unanticipated comet damage."

I glanced at Emma, who rolled in pain on the thickens. Any weapon strike big enough to completely destroy all these plants would also destroy our settlement. My anger rose at Stryder's arrogance in deciding the fate of our community and I tensed to charge him. But before I could move, my father laid his hand on my arm. Stryder smirked. He obviously considered nonviolence a weakness. He gestured with the stun gun. "Carry her onboard the ship," he ordered. "We need to be inside to be safe from the impact."

As I bent over Emma, my socket buzzed. On a hunch, I opened myself to her and a wave of information flooded in, everything from her uncovering Stryder and Watkins' plan to detailed sims showing Stryder using his ship's weapons to destroy everything within a hundred kilometers of these hills. As I watched our community explode, Emma suddenly smiled. One final, but critical, piece of information clicked into me.

I stood up and faced Stryder. "We're not going anywhere."

My father reached for me, but he didn't have to worry -- I had no intention of fighting. Instead, I uploaded the access code Emma had just given me into Stryder's ship, sealing the main door shut. A look of panic crossed Stryder's face as my socket warned we were one minute to impact.

"Open the door," Stryder screamed, but I'd already scrambled the code. He aimed the stun gun at me and fired, sending pain coursing through my body. As I fell onto the thicken-coated ground, I glanced up at the comet, which appeared unmoving and eternal yet also ever changing.

As Stryder banged on the door in pure panic, the comet entered the atmosphere with a massive, eye-burning explosion. The fire reached above the distant horizon like God's hand embracing His own. As I passed out, my last thoughts were a prayer, hoping He would forgive my sins and pull me into the sweet night of His bosom.



I woke two days later in my own bed. At first I was disoriented and thought I'd entered a sim of my parent's house, but when tried to find my way out I only felt my own body and senses. I rubbed the slight bump under the back of my skull. The socket was physically there, but the slight buzz I'd felt ever since installation was gone.

I stood up and looked out the broken window at the foothills. The distant hills were still covered in yellow thickens and I saw the glint of water on the damaged water condensers. I then walked downstairs to find my parents sitting on the back porch with Ms. Watkins.

"Sam," Ms. Watkins said, standing up and offering me her chair. "Glad to see that you are up and about."

Remembering Emma's last upload and how Ms. Watkins had been working with Stryder to destroy our community, I refused to take her seat. Ms. Watkins gave me a sour look, then shook her head and walked toward the barn, where a shuttle waited for her.

My father and mother quickly filled me in. After the electromagnetic pulse fried the sockets of Stryder, myself, and Emma, my father had pulled us behind the relative safety of the English ship. The seismic shaking hit a minute and a half after impact; the shock wave twenty minutes later. As we'd been told, the damage to the community was minimal at this distance, although ejecta from the impact pelted our crops rather hard.

Ms. Watkins and other rescuers arrived an hour later. Stryder was in bad shape -- evidently he'd relied almost totally on his socket for storage of his memories and proxies. While Emma's socket, and my own, were also destroyed, Ms. Watkins said we should be okay because we had stable personalities hardwired in our neurons. As a precaution she'd sedated us, but said there would be no lasting effects -- aside from having a dead socket in our head for the rest of our lives. She'd also half-heartedly apologized for going behind our backs in dealing with the thickens problem. While my father knew she didn't truly mean this, he still suggested several low-tech solutions for controlling the plants near the Amish settlement. Ms. Watkins had expressed interest in exploring those options.

"Do you trust her?" I asked.

"No," my father said. "But I trust God, and even you must admit He handled things rather well."

I nodded, still amazed that my socket could no longer tempt me. While I'd been praying for this ever since returning to the faith, the fact that I couldn't go back to the English world now scared me more than anything. Seeing my concern, my mother hugged me and told me to go check on our guest in the spare bedroom. I nervously walked to the bedroom and knocked on the door. An excited voice told me to come in.

Emma sat on the bed, a black prayer covering in her hands. She quickly placed it on her head and smiled.

"Your mother let me borrow some clothes," she said, standing up. Her dress was loose and baggy, and she laughed as her apron slipped from her waist. "She said I could stay as long as I want. Guess I'll need to make myself some clothes. Been a few centuries since I've had to do that."

I took her hand and squeezed it, then hugged her tightly. I wanted to ask how much of this her other proxies had planned and how much had resulted from God, or chance, or any of the above. But as I looked at Emma's happy face, I realized none of that mattered. Everyone else she'd ever been was dead and, in a strange way, both of our prayers had been answered. What else could we do but be content with the new lives we'd been given.

When I Kissed the Learned Astronomer

by Jamie Todd Rubin



Artwork by Jin Han

When I kissed the learned astronomer, I never expected to fall in love, discover intelligent alien life in the universe, and end up in jail. Up until the moment our lips first touched, I had never so much as been sent to the principal's office. My biggest infraction had been fibbing to my folks about looking for after-school employment. Up to that point, my biggest discovery had been (much to my dismay) a complete lack of any visible talent in chemistry lab. This made me think twice about becoming a doctor, veterinarian, chemical engineer, or any other profession that required mixing skills (including chef), and which resulted in yet another change in my major.

As for love, well, there was Summer Halfast, but I'm not sure it counts when the person for whom you pine over doesn't recognize your existence.

Tracing back the chain of events that led to my accidental fame and incarceration, it boggles my mind to think that it might never have happened if I hadn't been on that particular shuttle to the moon, and hadn't been assigned that particular seat. I'm no predestinarian, but it's hard for me to swallow the fact that it was all just happy circumstance. Yet what else could it be but happy circumstance?

And to think it all started with that kiss. Well, not quite . . .

—*igms*—

It all started with the summer solstice.

The fact that it was summer solstice would, under ordinary circumstances, never have entered my mind. However, it was also my graduation day and the high-noon sun would allow none of us graduates to forget that summer was upon us. The graduation ceremony was like a final exam: one in which we demonstrated that we were smart enough to follow one another in an endless

procession, under a blazing sun, draped in black. We sat there baking while the speaker cast his arms about the similarly-dressed audience, praising our individuality. Finally the dean of the school conferred upon us our respective degrees, and we tossed our sweat-drenched caps into the air and plotted our escape.

After four years of struggle, and a half dozen changes in major, I had finally settled on political science, mainly because I thought that the science part would impress my folks. It must have worked because after I'd threaded my way through the black-bean mass of fellow graduates and found my folks, they presented me with a most amazing graduation present.

"Here you go, son," Pop said, handing me the envelope, which I assumed contained money.

"Where's your diploma?" Mom asked, "Where is it? Let me see it. Come on, Danny, let your poor mother see it!"

I had to break the news to her. "We don't actually get the diplomas today, Ma. A replica will be sent out in four-to-six weeks, and the proper entry will be made in my academic record." She frowned, and I imagined that she would remain suspicious of the whole affair until that piece of paper was produced.

"Let him open his present, willya!" Pop said.

Ripping off the end of the envelope revealed the red-white-and-blue stripes of the Lunar Transit Authority. I pulled the LTA shuttle ticket from the wreckage of the envelope and flipped it open.

A round-trip ticket to the moon!

I looked up in surprise and Pop was beaming. How did they know I'd wanted the tickets? I'd never said anything about it. He patted me on the back and said, "I'm proud of you, son." Mom dabbed at the corner of her eyes and hugged me tightly. Suddenly graduation was a distant memory. I was going to the moon.



Someone once told me that two hundred years ago it was traditional for college graduates, freshly armed with their degrees, to announced themselves to the world by spending the summer after their graduation backpacking across Europe. I never understood that. Here these graduates had just completed four years worth of reading about the place so often in their history books and science books that you'd think they'd be sick of it! Eventually, I guess, they did grow sick of it and the tradition progressed from romping through the ruins of Stonehenge to hopping across the Ocean of Storms. That's where I was headed and I couldn't wait to get there.

Mind you, I was not one of those troglodytes who'd never been up in a shuttle before. We'd taken family vacations and I'd rocketed to Japan and New Zealand. But those were little lob shots, the kind that the girls on my sister's softball team tossed to one another. Going to the moon was like a fastball -- or at least a hanging curve -- in comparison.

Thus it was one week after graduation that I found myself climbing aboard the shuttle that would boost us into orbit. I was anxious, and perhaps a little nervous too, but as I looked around the cabin, no one else appeared worried, and so I did my best to ignore the feeling and focus on the flight. I calmed myself by humming "Fly Me To the Moon" under my breath (I am a fan of early-twentieth century music; it's my personal quirk!) Not long after we'd fastened in, the engines shuddered and thundered and I was flattened onto my couch for the ten longest ten minutes of my life.

When the shaking and rattling had reached the point where I thought my head would burst, it suddenly stopped. There was a momentary silence among the passengers and then the gentle three-note chime of an electric tone, followed by the voice of a flight attendant making the traditional announcement: "The captain has turned off the fasten seatbelt sign. You may now feel free to float about the cabin." And that's just what I did.



How does one expect to meet the love of one's life?

For me, I'd always imagined that it would be love at first sight, that we would stroll past one another in some exotic port, our eyes would lock, and the rest would be history. Or perhaps she would see me from afar, and come ask me for directions, and one thing would lead to another, and --

It's never quite how you play it through your head. Thus, I met Audrey on the free-return trajectory to the moon. In later months, I would leave off the last detail, telling people I met Audrey on the free-return trajectory, adding that if she didn't like me, she could feel free to return me from whence I had come.

She happened to be sitting in the seat just to my right, and I took no notice of her until she spoke to me. And the first thing she said to me was:

"I hate space travel. Only six hours into the flight, with half a day to go and already this stuffy little tin can just wrecks of an imperfectly washed humanity." And she glared at me when she said it.

I tore myself away from the view of a quarter-crescent Earth, ready to see if she could take it as well as she could dish it out, but when I saw her, actually looked at her, all thought of malice left my mind. I looked into her green eyes, from which she brushed away dark curls of hair, and in that instant, I longed for a washroom where I could scour away the scents of my imperfectly washed humanity.

I don't know what she saw in my face, but she must have taken pity on me because her face suddenly softened and she tilted her head slightly and said, "I'm sorry. You must think I'm rude. It's just that I get edgy on these shuttle flights. I don't like being closed in like this with no escape. It happens every time."

"You do this often?" I asked.

"About a dozen times, I guess. Mostly during the last few years, while completing my degree."

"Oh, did you just graduate?"

"Yes."

"Me too," I said.

"Congratulations. What did you study?"

"Political science."

"Ugh," she wrinkled her nose.

"What, not a fan of constitutions and elections and nation-building?"

"Let's just say I'm not a fan of bureaucracy and its petty rules and regulations."

"What are you a fan of?" I asked.

"That," she said, and leaned across my lap to point out the window.

"You're a fan of the earth?"

"Space, the stars, the whole universe!"

"Come on," I said, "you just graduated, didn't your professors tell you to start small?"

"I can't. Comes with the territory."

"Why? What do you do?"

"I'm an astronomer," she said. I detected a quaver in her voice when she said it, as though it were some secret thrill for her.

"So maybe you can explain something to me, oh learned astronomer."

"And what might that be?"

"Why haven't we found any other intelligent life in the universe?"

"Now whose getting ahead of himself. Don't you think we need to find the intelligent life we have right here at home first? Beside," and her voice grew momentarily grave and confident, "if they're out there, I'll find them."

"You're very self-assured. Ever think of running for office?"

"The only office I ever run for is the one in which I keep my computer and research notes," she said. "Now maybe you can explain something to me, Mr. President."

"And what might that be?"

"What on Earth are Wilson's Fourteen Points?"

"Six field goals and two free-throws," I said, and this time she laughed.

"I'm Audrey," she said and held out her hand.

"Dan," I said taking it, "but my friends call me Danny."

"So you're a basketball fan, are you, Mr. President?"

I nodded.

"I should have guessed, what with your fascination with rules and all. Wait until you see them play basketball on the moon."

On the moon, I thought. I turned back to the window and glanced at the crescent Earth, which seemed to grow smaller each minute. The moon wasn't visible in our current flight path, but I couldn't wait until the moment that the descent shuttle touched down on its dusty surface.



One might suppose that meeting the love of one's life in an unexpected manner would lead one to conclude that just about anything can happen, and I must admit that my view of the universe was altered a bit on the day I met Audrey. But I must further admit that it was altered to a greater extent several days later when, completely by accident, I discovered the Drifters.

I should clarify that we assume that the Drifters are intelligent; we don't know for certain, and we may never know. But the evidence is pretty strong in our favor. I didn't know much about it at the time, but what I did know was that aliens would likely be discovered in one of three ways:

1. The rationalists felt that aliens would be discovered by some signal they sent out, some code, written in the language of Nature that would be detected by Earth's scientists, the discovery of which would open a new era of peace and prosperity.
2. Warmongers felt that the alien spaceships would one day appear out of the blue, descending through the atmosphere on an invisible tether, and firing their death rays which would destroy whole cities. Humanity would band together to do battle against the threat, but do so too late for any meaningful action.
3. Conspiracy theorists felt that the government would be forced to admit regular dealings with aliens who had been visiting our planet for years. And having heard the truth, the conspiracy theorists would detect a trap and announce that the government was only placating them, and that these were not the real aliens, but a decoy to cover up some ever more nefarious plot.

Need I say that the discovery of the Drifters turned out to be very different from any of these possibilities? And the irony is that while such a discovery could not possibly seem connected to my meeting the love of my life in a most unexpected manner, in truth, it would not have happened if Audrey and I had not met on that shuttle to the moon. Let me explain . . .



It is often hard to objectively gauge the effect a woman has on you. Friends might point out that you talk differently when she is around, or that there is a little more pep in your stride, or that your apartment appears less a shambles. On the shuttle down to the Ocean of Storms, none of my friends were around to gauge my reactions to Audrey, and yet I know she had an effect on me.

I know it because on that shuttle, she got me into some trouble.

The ride down started out like a roller coaster: sudden acceleration followed by freefall. I can't say that I enjoyed it. We'd been served a meal just before arriving at the transfer station and for the entire twenty minute descent, I had the distinct feeling that the lunch I'd eaten a few hours earlier was not only floating free in my stomach, but was beginning to crawl back the way it had come.

Audrey was sitting next to me and we had been chatting, but I had become silent as the queasiness overcame me. I suspect she knew I wasn't feeling well because after the descent burn started and the flight attendants disappeared into their compartment at the front (I thought of it as the "top") of the shuttle, she looked around carefully and then said, "Come on, I'll show you something really amazing, get your mind off the motion sickness."

"How'd you know?" I asked.

"I'd say 'woman's intuition' but the real giveaway is the color your complexion has taken on in the last ten minutes." She unfastened her safety restraint and took my hand, which thrilled me enough to help me forget my queasiness. "Come on, you don't want to miss this."

I looked around at the other passengers, many of whom looked worse for the wear. "We're supposed to remain seated," I said weakly.

Audrey leaned in, unlatched my restraint and pulled until I floated free in the cabin. Nervously, I stole another glance at the passengers, but they all seemed to be too concerned with the ride to notice our sudden acrobatics. Audrey pulled me "down" toward the back of the shuttle and as we became more noticeable, I began to feel the sting of an occasional stare from one passenger or another. I was sure that my face had turned a bright red, but Audrey didn't seem to mind at all. She pulled us to a small panel with an embossed sign that read: Crew Only. She took one quick look toward the front of the shuttle, and then slid the panel over and slipped inside the opening. There was nothing I could do but follow her down the rabbit hole.

I came to rest inside a compartment so small, it was clearly designed for a single person, perhaps a child. I didn't mind so much, because it meant that I was pressed up against Audrey's soft body. Before I could get my bearings, however, I was overcome by another wave of dizziness.

There, below my feet, the surface of the moon rolled by and I could see it moving closer and closer!

I reached out to grab something to stabilize myself and found I had clasped onto Audrey. She giggled but she didn't move my hands. "I told you it would be amazing," she said.

"What is this?"

"Docking compartment. The shuttle backs into the dock at the transfer station in orbit. If they have to dock manually for some reason, the navigator will use this room to get visual bearings. But it's usually empty and most passengers don't know about it. And since 'back' is 'down' on the descent, it makes for quite a view."

And what a view it was! Craters and mountains slid by and as we descended closer, I felt as though I could make out ripples in the lunar soil. My stomach had calmed down, but my nerves! -- the view thrilled me, filled me with a rush that I'd never felt before, although I didn't know if it was the rising surface of the moon, or the profile of Audrey's face, caught in the fiery light of the descent engine, that had a greater effect on me.

Within a few minutes, we'd circled back around and the edge of the Ocean of Storms came into view on the horizon. We were much lower now, and had slowed down considerably. The view gave the illusion of floating down to the surface; graceful, poetic --

"What's going on in here?"

We looked up and saw that one of the flight attendants peering down through the open panel.

"We were, we just, uh, we --" I said helplessly. I could only guess what he was thinking. Audrey just grinned.

"I must ask you to return to your seats at once. This is a restricted area," the attendant said.

I pushed my way up through the panel and tried not to look into the eyes of the other passengers. I didn't even look back to see Audrey pull herself up and sit down next to me. All I could think of was how much trouble I'd be in if my folks found out -- and I hadn't even made it to the surface yet.

"Don't be sore," Audrey said, "it was fun."

"We could have gotten into serious trouble," I said.

"But we didn't."

"Not yet, anyway."

That's when she leaned over and kissed me. Just like that. Her lips were soft and warm, and though my eyes were closed, I held her image in my mind and it told me all I needed to know: I was in love. That kiss drained the anger right out of me.

I was floating so high that I never felt the shuttle touch down on the surface of the moon.

—*igms*—

The sea has many traditional romantic qualities, but when the great literary lights of the ages wrote their masterpieces, I don't think it was the desolate, slate gray sands of the Ocean of Storms they had in mind. And yet when I cast my eye back across the years and think of romance (as one is bound to do when one wonders in somber moments how the magical devolves into the mainstream), it is the Ocean of Storms I see. It was my first venture onto the surface of the moon, and I played the role of hopeless romantic, for I was certain I was in love.

It had been my idea to settle into the hostel, and then leaf through the guidebook and determine the best order in which to view all of the tourist attractions in Conrad. I wanted to get the most out of my trip and I was intent on being methodical about it.

It was Audrey who suggested that we head out into the Ocean of Storms and visit the Intrepid. Blinded by the unfamiliar emotions I was feeling, I agreed -- anything just to spend time with her -- even though it meant my sneaking out onto the surface with her because I lacked a permit for doing so. (As an astronomer, Audrey had a permit and had made numerous treks out onto the surface, and so I felt I was in good hands.)

We never made it to the Intrepid.

Once we were on the surface (I had a hard time thinking of it as "outdoors") I was lost in the scenery. It may appear drab and gray; it may have been described as "magnificent desolation," but as we bounded across the surface, I finally understood what Robert Conway felt upon reaching Shangri-La. Audrey's presence only magnified the effect.

About halfway to the Intrepid, Audrey suddenly headed up a small rise and then bound over the peak and out of sight. I followed as quickly as I could and as I crested the rise, I saw that it formed the lip of a small crater into which an observatory of some kind had been built.

"What is it?" I asked over the radio built in to my helmet.

"A research station," she said. "It houses a small telescope, but has a hookup to the Korolev radio telescope on the far side, as well as a couple of orbiting telescopes. You can get a view in here that you'd never be able to get on earth."

After a moment, the airlock door slid open, spilling light onto the shadows of the crater. "Come on," Audrey said, and I followed her in.

We got out of our surface suits, but the suits were covered in moon dust and that fine dust transferred itself to our clothing.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to strip down," Audrey said arching an eyebrow.

I laughed and joked back, "Okay, but ladies first."

To which Audrey replied by slipping out of her pants and pulling her shirt over her head so that she stood in her underwear. The light was dim but there was enough of it to fill me in on any detail that I might otherwise have missed. I'm normally not an observant person, but in this case --

"Come on, Mr. President, your turn."

I snapped back to attention and hesitated. "I thought you were joking," I said, "Someone might see us."

"Aw, is the President shy?"

"Well, no, but --"

"Look, there's no one here. It's a remote station these days, used to be staffed, but it's cheaper to link up the equipment to the network. They keep it operational for grad students and the occasional observations that have to be made directly. We won't be bothered."

I couldn't argue with logic, so I stripped down to my boxers.

We brushed the remaining dust of one another (which, though flirtatiously pleasant, reminded me of the way chimpanzees groom one another). As I flicked sand from the crater that formed in Audrey's shoulder, I had a thought:

"Why do we have to strip?"

"Lots of sensitive equipment," she said, making a final swipe at my chest. And then as an afterthought, she added, "The dust can cause it to malfunction."

Audrey tapped at the door panel and the door to the station proper slid open and then closed behind us as we moved out of the lock and into the station. There was a musty smell inside, old air, the way that I imagined a cave would smell.

"That's a small telescope?" I said looking at the massive tube that angled up three levels through the dome.

"Small compared to some," she said. It was surrounded by a catwalk structure and at its base was a computer console which I presumed controlled the instruments. "I want to show you something, but it will take a moment to make the adjustments."

Her bare feet slapped across the tiled floor and my eyes followed her to the computer terminal. She tapped in some commands and a moment later, the room was filled with a low hum. I felt slightly disoriented, and then realized that the whole room was moving as Audrey adjusted the direction at which the telescope pointed at the sky.

When the humming stopped, she hopped up from the chair and said, "Follow me," and bounded lightly up the catwalk stairs to the second level of the structure. She led me to what appeared to be a dead-end that was blocked by the telescope itself. But then I saw Audrey lean over and peer into an eyepiece. The room was suddenly quiet. I could see the rise and fall of her chest. I imagined that I could hear her heart beating.

"Okay, take a look," she said. She was smiling as though she knew something I didn't. I smiled back at her, stepped in front of her just close enough to brush up against her, and then bent down to look into the eyepiece.

My entire field of vision was suddenly full of stars. It looked almost three dimensional, and far too many to count. Not only that, but there was what appeared to be a gaseous blur of color, like an explosion frozen in time, just off the center of the image.

"It's over ten-thousand light years away," she said when I looked up at her. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"It sure is," I said, and it was, but I was looking at her.

Audrey's cheeks grew a shade pinker, the first time I'd seen her react that way, and that stirred me to a new level of courage.

"How about some music?" I asked.

"I think that can be arranged," she said.

"Is there an interface on the terminal?"

"Of course."

"Well let me do it then." And I bounded down the catwalk stairs, found the environmental controls and queued up the song that I was looking for. I called up to her, "I think this will be perfect!"

When I reached the top of the catwalk, Audrey was looking into the eyepiece. The music started as my foot touched the top step, the soft background choir fading in. And after a few beats, Bing Crosby crooned, "Far away places . . ." Audrey stood up suddenly and looked at me.

"How do you know this song?" she said.

"I'm a fan of old music."

"I've loved this song ever since I was a little girl."

"Would you care to dance?" But I didn't really give her the chance to answer. I stepped forward and put my arm around her waist and pulled her close to me and for the next two minutes, we danced in the Ocean of Storms.

When the song ended, I said, "Okay, show me more." But Audrey just kissed me and it was quite a while before we got back to the telescope.



We did get back to the telescope though, and though we didn't know it yet, this nearly perfect evening was about to gain an unexpected crowning jewel.

Audrey spent quite some time showing me a variety of astronomical objects: nebula and planets, comets and clusters, all of them far away places.

Noting my enthusiasm, she asked, "Is this the first time you've ever looked through a telescope?"

"Yes," I said, even though that was a little white lie. There had been the time back in high school when I was at my friend Derek's house and we'd pointed his (very small by comparison) telescope at Summer Halfast's window nearly a half a kilometer down the block. But that didn't really count since I wasn't looking at stars.

"Do you want to try controlling it?"

"Sure, what do I have to do?"

Audrey showed me how to manipulate the controls so as to move the telescope (or the observatory as a whole) and I fiddled with them until I had picked out a swath of sky that, from the ground, looked devoid of stars. I leaned down to the eye piece to look at the result.

Sure enough, there were hundreds of stars that simply could not be seen with the naked eye. One star in particular shone strongly as a small pinpoint of very red light. "What's the red one?" I asked Audrey.

She stepped up to the eye piece and took a long look. When she stood up straight, she had a puzzled look on her face.

"So what is it?"

"I don't know," she said furrowing her brow.

"Well, it doesn't surprise me," I said. "With umpty-ump billion stars out there, you couldn't possibly know all of them."

Audrey grunted, but still looked puzzled. Then she snapped her fingers. "These stations do regular sky surveys as part of providing data to astronomers and scientists across the network. Let's go pull up the most recent one and find out what it is."

"It's not really not that important. I was just wondering."

"Science is all about answering questions," she said seriously. Then her face twitched and she smirked, "Unlike politics, which is all about avoiding answers." And before I could grab her and repay her for her denigration of my life's work, she bounced down the stairs to the main terminal.

By the time I'd caught up with her she'd already pulled the image onto one of the plasma screens. "That was fast," I said.

"Oh, that's just the image on the telescope right now. I'm going to have the computer pull up an image of the same section of sky from the last survey and then we'll see what our little friend is." She tapped away and in a moment, the same image appeared on a second plasma screen.

Audrey zoomed into the first image and highlighted a section of space that contained the red pinpoint star. She tapped some more keys and the second image zoomed in as well.

"It's not there!" we said at the same time.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that you, Mr. President, may very well be the discoverer of a new star." She paused. "Hmm? The survey image was taken only a few weeks ago, so this must be a really new star."

"Do I get to name it or something?"

Audrey rolled her eyes, "Going to your head already, huh? Let's find out about this little guy so we can submit the necessary records for independent confirmation." Audrey tapped in more commands and the image of the star on the first screen was replaced with data. I tried to skim through it but it might as well have been Martian for all I could make of it.

"This can't be right," Audrey said. She issued some more commands and a moment later, said, "Same thing, but it can't be right."

"What can't be right?"

"The light from the star runs very close to infrared, still visible, but that's why it appears as red, which isn't too unusual. But I also ran an analysis of its spectrum and it's completely missing any hydrogen lines."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Hydrogen is the primary fuel of the stars. They burn it and convert it to helium and other elements. But there's no such thing as star without hydrogen. And that, Mr. President, can only mean one thing?"

I stared at her blankly.

"What you discovered is no star," she said, and though it was not cold, I shivered.

"Then what is it?"

Audrey seemed lost in thought. "I should run this by Nate," she said.

"Who's Nate?" I asked.

"Professor Nathan Cauldwell. He was my thesis advisor," she was tapping away at the telelink as she spoke. A moment later, a fatigued-looking, middle-aged man appeared on the screen. "Nate, it's Audrey. Did I wake you?" The fact that she was in her underwear didn't seem to faze her in the least.

There was a delay of about two seconds before a smile of recognition appeared on the professor's face. "Audrey, my dear. How are you?"

"Perplexed. I'm up here at the outpost observatory in the Ocean of Storms, and I've got something I can't identify. I was wondering if you could confirm it for me and tell us what it is." She explained what I had found, pointing out that the object was not in the last sky survey. "You can find it here," she said, feeding him the coordinates.

While this conversation took place, I could not help but feel a little jealous. After all, here was another man who seemed interested in Audrey and I wanted her all to myself. But the romance of the evening had already dissolved into mystery and so I tried to go with it as gracefully as I could manage.

Several minutes later, "Nate" turned back to face the video screen. "I can confirm it, Audrey. The object is there. And it is missing the hydrogen lines in its spectrum. How is it you came to find this thing in the first place? That section of sky wasn't scheduled for another survey for two weeks?"

"I didn't discover it. My friend Danny here did." I smiled at the screen, giving the professor an awkward wave. "So what is it, Nate? It's got me puzzled. What kind of natural phenomenon would appear as a star but be completely lacking in hydrogen?"

"Who said it had to be natural? There is another possible explanation for this."

"Aliens?" Audrey asked. That got my attention. "Intelligent life? An artifact of some kind?"

"Let's not get head of ourselves. We need to broaden the investigation, get some others involved." Audrey looked as though she were about to protest, but the professor waved her off. "Don't worry, you and your friend Danny will get priority, whatever this turns out to be. Get back to Conrad and get in touch with Jordan Duvall there. She can help. In the meantime, I'll get the ball rolling on this end."

What started off as a pleasant evening with interesting possibilities had turned into what would become an historic night of incredible improbability.



We were back out on the Ocean of Storms, heading toward Conrad. Audrey wanted to get there as soon as possible so she could make contact with Jordan Duvall and turn additional resources to the mysterious object.

I, however, wanted to see the Intrepid.

"You can see it anytime," Audrey said as we bounded across the surface. "But it's not everyday that you discover an alien artifact in the universe."

"You don't know for sure it's alien," I replied. "Even if it is, it's not going anywhere. And besides, we're a kazillion light years from that thing and we're only half a kilometer from the Intrepid."

"First of all, how do you know it's not going anywhere? It wasn't there a few weeks ago, and it could disappear just as quickly as it appeared. And secondly, it's about 300 light years away, based on my initial estimate, not a kazillion. Come on, Danny, the Intrepid has been sitting out there for nearly 300 years and we know that it's not going anywhere. But this discovery of yours, it's -- amazing."

Audrey was right, of course, but all of this was over my head. There was a reason, after all, that I'd chosen political science. Still, at this point I would do anything just to be around her, so I begrudgingly agreed to return to Conrad.

We proceeded back to the city, and while I tried to cheer myself up by cracking jokes, Audrey was unusually quiet. Inside the lock, we went through the ritual of unsuited, and cleaning off the dust (this time using a water vapor rinse), then we headed into the city proper.

"Uh-oh," Audrey said as soon as the lock doors slid shut behind us.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Permit check," she whispered to me.

I was about to ask what that meant, when a city official with a round face and bright blue eyes, said, "Next!"

Audrey stepped forward and handed the official her permit. She looked back at me nervously.

"Next!"

I stepped forward, still uncertain of what was going on.

"Permit," the blue-eyed official said.

"Uh, I don't have one." I looked over at Audrey and she shifted uneasily and then stared at the ground.

"You don't have one?" the official echoed.

"No, sir."

"But you were out on the surface?"

"Yes, sir."

"And do you know that surface visits without a permit are illegal?"

"Well, sir, I'm new here, it's my first visit and --"

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse," he said.

I knew the law very well. I also knew forced bureaucracy when I saw it.

"Identification," he said. I handed him my ID card and he scanned it through his computer. "Well, Mr. Duncan, what were you doing out on the surface without a permit?"

"As I already pointed out, sir, I didn't realize I needed one.

"What were you doing out there?" he snapped.

"There's no need to be rude," I said. I glanced at Audrey whose pitiful eyes pleaded with me. "I was just sightseeing. I've always wanted to visit the Intrepid."

"Did your friend there know that you lacked a permit?"

"No."

"I see. Well, Mr. Duncan, you're going to have to come with me. We have to process the infraction and you will need to wait in a cell until we've done so. Also, there's the matter of the fine to be paid. Shall we notify your parents?"

I knew that I didn't have the money to pay the fine, so I really didn't have a choice.

The official turned to Audrey. "You're free to go ma'am," he said sweetly.

Audrey looked at me and then looked toward the city proper. Finally she said, "I've got to go, Danny. I've got to get this information to the right people. If I can confirm our theory, your discovery will be huge!"

"So go then," I said coldly.

"I'll be as quick as I can and meet you as soon as I'm done."

"What are you waiting for?"

She stepped forward and put her arms around me, but I just stood there. Then she whispered into my ear: "You don't understand Danny, what you found just may very well answer the question that people have been asking ever since they first looked up at the stars. You asked me why we haven't found evidence of intelligent alien life in the universe. Maybe now we have."

"Come on, Mr. Duncan," the official said.

Audrey released me and stepped back. "I'll go as quickly as I can," she repeated. And then she turned and headed off into the city while I was dragged off to jail.



One might suppose there is no better way to clarify one's true feelings for a woman than to spend three days in jail because of her. But then one has not suffered the agonizing humiliation of having to explain to your parents just why you are in jail in the first place. The truth is, I felt somewhat betrayed by Audrey. It was the second time she had lured me into trouble.

And yet, in neither case did Audrey hold a gun to my head. It was I who decided to follow her into the docking room on the shuttle, and it was I who decided to follow her onto the Ocean of Storms, knowing full well that I lacked a permit.

I thought about the Ocean of Storms, and our dance inside the observatory and what followed, and although I was still angry and distressed, I realized that I was just as much at fault as she. What really bothered me was that the entire time I was in jail, I didn't hear from her. Not once.

I did make a friend, however. Kind of. His name was Brahm and he was the official who stopped me when I tried to reenter Conrad without a permit. He was not so bad after all. He explained to me that life on the moon was different, and related a number of gruesome tales of surface accidents that led to the establishment of the permits in the first place. In turn, I described to him how Audrey and I met, our adventures on the shuttle, and our excursion to the observatory. On the third day, still uncertain of how I felt about Audrey or about what I should do, I posed the question to my new friend.

"Do you love her?" Brahm asked me. He had come to sit in the cell with me to keep me company for a while and was propped up against the opposite wall.

"Yes," I said. "No. I don't know. To be honest, I'm pretty ticked off. She hasn't even come to see me."

"You've known each other, what, five or six days? That's nothing. You've barely scratched the surface. If you really like her, you've got to give her a chance. Really get to know one another."

"I do like her," I said, and as soon as I said it, despite all of her mischief, I knew it was true. "But I'm still pretty mad."

"You're locked up in a jail cell, of course you're mad. Ask yourself, Danny, are you angry enough not to give this a shot? Years from now, will you regret not taking a chance?"

"Taking a chance on what?" said a new voice. I turned, and there she was, standing outside the jail cell. She looked radiant. I might have been angry, but seeing her again made me realize I did want to take that chance.

I tried to look angry. "Take a chance on breaking out of this joint," I said.

"Don't bother. The charges have been dropped." She handed some papers to Brahm, who looked them over.

"She's right. You're free to go." He opened the cell and Audrey stepped in.

"It seems we're famous, Danny," Audrey said, "And the city didn't want to press charges against one of its most famous visitors." I must have given her a confused look because she punched me in the shoulder and said, "The object you found -- the one Professor Cauldwell suspected might not be a natural phenomenon -- we're pretty sure it's an alien starship."

I had to sit down. "I thought you guys were pulling my leg. What on earth makes you think it's an alien space ship?"

"It's no joke, Danny," Audrey said as she sat down beside me. "These last three days have been so hectic I've hardly gotten any sleep. After Professor Cauldwell confirmed the finding, he went ahead and alerted other astronomers and astrophysicists. I helped coordinate the effort from up here. Dozens of experts have looked at this object and most of them agree that it is not natural. And they've not only come to the same conclusion, they've improved upon it."

"Remember when I said that the star was missing the characteristic hydrogen lines in its spectrum? Well it turns out that an antimatter photon propulsion system would produce visible light in the spectrum just as you discovered. And this light would lack the characteristic hydrogen lines in the spectrum."

"And from all that you guys figure it's an alien starship?"

"No, there's more. The simplest explanation might be that it is some stellar event that we'd never before witnessed. So we decided to attempt to prove ourselves wrong by measuring its movement against the background of stars. By looking at the light, and measuring its relative movement against stars that appear to be in its vicinity and its Doppler shift, we've been able to determine that it's moving away from us, and between two stars at a rate of about one-tenth the speed of light. This is all consistent with an antimatter photon propulsion system."

"And you discovered them, Danny!"

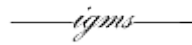
We sat there in silence for some time. It was a lot to take in. I had never expected to find myself in a situation like this one, but then again who ever does.

"So what now?" I asked.

"Let's go look at them again." As excited as I was about the possible discovery of other intelligent life in the universe, it didn't measure up to the possibility of once again being alone with Audrey in the observatory. That could bring us closer. We could talk, get to know each other better. But there was one problem.

"You seem to forget the reason I'm sitting in this cell in the first place is because I went out there without a permit."

Audrey brushed my concern away. "You've been granted a waiver," she said. "You're famous now, Danny. It's all over the news!"



When I was younger, I often imagined what it might be like to be elected to some high office, and hold my first press conference. In my imagination, it was anything but the cliché repartee between speaker and press. I would dazzle them with my skillful answers, I would impress them with my all-encompassing knowledge, and I would have them rolling in the aisles with my humor and wit.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that when Audrey and I stepped out into the main city concourse to make our way back to the observation station and the press hounded us with questions, I said I would be glad to answer a few.

It should come as even less of a surprise that most of the questions were far over my head and Audrey had to handle them.

"If this all happened 300 years ago, why is it we didn't discover these aliens sooner?" one reporter asked.

"Because the light from this starship's propulsion system is just reaching us now," Audrey said, "The star from which it appears to be leaving is 300 light years away from us. That star could be its home star and it's possible that the starship is leaving its solar system. But until it turned on its engines, so to speak, there was nothing to detect."

"Do we know where it's going?"

"Based on its current vector and assuming that doesn't change, it appears to be heading toward another star, several light years away from the home star. Keep in mind," she continued, "that because what we are seeing actually happened centuries ago, it is possible that the starship is well underway by now. It may have reached its final destination. We have no way of knowing."

There was a murmur among the throng and then one of the reporters asked, "What are you calling these aliens?"

Feeling that I could handle this one, I said, "To be honest, I haven't thought of a name yet, but I'll let you know as soon as I do."

"Would you like to see the starship for yourself?" Audrey said, before another question could be squeezed in. The press must have liked that idea because they grew even rowdier. "We're heading back to the observatory now. Anyone who'd like to come along is welcome to join us."

So much for the quiet alone time together. Alien starship or not, I wanted to be with Audrey. But she clearly had other interests. And though gravity on the moon is one-sixth that of Earth, I felt crushed.



The station was like a completely different place when we got there. Aside from the ungainly pack of reporters that followed us out, the observatory was buzzing with other people, most of whom I assumed were astronomers like Audrey. They took holographs of me and Audrey together, and they took more when each of us peered into the eyepiece of the great telescope. When it was my turn, the scene looked no different to me, but it suddenly took on new meaning. That wasn't a star I was seeing; it was a ship (or the exhaust thereof) and some life form had been curious enough, and talented enough to build it and head out for the stars. We humans had not come close to doing that yet.

"It hardly looks like they're moving at all," I said.

"Believe me, they are. One tenth the speed of light is about 108 million kilometers per hour. The fastest drone ships that we've sent out can't do much better than 100,000 kilometers per hour."

"Still, to me it just looks like they're drifting."

"Maybe that's what you should call them, " Audrey said.

"Drifters?"

"Why not?"

"Do you think we'll ever get to meet them?" I asked. It was hard to hear with all of the commotion and I desperately wished for some privacy.

Audrey's face darkened a bit. "Probably not. That's the irony of the whole thing. We have what seems to be irrefutable evidence of intelligent alien life, and we will probably never know more about them than we do today."

"Why not?"

"That starship was on its way before we'd even colonized the moon! So it's not like we can go and catch it, even if we had the technology to do so, which we don't."

"And so that's it?"

"It's a lot Danny. It answers a question that we've wondered about for ages. Not only that, but we can see from the ship itself that they've developed a working antimatter propulsion technology capable of boosting them to a measurable percentage of light speed -- which means that it can be done."

"But we'll never know who they are or why they're drifting between the stars?" It was sad in its own way.

"Never say never," Audrey said. In the light she looked as she did the last time we were here, dancing across the catwalk. "In a way, we're lucky that they're so far away. Their existence is much less of a threat now than it would be if people felt that they could come here. And we can still attempt to learn about them. It'll be a tough job, but it's also the discovery of a lifetime, worthy of every effort."

We sat down in front of the telescope and I was steadily nerving myself to the task of talking to Audrey about us, about learning more about one another, about our future. It was hard to tune out all of the activity going on around us.

"There's something I need to tell you, Danny," Audrey said.

Maybe she was about to say the same thing to me?

"I'm leaving the moon," she said. She looked down at the grating of the catwalk lattice. "Professor Cauldwell is forming a commission that will explore the possibility of building a large-scale detection system. The idea is to focus it on the region of the Drifters and see if they send anymore ships. "

"And he wants you? Even with all of these other astronomers?"

"He needs me for PR purposes. Co-discoverer of the Drifters. Good for fund-raising. But the truth is, I want to help. This is what I have been preparing for my whole life."

"So you're leaving?" I said. I could feel my heart beating within my chest and something about it didn't feel right. "For how long?"

"The commission is just the beginning, Danny. The real work comes afterward. A detection system like this will be most efficient if we build it in the outer part of the solar system. This could take twenty years," she said, and the words echoed with the sound of a stone door sealing a tomb. My heart fluttered, and I chewed on my lip, and told myself that I wasn't in love, that I'd never been in love. But nothing I could do seemed to prevent the tears from coming.

I blinked repeatedly and said, "I think I managed to get some of that moon dust in my eye." I rubbed away the tears.

"I know this is happening so fast," Audrey said, "And I won't be leaving right away. But just knowing the amount of work involved, the travel. I can't --"

I gathered my composure as best as possible and said, "I was going to tell you that I was heading back to Earth, too. All this excitement and publicity is a little too much for me." I forced a laugh.

"What will you do?"

"Oh, I'm sure I'll find something. You know, lobby some cause, run for office maybe, discover more alien life forms in the universe. The usual."

Audrey laughed. She stood up, put her arms around me and we were soon hugging and kissing. Another holograph was taken. Champagne was being passed around. My face was wet once again, but this time I realized it was her tears, not mine. "Good luck to you, Mr. President," she said.

"Good luck to you, oh learned astronomer."



When I kissed the learned astronomer, I never expected to fall in love, discover intelligent alien life in the universe, and end up in jail. But it's what you don't expect that makes life interesting. I never did get to see the Intrepid, yet I discovered the Drifters. Go figure.

When I returned to Earth, I was something of a celebrity and that was something I could handle -- for a while. I was interviewed by news agencies the world over. I received messages from scientists, politicians, clergy, sports and movie stars. Several years after I returned to earth, Audrey left on an expedition to the outer solar system to do preliminary testing of a new detection system. I imagine she is still there today, working on the detection system she was so eager to be a part of.

I told my story far and wide, in much the same way that I have told it here. And this is where the story ended, and slowly my life returned to its (relatively) quiet ways and I faded out of public view.

After I returned to Earth, I never saw Audrey again. Not once.

That's not to say that I never look for her. Even today, after the kids have been put to bed and the wife is busy working on her next book, I head out into the big corn field behind my house, listening to Bing Crosby sing "Far Away Places." And when the sun has set, and the Milky Way spills its dusty light across the sky, I turn off the music, tilt my head back, and look up in perfect silence at the stars.

The Polka Man

by William John Watkins



Artwork by Kevin Wasden

Whenever I hear an accordion now, it sounds to me like angels screaming. I used to like accordion music back when the band came into my Uncle Jack's bar on Saturday nights and played polkas for the miners and their wives to dance to. But I was very young then, and that was before I met the Polka Man.

My Uncle Jack bought his bar with his "leg money." That was what he called the compensation the Red Circle Coal and Navigation Company gave him for the loss of his leg. Generally, all the Red Circle gave disabled workers was a pink slip, but his accident was so spectacular and public opinion so obviously on his side, that they had no alternative but to pay him off.

And, of course, he did manage to save the life of a minor mine official, which every miner who came into the bar berated him for, even ten years later. That the rescue was inadvertent counted for nothing with them. Instead of knocking the old fool out of harm's way scrambling out of the tunnel a half step ahead of the explosion, they held generally that he should have "stopped and thrown the bastard back in."

His failure to do so was considered the loss of a golden opportunity, since men from The Office rarely came any closer to the miners than the pay window, and the drunker they got, the more they moaned the loss of such a chance to get even. But even when they'd been laid off, and the joking had a bitter, belligerent tone, Uncle Jack never complained about it, any more than he complained about the loss of his leg.

He was remarkably good natured about the leg, considering how much it pained him in the mornings, and sometimes late at night, and always when the damp rolled up the valley. It always looked painful to me, a red, blunt, angry stump just below his knee. But he always gave me a rueful grin when I mentioned it, and said "Well, it was only half a leg really, and they paid for a whole one," as if he'd

expected worse.

In fact, I never saw him angry about it at all, until the Polka Man came in. I called him that even before I knew his name because he came in carrying something that looked like a new kind of accordion and I thought he was there to play, even though it was early afternoon and not even Saturday.

It was probably just wishful thinking. I loved polkas then; I never heard one without a hurricane of excitement around it. The minute the accordion would riffle through its notes opening up, miners would get up and fling their wives and girlfriends around, and it was all shouting, and the stamping of feet, and laughing. And of course, they always played a polka when a fight broke out, which is always exciting for a kid.

I didn't know then that it was all just a way of forgetting the desperation of their lives for a minute, so it always cheered me up when I heard a polka, and I needed cheering up.

I was nine then, and in love for the first and last time. Her name was Grace Powers, and her father ran the bank. There's no more painful kind of love than first love. You're always too young to know what to do about it, even if you have the chance, and you rarely have it, because first love is almost always unrequited. Mine was more unrequited than most.

First, as is almost always the case, she was beautiful, or at least I thought so then. It seemed to me she was the blond haired little girl from every magazine I'd ever seen, and I wanted her more than life itself, though I had no idea what to do with her if I got her. I doubt that I would have thought to kiss her, and wouldn't have known how to do it right anyway. I believe all I wanted was for her to say she loved me.

My fantasies always ended that way, after some great act of heroism on my part. Still, my daydreams about her always seemed incomplete, like the Coming Attractions they showed on Saturday afternoon at the Palace. But then, in those days, even the movies rarely went further than innuendo, and I was far too young to even know something was being hinted at. Still, I knew there was something more I wanted, I just didn't know what it was.

Of course, what makes first love so valuable isn't that it's free of lust, but that it's free of the taint of knowledge, like Adam and Eve before the serpent showed up and told them the "game" they'd been playing all along was dead evil.

The Polka Man told me that.

Not that I understood him then. I didn't understand what he meant any more than I understood what he was offering. But my Uncle Jack knew. From the first minute the Polka Man came in, I could see in my uncle's eyes that he knew him. And feared him.

It was a great shock, seeing fear in my Uncle Jack's eyes. I was afraid most of the time, but it was inconceivable to me that there was anything Uncle Jack could be afraid of. But I had no doubt he was afraid. He had that look people get when they look at an overwhelming natural force, like a fire, or a really big storm coming in.

"What do you want?" he said. He didn't give the Polka Man time to answer. "You'll not get it," he said. "One was enough." I never heard so much anger in his voice, and I certainly couldn't understand why he would be mad at the Polka Man. Uncle Jack was always nice to old people, and he'd have made a hefty profit if he didn't set up one on the house every time an old timer came in.

Besides, the Polka Man was as harmless looking an old man as I ever saw. He had a Santa Claus sort of face but without a beard, and a big smile, and his eyes were amused even though they looked sad deeper down, like he'd suffered a great deal but hadn't lost his sense of humor about it. He was short, and not plump but sort of soft looking. Even the fat miners had a frame of muscle underneath like a steel girders, but he was nothing like them. Nor was he that unused kind of soft like Mr. Powers, the banker, or the men from The Office at the mine who we'd see on the way to church on Sunday.

He had a hearty voice, a kind of musical voice, like women's laughter, and he had long, women's hands. "I've come to play," he said.

I could see Uncle Jack was still afraid of him, but he started coming round the bar. I'd seen him do that before when somebody got dangerous and he had to throw them out. He only had one leg, but he could use it better than a cop used his billy club, and even the meanest drunk usually went backing out with his palms up in front of him when Uncle Jack came around the bar. I expected the Polka Man to pick up his accordion and scramble out, but he held his ground as if he wasn't in the least worried about anything Uncle Jack could do, because it had all been done to him already.

And about four stools down, Uncle Jack slowed, stuttered, and stopped. And there he stood, with the weight on his good leg so the other could swing free to upend somebody, but too afraid to take a step closer. "Take your damned squeeze box and get out," he said.

But the Polka Man only laughed. A pleasant laugh, the kind friends have when they call each other names they'd punch a stranger for using. "You liked my music well enough once," he said.

Uncle Jack looked guilty, and it took some of the anger out of him. "Well, I don't like it now," he said.

"Shall I unplay it then?" the Polka Man said. It didn't make any sense to me, but he said it as if he was perfectly willing to do it.

My uncle hung his head and gave a deep sigh and said, "What's done's done."

The Polka Man smiled as if Uncle Jack was complimenting his playing. "None ever sorry they danced to my music," he said.

"But I won't dance again," my uncle said.

"Not you," the Polka Man said. Then he looked at me.

Uncle Jack came another half step forward; you could see he was more scared than ever, but he couldn't hold back. And he couldn't go forward. There was a lot more fear in his voice than rage, and it almost sounded like he was begging. "Not him," he said, "he's too young."

"Old enough for my song," the Polka Man said.

My uncle looked at his leg, and took another step and a half forward. He was close enough to grab hold of the Polka Man with a lunge, but he didn't do it. He was starting to sweat, and he was sort of shivering like something was pushing him forward just as hard as fear was holding him back and he was stuttering between the two. "No!" he said. But you could see he knew he had no power over the Polka Man and couldn't really command him to do anything. Then he swallowed hard and said, "Aww, to hell with it, then. Take the other one and be damned."

That made the Polka Man laugh, not a mean laugh, or a superior laugh, but the kind of laugh when somebody says something he doesn't know is funny but everybody else does. "I'm not here for your leg, you daft bugger." He held up a finger to stop what my uncle was going to say next. "And I'm not here for his." The idea of it seemed preposterous to him, and he seemed like he was trying not to laugh. But it didn't put me much at ease. I didn't know what was going on, but it was clear it was about me, and I didn't like it.

"No, you're here for pain," my uncle said. "Just like the last time."

"I am," the Polka Man said. "But I promise you I won't take any that isn't here already."

My uncle looked a little mollified. "And you won't harm him," he said. It was as much a warning as a question.

The Polka Man's eyes twinkled. "What a question," he said. "Of course I won't harm him!" But it was perfectly clear that he could, and there was nothing my uncle or anybody else could do to stop him.

I looked for the door, but somehow I knew I couldn't get out it, and the Polka Man gave me such an affectionate look I wasn't sure I wanted to, even if I was at risk. And I wanted to know what was going on, more than I wanted to get away, so I stayed where I was until the Polka Man and my uncle finished negotiating. I could see that was what they were doing, even though it was clear my uncle had no power over the Polka Man. Finally, the Polka Man said, "I give you my word, no pain that isn't here already."

My uncle looked skeptical, and the Polka Man gave a smile. "Did your leg hurt? Didn't you get everything I promised?" he said. "Did I ever lie to you?" My uncle shook his head reluctantly. "Did I cheat you? Do you want it undone?" the Polka Man said.

Uncle Jack shook his head again. "I won't have him hurt," he said doggedly.

The Polka Man gave an exasperated sigh. "I take the pain away," he said. He looked like he carried it away inside himself. "Who knows that better than you?"

Uncle Jack threw up his hands and went back around the bar. "It's up to him, then," he said.

And the Polka Man turned to me. "I want your pain," he said. "I'll deal for it fair and square. You make the decision."

I didn't know what was going on, but I knew I didn't want a bar and I needed two legs to play on, but since it was up to me, I was willing to listen. "I want my legs," I said.

The Polka Man laughed so hard it took him two minutes to stop. "I don't collect legs," he said. "What kind of silliness have you been telling him about me?" he said to my uncle.

"He knows nothing about you," Uncle Jack said. "Nor where you come from."

"Well," he said to me, "I'm from right here, you know. Just not Right Now." I had no concept of time as a place then, so I thought he meant he was born in the Valley but didn't live there any more. "And around here," he said, "I'm called the Polka Man."

He picked up his instrument and moved it apart and together. All it sounded like to me was a gang of men and women being crushed to death, and I told him that. "Those were the black keys," he said. "Wait'll you hear the white ones." But he didn't play them. "I'm collecting for the white keys now," he said.

I believed him that he wasn't after legs, but I didn't know what he was after. So I asked him.

"Pain," he said. "You can't have great music without pain. That's the root of all art." And as soon as he said it, I could see how the polka was just a way of letting a whole lot of pain out in one great joyous rush.

"I take it back away with me." He looked like there was a lot more to it, but he didn't know how to explain it any way I'd understand.

I didn't like the idea of being mined for pain, but I was young then, and I didn't know the Red Circle Company was mining all of us for pain everyday, and the bar and the polkas and the fights were just ways of trying to get away from it. So it didn't make sense to me. "What do you want it for?"

He looked like I'd ask a hard question, one he'd asked himself more than once. Finally he said, "When I come from," he said, "nobody's ever been in pain. Nobody I know even knows what it is."

"They never get hurt?" I said. "They never fall down or get hit by a car or anything?"

"There's all kinds of pain," he said. "But no, they don't fall down, and there aren't any cars, and they're never sad. And they never dance." He looked like that was the greatest pain of all. "But they will," he said, "as soon as I've tuned my instrument." He looked like he thought they weren't going to be very grateful to him at first. "That's what I need your pain for," he said. "For my instrument."

"Are you an angel?" I said. I didn't know anything else that could take away pain, and the place he was talking about sounded a lot like heaven the way I understood it.

He had the same rueful smile Uncle Jack had whenever he talked about his leg. "You have to be ruthless as the Devil to be an artist," he said. "Especially with yourself." He never said so, but I believe he felt each pain every time he played a note. "Now your uncle," he said, "he was a black key." Then he hit one note full of quavers that sounded like something being ripped, and I felt like he'd torn a piece off me.

"You made him lose his leg," I said. I didn't know why, but I didn't hate him for that. My uncle clearly didn't, much as he feared him, and he knew a lot more about it than me.

"No, I didn't," he said. "He was going to lose it anyway." I looked at my uncle, but he was polishing glasses like none of it was any of his business. "All I took was his pain." He played the note again. It was dreadful. "For my instrument."

I must've looked scared of the thing, because he played another note, only this one didn't have any fear or horror in it at all. But it was so sweet and sad it made me want to cry. "There's all kinds of pain," he said. He looked like he'd had them all. And he played another note, a low, hollow sound that made me feel empty inside. Then he hit another key, and nothing came out. "That's your pain," he said.

I was sure nothing hurt me, and I didn't want to know if some accident was going to happen to me any minute that all I could do was sell the pain to. "You know the pain I mean," he said.

And when I thought about it, I did. It was the worst pain in my young life, and until he walked into the bar, it was burning me like hell fire. And the moment I thought of Grace Powers, it started hurting me again, but a hundred times worse, because now I knew I could be rid of it. It wasn't just that I had this longing for her that I couldn't even define. It wasn't even that she didn't know I was alive, because she did, it was that no matter how much I loved her, wanted her, I could never have her.

It wasn't just that she was so beautiful and I wasn't. Or that I was short for my age, and she wasn't. Or that she was graceful and clever and sweet, and I was awkward and stupid and ruthless, though I didn't know then that I was ruthless. I believe all the Polka Man did was let me know what my pain really was; he didn't make it, he just made me fully aware of it, and it hurt worse than anything before or since. I could see that the pain was that I could never have her. She was the banker's daughter, and I was the runt nephew of a one-legged bartending ex-coal miner.

I could see that we would grow up along side one another and go to high school together and I would want her more and more the more ways I found out there was to want somebody, but I would never have her, and I would watch her get married to somebody who didn't love her at all, and beat her up, and keep her pregnant until her looks wore away, and she would never in her most desperate dreams think of loving me as even a possibility.

She would never think of me as anything but an ugly little runt who would go down into the mines and come up blackfaced and hollow eyed until I coughed myself to death trying to cough up all the coal dust I'd swallow before I was fifty. And that was all I would be, just a drunk in pee-stained underwear sitting in my Uncle Jack's bar and coughing my lungs up into a hanky and looking at it to see how long I had to live.

I could see that life inescapable as destiny, and seeing it hurt so bad I started to cry, even though I knew I was too old for that and my uncle was watching me and all. But I bawled and bawled, and the Polka Man let me go on until all I had left was sobs, and when I was all cried out, I looked at him and it was all there, fresh as if I hadn't grieved any of it away. I knew I was going to feel that terrible pain all my life, every waking moment from then on, and it would never get any better and it would never go away, and I'd never feel it any less than I did right then.

When I stopped crying for a moment, the pain didn't go away it was just like somebody turned the volume down and it was still playing in the background. And I said, "That's what you want?"

And he nodded. And I didn't know why, but I hated him for wanting it, even though I knew I was going to give it to him no matter what. I don't think I thought at all about the people wherever he came from who would hear it as part of his music, but I've thought a lot about them ever since. I can't help wondering what it did to them the first time they heard it. What it must have been like to people who never felt any pain at all. I think of that sweet sad note he played for me and what it did to me, and I'd heard music before. I don't really like to think about what it did to them.

I suppose if he told me they'd feel just what I was feeling every time they heard it, I would have sold it to him anyway. Hell, I'd have probably given it too him just to be rid of it, no matter who had to suffer it instead. "And I won't feel it any more?" I said.

"You'll never feel a thing when you think about her," he said.

"Take it," I said.

And Uncle Jack leaned over the bar and said, "Show him what he gets."

And the Polka Man started to play a polka, and everything that I knew was going to happen to me started to flash before my eyes again, but he played the white keys mostly, and all of it changed, and I could see myself grow up taller and better looking than I ever dreamed of being, and I played football and went away to college, and there was a long line of girls like Grace Powers doing things to me I couldn't even identify, and as soon as one left there was another along, and I loved all of them, and not one of them had the power to hurt me like Grace Powers.

So I let him take away the pain of first love, and when he touched my key, I still couldn't hear it, but my uncle heard it and big tears rolled down out of his eyes.

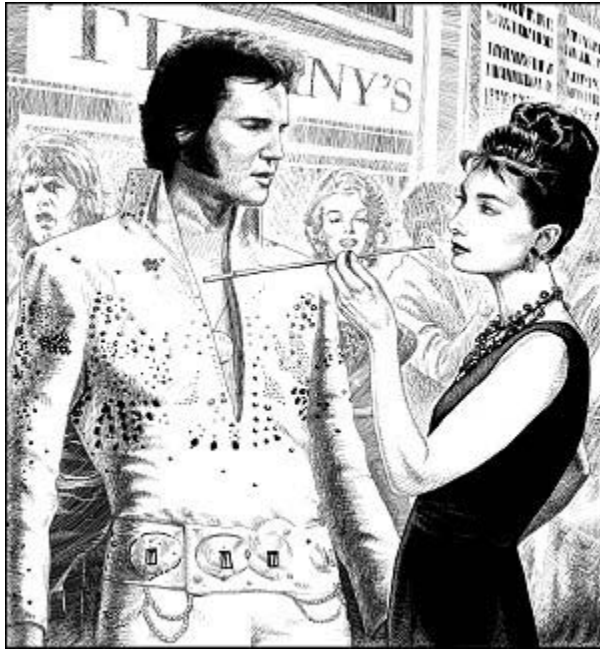
And when the Polka Man played out his song, I knew it was over because I thought of Grace Powers, and it didn't hurt. I didn't feel a thing.

But what I didn't know was that it not only wouldn't hurt, but that in all those beds and all those bodies, I'd never feel anything as painful or as good as I'd felt then, and much as I like the life I bargained for, like my Uncle Jack, when I think of it, and that emptiness I feel instead of love comes to me, I smile ruefully just like he did, and wonder if it wouldn't have been better to have kept the pain after all.

And when I do, I know what it is that makes my bargain and Uncle Jack's look good, bad as things get, because we don't have to be those poor painfree demi-angels, laying around in their endless luxury, when the Polka Man finally gets his instrument tuned and starts to play. And better still, when that pain floods into them and floods back out mixed with their own newly created agony, we don't have to be the Polka Man.

Original Audrey

by Tammy Brown



Artwork by Raffaele Marinetti

Elvis Presley watched Audrey Hepburn eat her breakfast in front of the Tiffany's window in the Caesar's Palace Mall. He loved how she managed to devour the food without spilling a drop on her black evening dress. He wondered if today he would walk over and introduce himself.

But where to begin? Haven't I seen you somewhere before? Hey, come here often? I couldn't help but notice that you're a clone of a famous person and I'm a clone of a famous person, so I guess we both have something in common. Or maybe he should just try a more classic approach. Can I buy you a diamond tiara?

He knew he was being stupid. He was just so tired. The wedding party he had been hired to emcee had gone on all night. Judging by the numerous requests for Blue Suede Shoes, even a hundred years after the King's death, he was still as popular as ever.

More people were beginning to fill the mall. Marilyn Monroe walked by, flashing her shapely legs and a coy smile. He caught himself blushing and immediately dropped his lower lip into a snarl. His namesake, Original Elvis, would roll over in his grave if one of his progeny blushed just because a pretty girl smiled at him.

Then the blood rose to his cheeks again, but for a different reason. A young boy, and his mother were hurrying past him. It was Elvis at age six. The woman had even dyed the child's hair black just like

his own mother had dyed his, as soon as he had hair to dye. He wondered if she had been a big enough fan to know ahead of time that Elvis was actually a natural blond. Would it help if he stopped her and talked, yelled or pleaded until she understood that her child was more than a life-sized collector's doll? Could he convince her to just let the child be himself. Probably not. It wouldn't have changed *hismother*.

Audrey's breakfast was almost finished. He wasn't in the mood to approach her now. Maybe he should wait until another day. He had told himself that every day for the past three months. The night before, when only the thought of her had sustained him through the endless repetitions of "Thank you very much," he had promised himself that he wouldn't let another week go by.

There was something special about this woman. He had felt it every time he had seen her. It wasn't just her beauty. He had seen other Audreys before. No, it wasn't the beauty. It was the moments that she didn't think anyone was watching her that made him fall for her. The look on her face would become wistful, and sad and haunting all at the same time. He recognized that look. He saw it every morning in the mirror. Something inside of her was trying to speak from behind her famous face. He wanted to know what it would say.

His throat tightened as he walked up behind her. "Do we know each other?"

"Why, do you think we're going to?" She answered with her back to him, probably bored by what she must have heard a million times.

"How would I know?"

"Because, I already know an awful lot of people and until one of them dies I couldn't possibly meet anyone else."

"Hmmm. Well, if anyone goes on the critical list, let me know." Any moment now she is going to laugh in my face and walk away.

"Mmmm, quitter. You give up awfully easy, don't you?" She turned to him, and stared him with amazingly clear, blue eyes.

"See anything you like?" He pointed at the rows of diamond necklaces and rings that filled the display.

"So many choices and so little -- money." She scrunched up her nose in mock disappointment.

"Just say the word."

"And you'll buy me my favorite?"

"No, but say the word anyway, I like to hear you speak."

"Well, you're no help." Again, she held him in her eyes.

This was it. "You have the most beautiful, blue eyes."

Her lip pouted and her forehead crinkled. "I hate my eyes. They should be brown. Beautiful, doe-like, *brown* eyes."

Fix it! His mind screamed at him. "Blue is nice." Lame. Really lame. Next time tell her that you think she's swell. That'll reel her in.

"Original Audrey had brown eyes. A clone should look exactly like the original. You look exactly like Original Elvis. Pre-fat days of course."

Why did everyone feel a need to comment on that? When you know for a fact that your genetic predisposition is to gorge on fried chicken, you just never eat it at all. If you do, at least ten people feel compelled to point out your genetic future.

He must have frowned without realizing it. "I meant that as a compliment," said Audrey.

"Actually, I'm not so perfect. I have a mole on my butt that's shaped like Illinois. I don't think he had one. You want to see?" He hoped he could coax a smile back on her face.

"Sure." She paused expectantly and then gave a wicked little laugh when he panicked at the thought of baring his bottom. "Just kidding. I guess like anything else, cloning can't be perfect. That's why I have fake ones."

"Excuse me?"

"I have fake eyes. I mean contacts. My eyes were tired so I took them out."

Neither spoke for a minute. "So, come here often?" He couldn't believe he just said that.

Neither could Audrey, obviously. She held him in her gaze for a moment and then started laughing again, but not unkindly. "Been practicing that line long?"

"Every morning in front of the mirror."

"Hmm," she yawned. "Sorry, It's been a long night. I need some more coffee."

"We could get some. We could go to the coffee shop."

She took a moment to evaluate him in his rhinestone jumpsuit and nodded. Only in Vegas could an Elvis in a white rhinestone jumpsuit ask an Audrey Hepburn in a black evening dress to coffee, and not have it be weird.

"What's your name?" She asked as they walked.

"Elvis Presley Schwartz." Pretty obvious. Like many parents of cloned children, his mother had wanted to be sure that the world would know exactly who he was. Like it was possible for them to forget his face.

"Oh good. I hate when you meet an Elvis and his name is Stan."

"Why?"

"It just seems wrong. My high school had an Elvis. His parents named him Frank."

Elvis shrugged his shoulders as if to say "so?"

"It wasn't just that. He dyed his hair red and pierced his nose. He even got a tattoo." She shook her head. "You can't undo a tattoo. I mean you can, but it'd still leave scar. Also, he never sang, never. Sometimes, I wonder what he's doing now. I imagine he's doing the exact opposite of what Elvis would do. What would that be? Probably an accountant. Don't you think that being an accountant would be the exact opposite of a rock and roll star?"

He nodded. "So, you're name is Audrey then?"

She blushed. "Yes. I'm sorry, you must think I'm a complete ninny. I just keep talking and I haven't let you say anything. I'm Audrey Hepburn Collins."

She's using her chatter like a mask. What doesn't she want me to see, he wondered. "I was just thinking how much you remind me of Holly Golightly in Breakfast at Tiffany's."

"Do you really think so? Don't say it if you don't mean it, but I hope you mean it because I've tried so hard. I know that some clones try to act exactly like the original. How many hotel rooms do you think have been trashed by some Mick Jagger copy?" She grimaced. "Although I don't why anyone would want to clone him anyway. He was just some star, not timeless like Audrey, or the King of rock and roll like Elvis. There are a whole lot of copies I don't understand. Do you know *what* the French see in Jerry Lewis?"

Elvis hated when clones were called copies. It made him feel redundant.

They reached the coffee shop and waited to be seated. "Anyway, I could act like Audrey and I probably will when I get older. I'll live in seclusion and volunteer for charities. But, right now I want to have fun, and I think Holly was the best character she ever played. So I'll be her for a while."

Her attitude wasn't uncommon. It had taken him most of his life to realize he could never be the real Elvis. Two loving parents and plenty of money meant that he would never understand the desperate need Elvis had to be adored by his fans.

Only one small room in the coffee shop was open at this early hour. A waitress in a short, roman-style toga, pointed to a table she was clearing and waved them over. The only other person in the room was an older woman who was constructing stacks of nickels all over her table. Surrounding the stacks were PEZ dispensers of varying shapes and sizes. Each time she finished a mound of nickels, she would ritualistically touch each PEZ dispenser and then close her eyes for a moment.

The woman looked up as Audrey and Elvis took their seats and cursed under her breath. Elvis didn't need to hear her to know what she was saying. She stood up, continued her muttering and swiped her nickels off the table, clearly more willing to disrupt her good luck ritual than to sit too close to two perversions of nature. He rolled his eyes and then looked right at her, giving her his best Elvis snarl. He laughed as she gasped, swept her bowl of nickels and PEZ dispensers into her bags and left.

The waitress brought their coffee. Elvis reached for the sugar and then thinking of the "pre-fat" comment from earlier, opened a few packets of Sweet n' Low instead. "Would you like some sugar?" He asked, offering it to Audrey.

She didn't answer. She was staring at where the old lady had been. Her features drooped like day-old roses.

"Don't tell me you're going to let that old bag get to you? There'll always be people like that." Elvis kept holding out the sugar as if it were the key to her consolation.

"I don't know. Sometimes I think people like that might be right." He voice dropped out of the lilting, musical tone it had held to this point and became huskier.

"About what?" He put down the sugar.

"About how we were made. Think about it. How many stillborn, and disabled children were created in order to make cloning possible?"

Finally, an honest feeling. "That wasn't anyone's fault except the fanatics who conducted their research in silence. No one knew what they were doing until they had perfected the process."

"And the world used their research anyway. We wouldn't even exist if they hadn't." She put her spoon into her cup of coffee and stirred, even though she hadn't put anything in it yet.

Elvis concentrated on his own coffee for a moment. It's not true, he thought. Maybe I would still exist, but maybe I would have been an original. I could have been myself.

It seemed that a clone could never really be his own person. The original was always in the back of everyone's mind. Clones usually responded to this pressure by becoming perfect replicas or exact opposites. This gave rise to Sean Connerys who spoke in Scottish brogues despite growing up in the Midwest or fat versions of Julia Roberts who crammed Oreos by the dozens in order to look nothing like their original. There rarely seemed to be a middle ground. It seemed like none of them just grew up to be themselves.

"At least we weren't taken from living celebrities." He offered this as consolation.

Audrey put her small hand to her mouth in a gesture of dismay. "Oh, that would be awful. And to think, they used to only be afraid of the paparazzi. I had nightmares for weeks after I heard about the Tom Cruise incident. At least that got congress to make some cloning protection laws." Her face grew even more serious. "Sometimes I still have terrible nightmares. Deformed children and stillborn babies are trying to choke me with their umbilical cords."

"Can I see you again?" He said it. He looked at her with raised eyebrows.

Her eyes widened a bit as if he had taken her off guard. "You're seeing me right now. Why do you need to see me again?"

"You know what I mean. Can I take you out? How about Thursday?"

"I have such a hard time remembering Thursday. It just seems to slip right by me. Wednesday is easy, I have --"

He interrupted her. "Don't do that. Don't become a character. I want to see you again, not Holly Golightly."

"Oh." She started to say more and then seemed to change her mind. They sat in silence for several minutes. "Don't you play a character too? You obviously aren't in Las Vegas to be an accountant. Unless of course there is some sort of dress code I was unaware of." Her long, elegant arms waved towards his jumpsuit.

"I love music. No one would listen to me play if I were just me. So I play the part of Elvis when I'm on stage and I get to sing. But when I come off stage, I'm me."

"Are you?"

"As me as I can be. I have his genes. I have his mannerisms, but I'm me. I want to make a name for myself, but how can I with his shadow always looming over me? So, I take the coward's way out and I don't even try." He looked her in the eyes. "Don't you ever wish you were an original?"

"I'm better than an original. I was made for a reason. My parents didn't have me just because it was a fad. They were a childless couple who wanted a beautiful, graceful daughter. They wanted someone who could make the world a more graceful place, just like Original Audrey did. My purpose in life is to prove that in a world of fake boobs and tummy tucks, nothing can compete with natural beauty."

"But you're not natural." He didn't mean to say it, but he also didn't want to take it back.

She looked stunned. For the first time since he met her, he saw her built up persona slip completely away. Her face had none of the coy attitude of Holly Golightly or the regal, aloof bearing of Original Audrey.

"But I don't know how to be me," she whispered.

"Right now you are you. I know that we just met, but I knew from the moment I saw you that you were special."

"Because I look like her."

"In spite of looking like her." He picked up the aluminum napkin dispenser from the table and held it before her face. "I've seen other Audreys before. You are the only one I spent months trying to work up the courage to meet." How would she react if he took her hand? He decided to chance it. She didn't pull away. "Times like right now when you let your mask slip a bit, I see an amazing woman who I would like to get to know."

"You think I'm amazing?" Living in the shadow of a legend, she obviously never realized that a normal girl could be loved for being herself.

"Yes, I do."

He could see that the honesty of the moment had become too intense for Audrey. She couldn't be used to speaking so frankly.

She replaced her mask, a coy expression this time. "I must say that I am amazing, or at least my many boyfriends think I am. There is this Duke from England who comes to visit me every month, just for a weekend. Just to get his Audrey fix as he says. Of course, he pays for my apartment so he knows where to find me. That is a fair exchange don't you think?"

This wasn't working. *She's lost, and I need to help her find her way out.*

He knew the movie she was playing at but couldn't remember the name. She's protecting herself against me, he realized. If she doesn't let me see behind the facade I can never reject her, only her persona. Elvis let her continue speaking. He knew that he wasn't ready to give up on her yet; there was something about her worth saving.

She kept talking, her words saying more and less than she intended, her eyes scanning the room as if looking for an audience. But, not the whole room. There was one table that she studiously avoided. It wasn't obvious at first, but the more he focused on her, he could tell that there was something she was purposefully ignoring.

He snuck a look out of the corner of his eye. At first he didn't know what it could be, and then saw it. He smiled and laughed out loud.

"What?" She looked self conscious. "Did I spill on my dress?" She searched for the imaginary spot.

"No," he said. "But wait here. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"It's a surprise. Promise you won't go anywhere?" He tried to suppress the grin that was bubbling to the surface of his face."

"Sure." She didn't sound sure.

"I promise it will be worth it."

A few minutes later he had returned, his hands behind his back, the grin still on his face.

Her eyebrows scrunched together in expectation. "Am I getting that tiara after all?"

Elvis didn't say anything. He just smiled again, and from behind his back, produced the largest chocolate fudge ice cream sundae that he had been able to persuade the kitchen staff to make. Two scoops of chocolate fudge ripple, two scoops of tin roof sundae, and two scoops of double chocolate were smothered in hot fudge sauce, nuts and whipped cream.

Her mouth formed a little "o". The sundae she had been avoiding looking at on the other table looked like a mole hill to this mountain of ice cream. She didn't say a word, and she didn't take her eyes off prize as he brandished a long handled spoon and placed it in her hand.

"It's for you. Dig in."

"I don't like chocolate or ice cream."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes?"

"I don't think you're sure."

"No?"

"No." He couldn't believe that a woman could look so terrified of dairy. "I think that Original Audrey hated chocolate and ice cream."

"She did."

"But you don't hate it." He took her hand in his and guided the spoon to the sundae, filling it with a large mound of ice cream.

She stared at the spoon for a few more seconds and then put it in her mouth. She took another bite, and another and then another. Tears melted down her face, dropping onto the table, mixing with bits of melted chocolate.

A crowd of people began filtering in the coffee shop. The sounds of the slot machines seemed to grow louder, yet for the first time that night, Audrey wasn't performing for an audience. She was sobbing now, alternating gulps of air with bites of ice cream. Finally, she finished the dish and set down the spoon. She looked up at Elvis through tears and chocolate and said, "I think I like chocolate ice cream."

That did it. He began to laugh. Trying to control it only made it worse, and great guffaws began to shake his body. At first Audrey seemed to become frozen in time, but then she began to laugh as well. People at nearby tables turned to stare and that only made them laugh louder.

Finally, they gained some control, and quietly looked at each other.

"So, now what?" Audrey asked a little timidly.

"Now we find out what else you like." Holding her in his gaze, he moved to sit beside her on the booth bench. Then, gently, he took her hair out of her Holly Golightly updo and let her hair fall softly around her face. He began to lean in.

She pulled away from him. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess," she said.

He grabbed the aluminum napkin holder and held it up to her face. "Do you know what I see?" he asked her. Chocolate sauce dotted her cheek, her eyes were red and puffy, black mascara rings circled her eyes and ran down her face.

"A completely insane woman?"

"No."

"A federally recognized natural disaster area?"

"No."

"A --" He put his finger to her lips so she couldn't speak anymore.

He looked at her a moment more, her mouth pursed in a small pout under his finger. She really was a mess, and she still had a long way to go towards finding who she really was. But then again, so did he. Maybe we can figure it out together, he thought.

She looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to speak.

"I see an original Audrey." Then, he kissed her.

The Gold Bug

Included in Ender in Exile and the DabelPro Comic
by Orson Scott Card



Artwork by Jin Han, created for the DabelPro comic book version of "Gold Bug." Copyright 2007 by Dabel Brothers Productions

It was all based on trust, wasn't it? You join the Fleet, you train until it's as natural to pilot your ship as to dance, as reflexive to fight with the ship's weapons as to use your fists. Then you go where they send you, leaving behind your family and friends, knowing that relativistic travel ensures you'll never see them again. To all intents and purposes, you've already given your life for your country -- no, your species.

You can only trust that when you commit to battle near some far-off world, the commander they've assigned to you will actually win, will make it worth the sacrifice.

As to you, personally, does it matter whether you live or die? Sel Menach asked himself this question more than once during the two-year voyage to war. Sometimes he thought it really didn't matter at all. All he cared about was victory.

But when they got to the Formic world, forty lightyears from Earth, and he and his warship hurtled from the transport and faced the enemy formation, he discovered that no matter what his mind

decided, his body was determined to live.

It was a child's voice he heard over his headset, giving commands to his squad. And another child giving commands to his commander. They had been warned; it had been explained to them. Mazer Rackham's voice came over the ansible, acquainting them with how these children had been screened, trained, tested, and now the finest military minds among the human race, the most relentlessly competitive, with the fastest reflexes, would give them their orders.

"They don't know the test they're taking is real," said Rackham. "To them, it's all about winning. I can assure you that the supreme commander, Ender Wiggin, does not waste his resources. He will be as careful of your lives as if he knew you were there."

We're trusting our lives to children?

But what choice did they have?

In some ways, the actual battle was not too different from what the children must be experiencing on their simulators. Inside Sel's fighter, there was no sound except the voices of commanders and fellow pilots, and the Dvoak and Smetana he always played to help keep him calm and focused. When a fellow pilot was killed, all Sel heard was the soft voice of the computer saying "Connection broken with" and the fighter's i.d. If the killed ship had been maneuvering fairly nearby, there would be a blink of light on the simulator.

An hour after they poured out of the transport it was over. Total victory. Not a Formic ship in the sky. And their losses had been, all else being equal, light.

Mazer's promise about the child commanders turned out to be true. When the surviving fighters returned to the transport and sat together to watch the replay of the battle on the large simulator, no one could find a single decision to criticize.

Each of the individual children had done well; but on the third viewing Sel began to grasp the genius of Ender Wiggin's overall strategy. He had maneuvered the enemy into an untenable position, forcing the enemy to expose himself, the enemy to be aggressive, the enemy to sustain the losses. Wiggin had been careful of lives that he didn't even know were involved.

But victory in this place was not complete victory. Who knew how many ships were under construction on the planet's surface? How long would it be before a new enemy arose?

They watched the succeeding battles, fought near different worlds, on their simulator, and Sel's awe at these children only grew. There were mistakes, but the overall design of the battles was always so deft that they were all in awe of Ender Wiggin.

As the Admiral of their expedition said, "No military force has ever been so well commanded or so wisely used."

Then came the final battle, when they were lost in despair. Vast swarms of enemy ships hopelessly outnumbered the human fleet.

"If he thinks it's a game," said Sel to his friend Ramon, "or even a test, what's to stop him from refusing to go on?"

"Refuse or not, we've lost the war right here."

And this time it seemed that Wiggin had met his match, as he broke with all his previous practice and simply sent his paltry fleet straight into the swarming enemy.

But there was a method to his madness, it seemed. As they listened to the chatter -- the boy called Bean talking to Ender Wiggin -- they began to get a glimmer of what Ender might have in mind.

And then the order came, the final mad assault on the planet's surface, the detonation of the M.D. device, the disintegration of the entire world.

Victory.

They celebrated. They drank. They wept for joy. They remembered all the people back on Earth that once upon a time they knew and loved, and wept again in grief. For by now they were all forty years older, and before this fleet could return eighty years would have gone by.

But they weren't going home. They had never planned to. Knowing what relativistic space travel would do to them, that they could never return to the lives they had once had, they set out on this expedition knowing that if they won, it would cease to be a military fleet and become, all at once, a colony.

They had expected to have to fight for control of the planet's surface, and it was to be a mission of extermination, like the one the Formics had launched against Earth. But after that last battle, it wasn't necessary. The queens of all the conquered worlds had been gathered together on the last planet. All their eggs in one basket, so to speak. When they died, the workers and larvae on all the worlds died with them. Not immediately, but within hours or days.

Sel Menach set foot on the Formic planet that the enemy had tried to protect from them, not as a soldier, but as a xenobiologist. It was his job to find some way to protect the alien life forms from the terrestrial ones, and vice versa. Could alien parasites pose a danger to them?

The answer was yes. Until Sel found a comprehensive drug treatment, more fighter pilots died from near-microscopic airborne burrowing worms than had died in their battle in space.

But he found the treatment, which, injected monthly, made human blood fatal to the worms. He found ways to keep maize and amaranth from succumbing to alien molds.

Within a few years, his expertise became less important, on a daily basis, and he was just another worker in the human colony. The Admiral was now the Governor. And Sel Menach was, to all intents and purposes, a peasant.

He, like half the males, lost the lottery to have a fertile mate. The unchosen men had the option of taking drugs to control their libido, so they were not consumed with envy or frustration. Sel did not bother with the drug. Not that he felt no desire; he simply had better things to think about. He worked his turn as a farmer during the days, then returned to his lab at night to work on genetic solutions to the problems of yield and storage and pest resistance.

Others, with different areas of expertise, studied climate patterns and determined that this world was in a cycle of ice ages like those of Earth, though the hot phases would never be as intense or brief as the warm times on Earth. Earth would have another Ice Age long before this planet did; but the cold here would be deeper, and the terrestrial seeds and roots were not adapted. It was Sel's job to help them adapt to the extreme cold so that the plants that humans depended on for survival would outlast the thousands of years of winter, when at last they came.

It would be millennia from now. But that was the way Sel had learned to think. It was the only attitude that could make his losses bearable. I am not living in my own lifetime now, he told himself. I am living on a planetary scale. I am living for the survival of generations of children unrelated to me.

He was nearly fifty years old when the first generation of children reached a marriageable age. He went to the Governor then and told him that the first preference for mating should go to the older men who had not mated in the first generation. "These would be, in effect, exogamous marriages," Sel explained. "If this new generation marries only each other, then the gene pool will be too small; if they bring in the sperm of the older men who never mated, then the gene pool is vastly increased."

The Governor sighed. "This is not going to be a popular decision," he said. "These young people were not pilots or soldiers. They know the Formics only as legends and pictures and vids. They want to marry for love. They'll assume at once that your advice is that of an old man yearning for young flesh."

"Which is why I remove myself from consideration. I recommend as a scientist, not as a man; ten generations from now, we'll be far stronger for having followed my advice."

In the end, the Governor made it a voluntary and temporary thing. Young women who agreed would be married to older men, but only until one child was born. That child would be raised by the mother and her new, younger mate, with the biological father as godfather to the child. Some women refused. Most consented -- and, as the Governor said to Sel, in private, "It was because of the great respect they have for you. They know they eat so bountifully because of your work with the plants and animals they use for food."

Sel refused to accept the praise. "I only happen to be our chief xenobiologist. If another man of the same training had been in my place, he would have done the same things."

"The problem we have, my friend," said the Governor, "is that many of the women insist that it's your seed they want, and no other."

"But mine is not available," said Sel.

"Forgive my asking, my friend, but don't you like women?"

"Like them, love them -- and children, too," said Sel. "But it will never be said that I benefitted personally from this odd little experiment in exogamy."

"You disappoint many women."

"I would also disappoint them if I mated with them. My children would probably be as ugly as me, and as stubborn."

"You have a point," said the Governor, but his jest was a sad one. "Your sacrifice will make my job easier."

By then the Governor was old, and it was not his job much longer. He died, and the ship carrying the new governor, long ago dispatched from Earth, had not yet come.

So they held an election, and chose, for their acting Governor, Sel Menach, father of none, uncle of all, or so it seemed. He governed for five years, continuing his scientific work, settling disputes, diversifying the colony and setting up smaller villages far enough away, and in different enough environments, that they could learn more about the life of this world.

Then the colony ship came from Earth. It had been sent only a few months after the great victory, but it was forty years in coming -- though it seemed only two years to those aboard. It brought ten times as many people as were already in the colony. It also brought the new governor, appointed by the Ministry of Colonization and backed, should anyone choose to resist his authority, by forty well-armed young Marines among the new colonists.

The original colonists -- the old settlers, they already called themselves -- learned the new governor's name only a few weeks before the ship came into orbit. It was Ender Wiggin himself, the architect of victory, who would govern them, though he was still only a child of fifteen years.

The old settlers were angry and afraid. The generation that had fought and won the battle, that had first explored this planet's surface and cleared away and burned the bodies of the formics who had died in this area, the ones who had first grown terrestrial crops here and lived in terror of the parasites that attacked the blood and lived for a time in the caves of the formics until they developed the right tools to

build with the right kinds of trees to make houses -- that generation was old. The young ones, who were now in the strength of adulthood, in their twenties and thirties, knew nothing of Earth. This was their home, and someone in a far-off place had decided to dump so many new colonists on them that they would become a small minority. And to add insult to injury, a child would rule over them.

"He is not an ordinary child," Sel Menach said. "He's the reason the human race possesses this world, and the enemy does not. He's the reason human beings are spreading out through this corner of the galaxy, instead of struggling to survive in the back hills of our own world, hunted down by Formics."

"So they gave him a reward -- our land! Us!"

"Do you think this is a reward?" said Sel. "I think his reward would have been to go home to Earth. To his mother and father. Instead he was sent here. They must have been afraid of him on Earth. In an earlier age, he would simply have been killed."

It was a sobering thought. But it didn't make the old settlers any more enthusiastic to have him rule over them.

"We who came with the original fleet, we knew that we would lose everything. If we had simply returned to Earth, all our friends would have been dead, our families as well. So before we ever left on this expedition, we were trained in the skills and sciences that would give us the best chance of survival on this planet. We thought we might have to fight for every inch of it; thanks to Ender Wiggin's complete victory, we did not. But we still struggled, and why? We're old now. We worked so hard in order to give this colony to other people, people we didn't know, people who hadn't even been born when we arrived. You."

"But that's different. We're your own children."

Sel smiled. "Not mine."

They had no answer for that.

"That's what civilization is," said Sel. "You labor all your life to create a gift, large or small, which you then hand to strangers to build on and improve for the generation after. Some of them might be genetically related to us; most of them will not. We've built something fine here, but with far larger numbers each of our little colonies can now become towns. We can begin to specialize, to trade, the spread farther across this planet's surface. We can make of this a world as diverse and rich and productive as Earth. Maybe even better. And we need their genes, these newcomers. We need a shot of fresh DNA to make our future generations competitive with the humans being born on Earth. We need them every bit as much as they needed us to prepare the ground for their arrival. We are allies in our species' war for survival. We are brothers and sisters on a planet where the indigenous life has no kinship with us at all."

Fine speeches were enough to quell the immediate rebellion. But once the new colonists arrived, there would be conflicts and misunderstandings -- it was bound to be so. It would be a constant labor of explanation, of patience, of nudges here and accommodations there to keep the peace. Sel knew just how to do it, but it would be hard, and he was tired, and besides, it was someone else's job. Ender Wiggin's. Not his.

So Sel began quietly to prepare for an expedition southward. It would be on foot -- there had been no beasts of burden in the original expedition, and he was not going to deprive the colony of any of its vehicles. And even though many of the new edible hybrids had spread widely, he meant to pass out of their optimum climate, which meant he would have to carry his food with him. Fortunately, he didn't eat much, and he would bring along six of the new dogs he had genetically altered to be able to metabolize the local proteins. The dogs would hunt, and then he would harvest two of them -- and turn the other four loose, two breeding pairs that could live off the land.

New predators turned loose in the wild -- Sel knew exactly how dangerous this could be to the local ecology. But they could not eat *all* the native species and could do nothing with the vegetation, and it would be important during later exploration and colonization to find edible and tamable creatures loose in the wild.

We aren't here to preserve the local ecology like a museum. We're here to colonize, to suit the world for ourselves.

Which is precisely what the Formics had started to do to Earth. Only their approach was much more drastic -- burn all, and then plant vegetation from the Formics' native planet.

Was that what they had done here? Sel didn't think so. He had found none of the species the Formics had planted on Earth during the Scouring of China nearly a century ago. This was one of the Formics' oldest colonies, and its flora and fauna seemed to be too distant, genetically, to have shared common ancestors with the Formic varieties. It must have been settled before they developed the formification strategy they had begun to use on Earth.

In all the years till now, Sel had had to devote himself entirely to the genetic research required to keep the colony viable, and then to governing the colony. Now that his replacement was here, he could go into hitherto unexplored lands and learn what he could.

He could not go any great distance -- he supposed a few hundred kilometers would be his limit, for it would do no good to range so far that he could not return and report his findings.

With the help of the lead xenogeneticist, Ix Tolo, Sel prepared a kit of the sampling and testing equipment he'd need -- well, not all that he'd need, but all that he could carry along with his supplies. It was a meager kit, but Ix didn't even argue with him about it, which was unusual. "Why aren't you telling me that there's no point in making this journey if I don't have the equipment I need?"

"Because," said Ix, "I know you're not really traveling as a scientist."

"I'm not?"

"Look at you -- an old man, planning a hundred-click journey."

"Farther than that."

"Like an old elephant, searching for a place to die."

"I don't plan on dying."

"Governor Menach," said Ix, "you're an old man who doesn't want to face his fifteen-year-old successor."

"I don't want to get in his way," said Sel.

"You know everybody and everything, and he knows very little."

"He saved the human race."

"He knows very little about governing this colony. He has authority without relationships or influence. You're making it far harder for him by going."

"I don't think so," said Sel. "It's going to be hard enough for him without everybody turning to me for answers all the time. And they will. You will. The new colonists have been in stasis throughout the voyage. They don't know him -- so they'll tend to follow whomever the old settlers follow. And if I'm here, that'll be me. No matter what we do or say, Ender Wiggin will be treated like my grandson, not like the governor."

"Maybe Ender Wiggin needs a grandfather more than he needs a position as governor."

"Make no mistake," said Sel. "Wiggin will be governor. He'll be better than the Admiral and I ever were. But let's make it happen as quickly and smoothly as possible. You set the example -- treat him as governor and help him as much as you can."

"I will."

"So you can unpack that other bag, because you're not going with me."

"Other bag?"

"I'm not an idiot. Half the equipment I decided not to take, you've put into another pack, along with more food and an extra bedroll."

"I never thought you were an idiot. But I'm not so stupid I'd endanger the colony by sending both our lead xenobiologists on the same journey."

"So who's the pack for?"

"My son Po."

"I've always been bothered that you named him for an insanely romantic Chinese poet. Why nobody from Mayan history?"

"All the characters in the Popol Vuh have numbers instead of names. He's a sensible kid. Strong. If he had to, he could carry you back home."

"I'm not that old and wizened."

"He could do it," said Ix. "But only if you're alive. Otherwise, he'll watch and record the process of decomposition, and then sample the microbes and worms that manage to feed on your old Earthborn corpse."

"Glad to see you still think like a scientist and not a sentimental fool."

"Po is good company."

"And he'll allow me to carry enough equipment for the trip to be useful. While you stay here and play with the new stuff from the colony ship."

"And train the xenobiologists they've sent along. I'll have plenty of work to do without babysitting the new governor."

"And Po's mother is happy about his going with me?"

"No," said Ix. "But she knows he'd never speak to her again if she barred him from it. So we have her blessing. More or less."

"Then first thing in the morning, we're off."

"Unless the new governor forbids you."

"His authority doesn't begin until he sets foot on this planet. He isn't even in orbit yet."

"Haven't you looked at their manifest? They have four skimmers."

"If we need one, we'll radio back for it. Otherwise, don't tell them where we went."

"Good thing the Formics got rid of all the major predators on this planet."

"There's no self-respecting predator would eat an old wad of gristle like this."

"I was thinking of my son."

"I'll watch out for him."

That night, Sel went to bed early and then, as usual, got up to pee after only a few hours of sleep. He noticed that the ansible was blinking. Message.

Not my problem.

Well, that wasn't true, was it? If Wiggin's authority didn't begin until he set foot on the planet, then Sel was still acting governor. So any messages from Earth, he had to receive.

He sat down and signaled that he was ready to receive.

There were two messages recorded. He played the first one. It consisted of the face of the Minister of Colonization, Graff, and his message was brief.

"I know you're planning to skip town before Wiggin gets there. Talk to Wiggin before you go. He won't try to stop you, so relax."

That was it.

The other message was from Wiggin. He really was fifteen, but his adult height was coming on him. He didn't look like an actual child now. In the colony, teenagers his size were expected to do a man's work. So maybe his work wouldn't be as hard as Sel expected.

"Please contact me by ansible as soon as you get this. We're in radio distance, but I don't want anyone else to be able to intercept the signal."

Sel toyed with the idea of turning the message over to Ix to answer, but decided against it. The point wasn't to hide from Wiggin, was it? Only to leave the field clear for him.

So he signaled his intention to make a connection. It took only a few minutes for Wiggin to appear. Now that the colony ship wasn't traveling at a relativistic speed, there was no time differential, and therefore the ansible transmitted instantly. Not even the time lag of radio.

"Governor Menach," said Ender Wiggin.

"Sir," Sel replied.

"When we got word that you were leaving, my first thought was to beg you to stay."

"I wonder who reported my plans?"

"Everyone with access to the ansible," said Wiggin. "They don't want you to go. And I thought at first that they were right. But the more I thought about it, the more I knew that if I've got any brains, I'll rely on the decision of the man who actually understands the situation on the ground."

"Good," said Sel.

"Your genetic work has been brilliant. The xenobiologists have been reviewing it ever since I woke them up. They were unanimous in praising the restrained way you adapted terrestrial plants and animals to the new environment. They are already working on following your example and using your techniques on the animals and plants we brought with us."

"On the manifest I saw a full range of beasts of burden as well as milk, wool, egg, and meat beasts."

"The Formics cleared out most of the larger indigenous animals. Within a few years we should be able to start filling those ecological niches."

"Ix Tolo has ongoing projects."

"Ix Tolo will remain the head xenobiologist, in your absence," said Wiggin. "You have trained him to an exacting standard, and the xenos on this ship intend to learn from him. Though they're hoping you'll return soon. They want to meet you. You're something of a hero to them. This is the only world that has non-Formiform flora and fauna. The other colonies have been working with the same genetic groups -- this is the only world that posed unique challenges, so you had to do, alone, what all the other colonies were able to do cooperatively."

"Me and Darwin."

"Darwin had more help than you," said Wiggin. "I hope you'll keep your radio dormant instead of off. Because I want to be able to ask for your counsel, if I need it."

"You won't."

"I'm fifteen, Governor Menach."

"You're Ender Wiggin, sir."

Wiggin said nothing.

"We soldiers who fought under you may be getting old, but we haven't forgotten what you did."

"I gave orders in a nice, safe room far from any danger, and without a clue what I was actually doing. You were the ones who fought the war."

"Who builds the house, the architect or the bricklayer? It's not an interesting question. You led us, sir. We destroyed the enemy. We lived to found this colony."

"And the human race will never again be tied to one world," said Wiggin. "We all did our part. The two of us will continue to do whatever we can."

"Yes, sir."

"Please. Call me Andrew. When you return, I want us to be friends. If I have any skill, it's knowing how to learn from the best teachers."

"If you call me Sel."

"I will."

"I'm going back to bed now. I have a lot of walking to do tomorrow."

"I can send a skimmer after you. So you don't have to carry your supplies. It would increase your range."

"But then the old settlers will expect me to come back soon. They'll be waiting for me instead of relying on you."

"I can't pretend that we're not able to track you and find you."

"But you can tell them that you're showing me the respect of not trying. At my request."

"Yes," said Ender. "I'll do that."

There was little more to say. They signed off and Sel went back to bed. He slept easily. And, as usual, woke just when he wanted to -- an hour before dawn.

Po was waiting for him.

"I already said good-bye to Mom and Dad," he said.

"Good," said Sel.

"Thanks for letting me come."

"Could I have stopped you?"

"Yes," said Po. "I won't disobey you, Uncle Sel."

Sel nodded. "Good. Have you eaten?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go. I won't need to eat till noon."

*

You take a step, then another. That's the journey. But to take a step with your eyes open is not a journey at all, it's a remaking of your own mind. You see things that you never saw before. Things never seen by the eyes of human beings. And you see with your particular eyes, which were trained to see not just a plant, but this plant, filling this ecological niche, but with this and that difference.

And when your eyes have been trained for forty years to be familiar with the patterns of a new world, then you are Antony van Leeuwenhoek, who first saw the world of animalcules through a microscope; you are Carl Linnaeus, first sorting creatures into families, genera, species; you are Darwin, sorting lines of evolutionary passage from one species to another.

So it was not a rapid journey. Sel had to force himself to move with any kind of haste.

"Don't let me linger so long over every new thing I see," he told Po. "It would be too humiliating for my great expedition to take me only ten kilometers south of the colony. I must cross the first range of mountains, at least."

"And how will I keep you from lingering, when you have me photographing and sampling and storing and recording notes?"

"Refuse to do it. Tell me to get my bony knees up off the ground and start walking."

"All my life I'm taught to obey my elders and watch and learn. I'm your assistant. Your apprentice."

"You're just hoping we don't travel very far so when I die you don't have so long to carry the corpse."

"I thought my father told you -- if you actually die, I'm supposed to call for help and observe your decomposition process."

"That's right. You only carry me if I'm breathing."

"Or do you want me to start now? Hoist you onto my shoulders so you can't discover another whole family of plants every fifty meters?"

"For a respectful, obedient young man, you can be very sarcastic."

"I was only slightly sarcastic. I can do better if you want."

"This is good. I've been so busy arguing with you, we've gone this far without my noticing anything."

"Except the dogs have found something."

It turned out to be a small family of the horned reptile that seemed to fill the bunny rabbit niche -- a big-toothed leaf-eater that hopped, and would only fight if cornered. The horns did not seem to Sel to be weapons -- too blunt -- and when he imagined a mating ritual in which these creatures leapt into the air to butt their heads together, he could not see how it could help but scramble their brains, since their skulls were so light.

"Probably for a display of health," said Sel.

"The antlers?"

"Horns," said Sel.

"I think they're shed and then regrown. Don't these animals look like skin-shedders?"

"No."

"I'll look for a shed skin somewhere."

"You'll have a long look."

"Why, because they eat the skins?"

"Because they don't shed."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm not sure," said Sel. "But this is not a Formic import, it's a native species, and we haven't seen any skin shedding from natives."

So the conversation went as they traveled -- but they did cover the ground. They took pictures, yes. And now and then, when it was something really new, they stopped and took samples. But always they walked. Sel might be old and need to lean on his walking stick now and then, but he could still keep up a steady pace. Po was likely to move ahead of him more often than not, but it was Po who groaned when Sel said it was time to move on after a brief rest.

"I don't know why you have that stick," said Po.

"To lean on when I rest."

"But you have to carry it the whole time you're walking."

"It's not that heavy."

"It looks heavy."

"It's from the balsa tree -- well, the one I call 'balsa,' since the wood is so light."

Po tried it. Only about a pound, though it was thick and gnarled and widened out at the top like a pitcher. "I'd still get tired of carrying it."

"Only because you put more weight in your backpack than I did."

Po didn't bother arguing the point.

"The first human voyagers to the moon and the planets had an easy time of it," said Po, as they crested a high ridge. "Nothing but empty space between them and their destination. No temptation to stop and explore."

"Like the first sea voyagers. Going from land to land, ignoring the sea because they had no tools that would let them explore to any depth."

"We're the conquistadores," said Po. "Only we killed them all before we ever set foot on land."

"Is that a difference or a similarity? Smallpox and other diseases raced ahead of the conquistadores."

"If only we could have talked to them," said Po. "I read about the conquistadores -- we Mayans have good reason to try to understand them. Columbus wrote that the natives he found 'had no language,' merely because they didn't understand any of the languages his interpreters knew."

"But the Formics had no language at all."

"Or so we think."

"No communication devices in their ships. Nothing to transmit voice or images. Because there was no need of them. Exchange of memory. Direct transfer of the senses. Whatever their mechanism was, it was better than language, but worse, because they had no way to talk to us."

"So who were the mutes?" asked Po. "Us, or them?"

"Both of us mutes," said Sel, "and all of us deaf."

"What I wouldn't give to have just one of them alive."

"But there couldn't be just one," said Sel. "They hived. They needed a hundreds, perhaps thousands to reach the critical mass to achieve intelligence."

"Or not," said Po. "It could also be that only the queen was sentient. Why else would they all have died when the queens died?"

"Unless the queen was the nexus, the center of a neural network."

"As I said, I wish we had one alive, so we could know something instead of guessing from a few desiccated corpses."

"We have more of them preserved than any of the other worlds. Here, there are so few scavengers that can eat them, the corpses lasted long enough for us to get to the planet's surface and freeze some of them. We actually got to study structure."

"But no queens."

"The sorrow of my life," said Sel.

"Really? That's your greatest regret?"

Sel fell silent.

"Sorry," said Po.

"It's all right. I was just considering your question. My greatest regret. What a question. How can I regret leaving everything behind on Earth, when I left it in order to help save it? And coming here allowed me to do things that other scientists could only dream of. I have been able to name more than five thousand species already and come up with a rudimentary classification system for an entire native biota. More than on any of the other Formic worlds."

"Why?"

"Because they stripped those and then established only a limited subset of their own flora and fauna. This is the only world where most of the species evolved here. The only place that's messy. The Formics brought fewer than a thousand species to their colonies. And their home world, which might have had vastly more diversity, is gone."

"So you don't regret coming here?"

"Of course I do," said Sel. "And I also am glad to be here. I regret being an old wreck of a man. I'm glad I'm not dead. It seems to me that all my regrets are balanced by something I'm glad of. On average, then, I have no regrets at all. But I'm also not a bit happy. Perfect balance. On average, I don't actually exist."

"Father says that if you get absurd results, you're not a scientist, you're a philosopher."

"But my results are not absurd."

"You do exist. I can see you and hear you."

"Genetically speaking, Po, I do not exist. I am off the web of life."

"So you choose to measure by the only standard that allows your life to be meaningless?"

Sel laughed. "You are your mother's son."

"Not father's?"

"Both, of course. But it's your mother who won't put up with any bullshit."

"Speaking of which, I can hardly wait to see a bull."

By the time they had been a fortnight gone, with almost two hundred kilometers behind them, they had talked about every conceivable subject at least twice, and finally walked along in companionable silence most of the time, except when the exigencies of their journey forced them to speak.

"Don't grab that vine, it's not secure."

"I wonder if that bright-colored froglike thing is venomous?"

"I doubt it, considering that it's a rock."

"Oh. It was so vivid I thought --"

"A good guess. And you're not a geologist, so how could you be expected to recognize a rock?"

At two hundred clicks, though, it was time to stop. They had rationed carefully, but their food was half gone. They pitched a more permanent camp by a clear water source, chose a safe spot and dug a latrine, and pitched the tent with the stakes deeper and the ground more padded under the floor of it. They would be here for a week.

A week, because that's about how long they expected to be able to live on the meat of the two dogs they slaughtered that afternoon.

Sel was sorry that only two of the dogs were smart enough to extrapolate that their human masters were no longer reliable companions. Those two left -- they had to drive the other pair away with stones.

By now, like everyone else in the colony, both Sel and Po knew how to preserve meat by smoking it; they cooked only a little of the meat fresh, but kept the fire going to smoke the rest as it hung from the bending limbs of a fernlike tree ... or treelike fern.

They marked out a rough circle on the satellite map they carried with them and each morning they set out in a different direction to see what they might find. Now they collected samples in earnest, and took photographs that they bounced to the orbiting transport ship for storage on the big computers there. It was nothing but a big satellite now, its electronics running on a tiny amount of the fuel and its databases constantly being transmitted to Earth automatically by ansible. The pictures, the test results, those were secure -- they would not be lost, no matter what happened to Sel and Po. The samples, though, were by far the most valuable items. Once they brought them back, they could be studied at great length using far more sophisticated equipment. The new equipment from the colony ship.

At night, Sel lay awake for long hours, thinking of what they had seen, classifying it in his mind, trying to make sense of the biology of this world.

But when he woke up, he could not remember having had any great insights the night before, and certainly had none by morning light. No great breakthroughs; just a continuation of the work he had already done.

I should have gone north, into the jungles.

But jungles are far more dangerous to explore. I'm an old man. Jungles could kill me. This temperate zone, colder than the colony because it's a little closer to the poles and higher in elevation, is also safer for an old man who needs open country to hike through and nothing unusually dangerous to snag or snap at him.

On the fifth day, they crossed a path.

There was no mistaking it. It was not a road, certainly not, but that was no surprise, the Formics had built few roads. What they made were paths, and those inadvertent, the natural result of thousands of feet treading the same route.

Those feet had trodden here, though it was forty years before. Trodden so long and often that after all these years, and overgrown as it was, the naked eye could trace the path of it through the pebbly soil of a narrow alluvial valley.

There was no question now of pursuing any more flora and fauna. The Formics had found something of value here, and archaeology took precedence, at least for a few hours, over xenobiology.

The path wound upward into the hills, but not terribly far before it led to a number of cave entrances.

"These aren't caves," said Po.

"Oh?"

"They're tunnels. These are too new, and the land hasn't shaped itself around them the way that it does with real caves. These were dug as doorways. All the same height, do you see?"

"That damnably inconvenient height that makes it such a pain for humans to go inside."

"It's not our purpose here, sir," said Po. "We've found the spot. Let's call for others to explore the tunnels. We're here for the living, not the dead."

"I have to know what they were doing here. Certainly not farming -- there's no trace of their crops gone wild here. No orchards. No middens, either -- this wasn't a great settlement. And yet there was so much traffic, along that single path."

"Mining?" asked Po.

"Can you think of any other purpose? There's something in those tunnels that the Formics thought was worth the trouble of digging out. In large quantities. For a long time."

"Not such large quantities," said Po.

"No?" said Sel.

"It's like steel-making back on Earth. Even though the purpose was smelting iron to make steel, and they mined coal only to fire their smelters and foundries, they didn't carry the coal to the iron, they carried the iron to the coal -- because it took far more coal than iron to make steel."

"You must have gotten very good marks in geography."

"I never saw Earth," said Po. "Neither did my parents -- all born here. But Earth is still my home."

"So you're saying that whatever they took out of these tunnels, it wasn't in such large quantities that it was worth building a city here."

"They put their cities where the food was, or the fuel. Whatever they got here, they took little enough of it that it was more economical to carry it to their cities, instead of building a city here to process it."

"You may grow up to amount to something, Po."

"I'm already grown up, sir," said Po. "And I already amount to something. Just not enough to get any girl to marry me."

"And knowing the principles of Earth's economic history will attract a mate?"

"As surely as that bunny-toad's antlers, sir."

"Horns," said Sel.

"So we're going in?"

Sel mounted one of the little oil lamps into the flared top of his walking stick.

"And here I thought that opening at the top of your stick was decoration," said Po.

"It was decorative," said Sel. "It was also the way the tree grew out of the ground."

Sel rolled up his blankets and put half the remaining food into his pack, along with their testing equipment.

"Are you planning to spend the night down there?"

"What if we find something wonderful, and then have to climb back out of the tunnels before we get a chance to explore?"

Dutifully, Po packed up. "I don't think we'll need the tent in there."

"I doubt there'll be much rain."

"Caves can be drippy."

"We'll pick a dry spot."

"What can live in there? It's not a natural cave, I don't think we'll find fish."

"There are birds and other creatures that like the dark. Or that find it safer and warmer indoors."

At the entrance, Po sighed. "If only the tunnels were higher."

"It's not my fault you grew so tall." Sel lit the lamp, fueled by the oils of fruit Sel had found in the wild. They grew it in orchards now, and pressed and filtered it in three harvests a year, though except for the oil the fruit was good for nothing except fertilizer. It was good to have clean-burning fuel for light, instead of wiring every building with electricity, especially in the outlying colonies. It was one of Sel's favorite discoveries -- particularly since there was no sign the Formics had ever discovered its usefulness. Of course, the Formics were at home in the dark. Sel could imagine them scuttling along in these tunnels, content with smell and hearing to guide them.

Humans had evolved from creatures that took refuge in trees, not caves, thought Sel, and though humans had used caves many times in the past, they were always suspicious of them. Deep dark places were at once attractive and terrifying. There was no chance the Formics would have allowed any large predators to remain at large on this planet, particularly in caves, since the Formics themselves were tunnel makers and cave dwellers.

If only the Formic home world had not been obliterated in the war. What we could have learned, tracing an alien evolution that led to intelligence!

Then again, if Ender Wiggin had not blown the whole thing up, we would have lost the war. Then we wouldn't have even this world to study. Evolution here did not lead to intelligence -- or if it did, the Formics already wiped it out, along with any traces the original sentient natives might have left behind.

Sel bent over and squat-walked into the tunnel. But it was hard to keep going that way -- his back was too old. He couldn't even lean on his stick, because it was too tall for the space, and he had to drag it along, keeping it as close to vertical as possible so the oil didn't spill out of the canister that was holding it.

After a while he simply could not continue in that position. Sel sat down and so did Po.

"This is not working," said Sel.

"My back hurts," said Po.

"A little dynamite would be useful."

"As if you'd ever use it," said Po.

"I didn't say it would be morally defensible," said Sel. "Just convenient." Sel handed his stick, with the lamp atop it, to Po. "You're young. You'll recover from this. I've got to try a new position."

Sel tried to crawl but instantly gave up on that -- it hurt his knees too much to rest them directly on the rocky floor. He finally settled for sitting, leaning his arms forward, putting weight on them, and then scrabbling his legs and hips after him. It was slow going.

Po also tried crawling and soon gave up on it. But because he was holding the stick with the light, he was forced to return to walking bent over, knees in a squat. The boy would end up crippled, probably, but Sel would never have to hear his father and mother complain about it, because Sel himself would never get out of this tunnel alive.

And then, suddenly, the light went dim. For a moment Sel thought it had gone out, but no -- Po had stood up and lifted the stick to a vertical position, so that the tunnel where Sel was creeping along was now in shadow.

It didn't matter. Sel could see the chamber ahead. It was a natural cavern, with stalactites and stalagmites forming columns that supported the ceiling.

But they weren't the normal straight-up-and-down columns that normally formed, when lime-laden water dripped straight down, leaving sediment behind. These columns twisted crazily. Writhed, really.

"Not natural deposits," said Po.

"No. These were made. But the twisting doesn't seem designed, either."

"Fractal randomness?" asked Po.

"I don't think so," said Sel. "Random, yes, but genuinely so, not fractal. Not mathematical."

"Like dog turds," said Po.

Sel stood looking at the columns. They did indeed have the kind of curling pattern that a long dog turd got as it was laid down from above. Solid yet flexible. Extrusions from above, only still connected to the ceiling.

Sel looked up, then took the stick from Po and raised it.

The chamber seemed to go on forever, supported by the writhing stone pillars. Arches like an ancient temple, but half melted.

"It's composite rock," said Po.

Sel looked down at the boy and saw him with a self-lighting microscope, examining the rock of a column.

"Seems like the same mineral composition as the floor," said Po. "But grainy. As if it had been ground up and then glued back together."

"But not glued," said Sel. "Bonded? Cement?"

"I think it's been glued," said Po. "I think it's organic."

Po took the stick back and held the flame of the lamp under an elbow of one of the twistiest columns. The substance did not catch fire, but it did begin to sweat and drip.

"Stop," said Sel. "Let's not bring the thing down on us!"

Now that they could walk upright, they moved forward into the cavern. It was Po who thought of marking their path by cutting off bits of his blanket and dropping them. He looked back from time to time to make sure they were following a straight line. Sel looked back, too, and saw how impossible it would be ever to find the entrance they had come through, if the path were not marked.

"So tell me how this was made," said Sel. "No toolmarks on the ceiling or floor. These columns, made from ground-up stone with added glue. A kind of paste that can hold up a chamber this size. But no grinding equipment left behind, no buckets to carry the glue."

"Giant rock-eating worms," said Po.

"That's what I was thinking, too," said Sel.

Po laughed. "I was joking."

"I wasn't," said Sel.

"How could worms eat rock?"

"Very sharp teeth that regrow quickly. Grinding their way through. The fine gravel bonds with some kind of gluey mucus and they extrude these columns, then bind them to the ceiling."

"But how could such a creature evolve?" said Po. "There's no nutrition in the rock. And it would take enormous energy to do all this. Not to mention whatever their teeth were made of."

"I don't think they evolved," said Sel. "Look -- what's that?"

There was something shiny ahead. Reflecting the lamplight.

As they got closer, they saw spotty reflections from various spots on the columns, too. Even the ceiling.

But nothing else was as bright as the thing lying on the floor.

"A glue bucket?" asked Po.

"No," said Sel. "It's a giant bug. Beetle. Ant. Something like -- look at this, Po."

They were close enough now to see that it was six-legged, though the middle pair of limbs seemed more designed for clinging than walking or grasping. The front ones were for grasping and tearing. The hind ones, for digging and running.

"What do you think? Bipedal?" asked Sel.

"Both. Bipedal at need." Po nudged it with his foot. No response. The thing was definitely dead. He bent over and flexed and rotated the hind limbs. Then the front ones. "It could do both equally well, I think."



Artwork by Jin Han, created for the DabelPro comic book version of "Gold Bug," Copyright 2007 by Dabel Brothers Productions

"Not a likely evolutionary path," said Sel. "Anatomy tends to commit one way or the other."

"Like you said. Not evolved, bred."

"For what?"

"For mining," said Po. He rolled the thing over onto its belly. It was very heavy; it took several tries. But now they could see much better what it was that caught the light. The thing's back was a solid sheet of gold. As smooth as a beetle's carapace, but so thick with gold that the thing must weigh ten kilos at least.

Twenty-five, maybe thirty centimeters long, thick and stubby. And its entire exoskeleton thinly gilt, with the back heavily armored in gold.

"Do you think these things were mining for gold?" asked Po.

"Not with that mouth," said Sel. "Not with those hands."

"But the gold got inside it somehow. To be deposited in the shell."

"I think you're right," said Sel. "But this is the adult. The harvest. I think the Formics carried these things out of the mine and took them off to be purified. Burn off the organics and leave the pure metal behind."

"So they ingested the gold as larvae ..."

"Went into a cocoon ..."

"And when they emerged, their bodies were encased in gold."

"And there they are," said Sel, holding up the light again. Only now he went closer to the columns, where they could now see that the glints of reflection were from the bodies of half-formed creatures, their backs embedded in the pillars, their foreheads and bellies shiny with a layer of thin gold.

"The columns are the cocoons," said Po.

"Organic mining," said Sel. "The Formics bred these things specifically to extract gold."

"But what for? It's not like the Formics used money. Gold is just a soft metal to them."

"A useful one. What's to say they didn't have bugs just like these, only bred to extract iron, platinum, aluminum, copper, whatever they wanted?"

"So they didn't need tools to mine."

"No, Po -- these are the tools. The factories." Sel knelt down. "Let's see if we can get any kind of DNA sample from these."

"Dead all this time?"

"There's no way these are native to this planet. The Formics brought them here. So they're native to the Formic home world. Or bred from something native there."

"Not necessarily," said Po, "or other colonies would have found them long before now."

"It took us forty years, didn't it?"

"What if this is a hybrid?" asked Po. "So it exists only on this world?"

By now, Sel was sampling DNA and finding it far easier than he thought. "Po, there's no way this has been dead for forty years."

Then it twitched reflexively under his hand.

"Or twenty minutes," said Sel. "It still has reflexes. It isn't dead."

"Then it's dying," said Po. "It has no strength."

"Starving to death, I bet," said Sel. "Maybe it just finished its metamorphosis and was trying to get to the tunnel entrance and died here. Or stopped here to die."

Po took the samples from him and stowed them in Sel's pack.

"So these gold bugs are still alive, forty years after the Formics stopped bringing them food? How long is the metamorphosis?"

"Not forty years," said Sel. He stood up, then bent over again to look at the gold bug. "I think these cocooned-up bugs embedded in the columns are young. Fresh." He stood up and started striding deeper into the cavern.

There were more gold bugs now, many of them lying on the ground -- but unlike the first one they found, these were often destroyed, hollowed out. Nothing but the thick golden shells of their backs, with legs discarded as if they had been ...

"Spat out," said Sel. "These were eaten."

"By what?"

"Larvae," said Sel. "Cannibalizing the adults because otherwise there's nothing to eat here. Each generation getting smaller -- look how large this one is? Each one smaller because they only eat the bodies of the adults."

"And they're working their way back toward the door," said Po. "To get outside where the nutrients are."

"When the Formics stopped coming ..."

"Their shells are too heavy to make much progress," said Po. "So they get as far as they can, then the larvae feed on the corpse of the adult, then they crawl toward the light of the entrance as far as they can, cocoon up, and the next generation emerges, smaller than the last one."

Now they were among much larger shells. "These things are supposed to be more than a meter in length," said Sel. "The closer to the entrance, the smaller."

Po stopped, pointed at the lamp. "They're heading toward the light?"

"Maybe we'll be able to see one."

"Rock-devouring larvae that grind up solid rock and poop out bonded stone columns."

"I didn't say I wanted to see it up close."

"But you do."

"Well. Yes."

Now they were both looking around them, squinting to try to see movement somewhere in the cavern.

"What if there's something it likes much better than light?" asked Po.

"Soft-bodied food?" asked Sel. "Don't think I haven't thought of it. The Formics brought them food. Now maybe we have, too."

At that moment, Po suddenly rose straight up into the air.

Sel held up the stick. Directly above him, a huge sluglike larva clung to the ceiling. Its mouth end was tightly fastened on Po's back.

"Unstrap and drop down here!" called Sel.

"All our samples!"

"We can always get more samples! I don't want to have to extract bits of you from one of these pillars!"

Po got the straps open and dropped to the floor.

The pack disappeared into the larva's maw. They could hear hard metal squeaking and scraping as the larva's teeth tried to grind up the metal instruments. They didn't wait to watch. They started toward the entrance. Once they passed the first gold bug's body, they looked for the bits of blanket to mark the path.

"Take my pack," said Sel, shrugging it off as he walked. "It's got the radio and the DNA samples in it -- get out the entrance and radio for help."

"I'm not leaving you," said Po. But he was obeying.

"You're the only one who can get out the entrance faster than that thing can crawl."

"We haven't seen how fast it can go."

"Yes we have," said Sel. He walked backward for a moment, holding up the lamp.

The larva was about thirty meters behind them and coming on faster than they had been walking.

"Is it following the light or our body heat?" asked Po as they turned again and began to jog.

"Or the carbon dioxide of our breath? Or the vibrations of our footfalls? Or our heartbeats?" Sel held out the stick toward him. "Take it and run."

"What are you going to do?" said Po, not taking the stick.

"If it's following the light, you can stay ahead of it by running."

"And if it's not?"

"Then you can get out and call for help."

"While it has you for lunch."

"I'm tough and gristly."

"The thing eats stone."

"Take the light," said Sel, "and get out of here."

Po hesitated a moment longer, then took it. Sel was relieved that the boy would keep his promise of obedience.

Either that, or Po was convinced the larva would follow the light.

It was the right guess -- as Sel slowed down and watched the larva approach, he could see that it was not heading directly toward him, but rather listed off to the side, heading for Po. And as Po ran, the larva began speeding up.

It went right past Sel. It was more than a half-meter thick. It moved like a snake, with a back-and-forth movement, writhing along the floor, shaping itself exactly like the columns, only horizontally and, of course, moving.

It was going to reach Po before he could get out of the tunnel.

"Leave the light!" shouted Sel. "Leave it!"

In a few moments, Sel could see the light leaning against the wall of the cavern, beside where the low tunnel began, leading toward the outside world. Po must already be through the tunnel.

But the larva was ignoring the light and heading into the tunnel behind him. With Po struggling to move through the low tunnel, the larva would catch him easily.

"No. No, stop!" But then he thought: What if Po hears me? "Keep going, Po! Run!"

And then, wordlessly, Sel shouted inside his mind: Stop and come back here! Come back to the cavern! Come back to your children!

Sel knew it was insane, but it was all he could think of to do. The Formics communicated mind to mind. This was also a large insectoid life form from the Formics' home world. Maybe he could speak to it the way the hive queens spoke to the individual worker and soldier Formics.

Speak? That was asinine. They had no language. They wouldn't speak.

Sel stopped and formed in his mind a clear picture of the gold bug lying on the cavern floor. Only the legs were writhing. And as he pictured it, Sel tried to feel hungry, or at least remember how it felt to be hungry. Or to find hunger within himself -- after all, he hadn't eaten for a few hours.

Then he pictured the larva coming to the gold bug. Circling it.

The larva reemerged from the tunnel. There had been no screaming from Po -- it hadn't caught him. Maybe it got too near the sunlight and it blinded the larva and it couldn't go on. Or maybe it had responded to the images and feelings in Sel's mind. Either way, Po was safely outside.

Of course, maybe the larva had simply decided not to bother with the prey that was running, and had come back for the prey that was standing very still, pressing himself against a column.

"Nice larva," whispered Sel. "How about some nice dried dog?"

When he reached for his pack, to extract the food, it wasn't there. Po had his pack.

But he had the little bag at his waist where he carried the food for each day's hike. He opened it, took out the dried dog meat and the vegetables that he carried there, and tossed them toward the larva.

It stopped. It nudged the food lying on the ground. Then it rose up and plunged its gaping mouth down on the food like a remora attaching itself to a shark.

Sel could imagine a smaller version of the larva being exactly that -- a remora, attaching itself to larger creatures to suck the blood out of them. Or to burrow into them?

He remembered the tiny parasites that had killed people when the colony was first formed. The ones Sel had invented blood additives to repel.

This creature is a hybrid. Half native to this world. Half formed from something from the Formic world.

No, not "something." Formics themselves. This thing was a hybrid between Formic and parasite. It would take very expert gene-splicing to construct a viable creature that combined attributes of two species growing out of such disparate genetic heritages. The result would be a species that was half Formic, so that perhaps the Hive Queens could communicate with them mentally, control them like any other Formics. Only they were still different enough that they didn't completely bond with the Queen -- so when this world's Hive Queen died, the gold bugs didn't.

Maybe not. Maybe they already had a species they used for menial tasks, one that had a weak mental bond with the Hive Queens, and that's what they interbred with the parasitic worms. Those incredible teeth that could burrow right through leather, cloth, skin, and bone. But sentient, or nearly so. It could be ruled by the Hive Queens' mind.

And mine? Or did it come back for the easy food?

By now the larva had plunged down onto each of the bits of food and devoured them -- along with a thin layer of the stone floor at each spot. The thing was hungry.

Hungry enough to override Sel's commands?

He formed a picture in his mind -- a complicated one now. A picture of Sel and Po bringing food into the tunnel. Feeding the larva. He pictured himself and Po going in and out of the cave, bringing food. Lots of food. Leaves. Grain. Fruit. Small animals.

The larva came toward him, but then circled around him. Writhed around his legs. Like a constrictor? Did it have that snakelike pattern, too?

No. It didn't get tighter. It was more like a cat.

Then it pushed from behind. Nudging him toward the tunnel.

Sel obeyed. The thing understood. There was rudimentary communication going on.

Sel hurried to the tunnel, then knelt and sat and started to try to slide along as he had coming in.

The larva slid past him in the tunnel and then stopped.

Sel took hold of the creature's dry, articulated surface, and it began moving forward again. It was carefully not thrashing him against the wall, though he scraped now and then. It hurt and probably drew blood, but it didn't break anything. It wouldn't even have bothered a Formic. Maybe the Formics rode the larvae in and out of the tunnel just like this.

The larva stopped. But now Sel could see the light of day. So could the larva. It didn't go out there; it shied from the light and backed down the tunnel past Sel.

When Sel emerged into the daylight and stood up, Po ran to him and hugged him. "It didn't eat you!"

"No, it gave me a ride," he said.

Po wasn't sure how to make sense of this.

"All our food," said Sel. "I promised we'd feed it."

Po didn't argue. He ran to the pack and started handing food to Sel, who gathered it into a basket made by holding his shirt out in front of him. "Enough for the moment," said Sel.

In a few moments, he had his shirt off and stuffed with food. Then he started laboriously down the tunnel again. In moments the larva was there again, coiling around him. Sel opened the shirt and dropped the food. The larva began eating ravenously. Sel was still close enough to the entrance that he could squat-walk out again.

"We'll need more food," said Sel.

"What's food to the larva?" asked Po. "Grass? Bushes?"

"It ate the vegetables from my lunch pack."

"There's not going to be anything edible growing around here."

"Not edible to us," said Sel. "But if I'm right, this thing is half native to this world, and it can probably metabolize the local vegetation."

If there was one thing they knew how to do, it was identify the local flora. Soon they were shuttling shirtfuls of tuberous vegetables down the tunnel. They took turns carrying food to the larva.

It was still eating when two skimmers arrived. It was new technology, obviously developed long after Sel's transport had left Fleet Command on the long voyage to war. The pilots were strong young soldiers, with potent-looking sidearms. One skimmer held supplies in bags and boxes. The other had a passenger. A fifteen-year-old boy in civilian clothes.

"Ender Wiggin," said Sel.

"Sel Menach," said Wiggin. "Po said you had a giant worm situation going on here."

"No weapons needed," Sel said to the soldiers, who already had their weapons at the ready. "We're not exactly talking with the thing, but it understands rudimentary images." And he explained about his theory of cross-breeding.

"So these aren't actually Formics," said Wiggin. He looked disappointed.

"None of the Formics could have survived," said Sel. "But they're somewhat like Formics. When we get back, we can do the gene comparison and see just how these things were made. And also, we can get all the gold we'll ever want. There might be iron bugs and silver bugs and copper bugs elsewhere. We need to do a search for the likely sites -- forty years of surviving by cannibalizing each other is a long time, and they might all be on their last legs, so to speak."

"Count on it, we'll do it at once," said Wiggin.

They stayed long enough to make sure the soldiers could project images of food to the larva -- at least enough not to get eaten when they carried food down the tunnel. Then a training course in which plants had nutrient-rich roots. Then, leaving Po behind to supervise, Sel climbed into one of the skimmers with Wiggin and the DNA samples and headed back to the colony.

*

Over the next few weeks, as Po organized the search for more Formic mines that might contain similar bugs and Sel learned how to use the new, improved equipment so he and the new xenobiologists could decode what the Formics had done to create these creatures, a few of the old settlers did come to him, just as he had feared, trying to enlist him in some kind of resistance to whatever it was the new colonists were doing.

Sel's answer was always the same. "I've got real work to do here! Get out of my lab! Go take your complaints to the governor. That's his job now, not mine."

Something of the Formics had survived on this world after all. Only a biological remnant, but it was something. It was so irritating that he was probably going to die before they had learned everything this world could teach them. How have other scientists put up with this death thing? It would be such a tedious interruption to his career, just when it was getting really interesting.

Toon Out

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

When the thought first occurred to me, I'd laughed. We're real people. We aren't cartoons. So what if Humbert -- I mean Dad -- had a new job? And lots of moms change their hairstyle.

That was only the beginning. Next thing I know, I have two new aunts. I never had aunts before. Suddenly, these two strange women who look like mom start dropping by. The worst part is that they both smoke. Pew.

Then Leslie started getting smarter and smarter. She's my younger sister. I've always been the smarter one. But for the last few weeks, it's seemed that she knows a lot more than I do. Now, she plays the saxophone. And she wants me to call her "Lisa."

She took the saxophone right up to her room. Even though she just got it today, she's already playing music. And not beginner stuff like "Three Blind Mice." She's playing jazz.

I don't want to be Bart. I want to be me -- Bert Stinson. Maybe it's not too late. Maybe there's something I can do to stop it before the change is complete. That's why I'm trying to write down everything I can remember since the changes began.

Darn. I keep dropping my pencil. My fingers are so short and stubby. Wait a minute. Didn't I use to have five fingers on each hand? It's so hard to remember. Hey -- why am I writing this? No idea. Weird stuff. I just read it and it makes no sense. Well, it's nothing to have a cow over. Think I'll grab my skateboard and head out.

Later, dude...

I'm scared. Before today, I was still able to convince myself that it was just a silly idea. But when my sister came home from school, I realized that none of it was my imagination -- it was real. Leslie started band this morning. I prayed she'd want to learn flute or clarinet. Lots of girls play flute. I wouldn't even have minded if she'd brought home a french horn or an oboe.

Leslie came home with a saxophone.

That's when I knew for sure. Look at all the evidence. Last month, my dad quit the law firm where he worked and took a new job at the power plant. He's gained a lot of weight, too -- a whole lot of weight. All day long, he eats donuts and drinks beer. He doesn't help me with my homework anymore. Yesterday, he tried to choke me. Luckily, he got distracted by a commercial for fudge.

Mom changed her hair. She's got it piled up on top of her head. It's a funny color, too. My baby sister, Mandie, decided she wouldn't go anywhere without a pacifier.

There's no doubt about it. I'm sure now. My family is turning into the Simpsons.



Artwork by Lance Card

Braces

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

Until she stepped into Dr. Kublanko's waiting room, Shelly had felt pretty good about getting braces. Half the popular kids in school wore them, and Shelly did have to admit that her overbite made her look more than a little bit like a bunny. She'd gotten tons of advice from her friends once she'd spread the news.

"Chew lots of gum now," Sarah had told her, "because you won't be chewing any once they put the braces on."

"Plan on eating spaghetti for the first few days," Lorie had warned her. "You won't feel like chewing."

Now, she was just minutes away from her first session in the chair. It was only an exam, but it brought her that much closer to the moment when it all became real. The small office, attached to the side of a house on the edge of town, was so dim and gloomy, Shelly found herself almost wanting to cry.

"Cheer up," her mother said. "They'll be off again before you know it."

Shelly nodded and sat on a couch that was against one wall. Across the room, another girl was sitting, waiting for her turn. The girl

looked up.

Shelly smiled.

The girl drooped her head back down toward the floor.

"He's very reasonable," her mother said, whispering the last word. Shelly knew that *reasonable* was her mother's way of saying *cheap*.

That could definitely describe the waiting room. The place certainly didn't resemble any other office she'd been in. The furniture was old and worn. There weren't any magazines. There was no music or radio. There wasn't even a receptionist.

Doctor Kublanko stepped into the waiting room and said, "Shelly?" He looked almost too young to be a dentist.

"That's me," Shelly said. She followed him as he bounced down a short, dark hall to a room with a dentist's chair. When she looked at the chair, she felt a pang ripple through her stomach. For an instant, she thought of turning and fleeing. What was so terrible about a few crooked teeth?

"Hop right up," Dr. Kublanko said.

Shelly got in the chair.

"Let's have a look," he said.

Shelly opened her mouth. Dr. Kublanko examined her for a moment, then said, "Well, let's get started."

"What?"

"The braces," Dr. Kublanko said.

"But, don't you have to do some x-rays? Isn't this just an exam?"

"Oh, you need braces. And there's no point in waiting. So, let's get them on."

Shelly kept her mouth opened, in part because she was too stunned to close it. Dr. Kublanko went to work. It took a lot less time than Shelly had thought. The doctor just slipped something over all her teeth. One minute, she was sitting there with her mouth open, a minute later, she was aware of this strange *thing* in her mouth.

"It feels funny," Shelly tried to say. But it came out "Ih eel zunny."

"You'll get used to it," Dr. Kublanko said. "I'll see you again in exactly one week."

Shelly got out of the chair and walked toward the waiting room. It was odd -- she'd assumed the strange metal in her mouth would feel cold, but it was very warm.

She probed at it with her tongue. It felt weird.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" her mom asked when Shelly returned to the waiting room.

"Gesh not," Shelly said, which was as close to *guess not* as she could come at the moment. She wondered when it would start to hurt. Her friends had told her that her teeth might ache for a day or two.

By that evening, she still felt fine. There was no ache, no discomfort at all other than the strangeness in her mouth.

Her mother made spaghetti, but Shelly wanted steak. She wanted to tear into a nice, juicy piece of meat. Rare. Definitely rare.

"I'll make steak tomorrow," her mom said when she heard Shelly's request. She looked surprised. "See, he must be a pretty good dentist. You aren't hurting at all. And his prices are very reasonable."

"I guess," Shelly said.

She was almost completely used to her braces by the time she went to sleep. She woke once in the middle of the night, briefly, but all she could remember was the feeling that she didn't have her braces on. *Guess I'm getting used to them*, she thought as she drifted back to sleep.

In the morning, her mouth felt fine. No pain, no discomfort. She wondered how the braces could work if she didn't feel anything. At her next appointment, she asked Doctor Kublanko about that.

"Oh, these are the latest design," he said as he examined her. "Everything is going just perfectly." He took a thin hose with a nozzle at the end and put it inside her mouth.

"What are you doing?" Shelly asked, speaking around the nozzle.

"Oh, just cleaning things a bit. Hmmm. From the way these look, I'm guessing you breathe through your nose. Try to breathe through your mouth. The braces work best when they get lots of air."

That didn't make sense. Shelly was going to say something, but she suddenly felt very tired. She blinked her eyes. Had she dozed? She looked up at the doctor. "There," he was saying. "All set until next week."

"Uh, okay." Shelly got up slowly. She still felt strange. Her eyes wandered round the small room, settling for a moment on a diploma hanging above the sink. Shelly looked at the date. He'd gotten his degree more than forty years ago. That didn't make sense. Dr. Kublanko couldn't possibly be that old.

"Relax," the dentist told her. "Everything is going just the way it's supposed to. Now get along home."

On the way out, she saw a girl in the waiting room. The girl smiled at her and said, "I'm just here to see if I need braces."

Don't go in there. Shelly almost spoke, but she was too tired to find the right words. It wasn't worth the effort. She dropped her head and turned away, then walked off.

That evening, Shelly woke again. Something glinted on the window sill, right up against the screen. Shelly started to get up, but the room danced in circles and slid from under her. As she fell back to sleep, she felt something slipping onto her teeth.

"I want to get my braces off," she told her mom the next morning.

"But that's ridiculous, dear," her mom said. "You need to wear them for at least two years. Otherwise, they won't do any good. What's wrong? Are the other girls teasing you?"

Shelly shook her head. She saw there was no use trying to explain it to her mom. But the dentist was another matter. She'd face him at her next appointment.

"And how are you?" he asked Shelly as she sat in the chair for her exam.

"There's something wrong with my braces," she said.

"Oh really? Well, it's easy to adjust these things." He reached onto his tray and took up a small pliers. "What exactly is the problem?"

They leave my mouth and crawl around the room at night. That's what Shelly wanted to say. But, suddenly, she was afraid to admit that she knew this. Shelly looked at his face -- it was so young, except for his eyes. She turned away, afraid to stare into those eyes. "Uh, they feel a bit loose," she said.

"Oh dear. Here, see if this is better." He did something inside her mouth.

Shelly nodded. "Much better," she said when the dentist had removed the tool from her mouth.

"Good. Now let me do just one more thing." He placed another tool, the one connected to a hose, into her mouth. "Great," he said a moment later. "All done."

Shelly realized she was nearly asleep. She dragged herself from the chair and staggered out of the office. When she reached her home, she fell right into bed and slept without waking during the night.

The next morning, Shelly looked carefully at her teeth in the mirror. Nothing seemed to have changed. Then she looked at her face. She was tired. There were dark bags under her eyes. Her face seemed older, her hair seemed dry and brittle.

She was sure that her youth and energy were being stolen. It had to be the braces. That night, she switched her alarm so it would ring at 3:30 in the morning. *It's going to end*, Shelly thought as she lay down in her bed.

The alarm jolted her. She sat up and switched it off.

Her tongue ran across bare teeth. She looked around the room. The braces, like a metal spider, were on the window sill, sitting in the moonlight. As she caught sight of them, they rushed toward her.

"No!" Shelly shouted.

The braces ran to the bed and sprung up onto the mattress.

Shelly clamped her hand across her mouth.

Sharp wires dug into her skin as the braces climbed her nightshirt. Wires stabbed at the hand she'd clamped across her mouth.

Shelly grabbed the braces with her other hand and ripped them free. She flung them to the floor, then grabbed a book from her bedside table.

She rolled to the floor and slammed the book down on the braces. Over and over, she slammed the book against the braces. It took every bit of strength she had. The world wavered. Shelly wondered if she was going to pass out.

"SHELLY! What's going on?"

Shelly sat up slowly and looked at her mother standing in the doorway. "My braces," she said, pointing to the floor.

Her mother switched on the light and walked over. She knelt next to Shelly. She put a hand under Shelly's chin and looked at her mouth. "What about them? They look just fine."

Shelly started to speak. The braces rubbed against her tongue. She looked at the spot on the floor. It was bare.

"You'd better get some sleep, young lady," her mother said. "You have school tomorrow. Oh, and I almost forgot. Doctor Kublanko called. He needs to make another adjustment to your braces. You have an appointment with him tomorrow, right after school." She paused and shook her head. "I honestly don't see how he can give so many appointments and charge so little. But I'm certainly not complaining."

Shelly nodded, unable to speak. Tired and drained of energy, she crawled back to bed. *It must be my imagination*, she thought. *It was a dream or something.*

"It doesn't matter," Shelly said as she drifted off. She was too exhausted to care. She felt so tired, and so old. Nothing was important -- not the braces on her teeth, not even the cuts and scratches on her hands. Shelly had no idea how those small injuries had gotten there, but they didn't matter either. The cuts would heal. And in just a few years, she'd have nice, straight teeth. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

InterGalactic Interview with Peter S. Beagle

by Edmund R. Schubert

"Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens, or half their greatness goes unnoticed."

Peter S. Beagle

Born in Manhattan in 1939, Peter S. Beagle wrote his first novel, *A Fine And Private Place*, when he was nineteen, to great acclaim. Many years later he wrote a script for *Star Trek: The Next Generation Episode*, about Spock's father (Sarek), at a time when the producers of *ST:TNG* weren't inclined to use characters from the old show. His script was so good they produced it anyway, and it went on to become one of the show's most popular episodes. Yet he is also a man known almost as well for being cheated and/or mistreated by the producers of various movies he's been involved with, as he is for being the author of the classic novel, *The Last Unicorn*.

If ever there were a man who could say "been there, done that," and call it a day, it's Peter S. Beagle.

Yet Beagle shows no sign of being jaded, much less slowing down. If anything, he's been more prolific in the past few years than ever before. "Two Hearts," a coda to *The Last Unicorn*, won the Hugo Award (in 2006) and the Nebula (in 2007) for Best Novelette, and he is at work on four new novels, including a book-length follow-up to *The Last Unicorn*. He's written dialogue for the MMOG (massively multiplayer online game), *Horizons: Empire of Istaria*. And he's agreed to an interview with *InterGalactic Medicine Show*...

ERS: You frequently talk about wanting to be invisible, to fly under the radar. In the introduction to your collection, *The Fantasy Worlds of Peter S. Beagle* (published way back in 1978), you describe yourself as a "self-made werewolf" and a "born hider... fascinated all my life by disguise, camouflage, shape-changers, and everything that has to be approached backwards or sideways." Where do you suppose this feeling came from, and, nearly 30 years later, would you say it still applies?

PSB: On one level it probably has to do with coming from people in Russia and Poland who literally had to hide in the cellars of kindly neighbors when the Cossacks came through town. That's probably genetic. Then there's simply my own nature. I was a very shy kid, and it took me a long time to learn to, as we say, "interact" with people. I was always good with animals, not so much with people. Now I can speak to an audience of a thousand people and handle it perfectly well, dexterously even, but it is very much learned behavior. I suppose I've always been fascinated by shapeshifters because there have been times when I've almost literally had to change my shape in a strange place to fit into odd, edgy societies, either because I was doing a magazine article, or because of where I grew up, or where I was living at the time. I think of myself as somebody who tries to keep things very simple, and is irritated on occasion because they always wind up complicated.

ERS: Speaking of complicated, what is the latest news on your legal challenges with the movie industry (specifically the animated versions of *LOTR* and *Last Unicorn*)?

PSB: Granada Media has gotten very tired of getting email and faxes from outraged fans who want to know why they are so earnestly screwing me. It's more trouble than they really want to handle, so there has been some possible motion towards a resolution. As for Saul Zaentz and *The Lord of the Rings*, I wrote and rewrote that script God knows how many times, eight or nine at least, for a consultant's fee with the understanding that when Part 2 came along I would be paid extra to compensate for the skimpy payment on Part 1. Well there never was a Part 2, and Saul Zaentz never felt morally obliged to live up to the promise he made. I'm not yet willing to give up on that, but there's nothing new to report. There are people working on that.

ERS: You once said, "I try to de-glamorize free-lance writing. Because writing is really all about showing up for work and staying there when no words are coming." With that in mind, what other things do you think people should know about the realities of life as a writer?

PSB: It helps to have a backup job, which I never did. An independent income. Anything of that sort...but I'll go with what my Uncle Moses, who was a painter, used to say. He and his brothers were my role models, because they used to get up in the morning, have their breakfast, and go down to the studio to work. There was no nonsense about waiting for inspiration. Uncle Moses used to say, "If the muse is late, you start without her." That's been a motto of mine for a long while.

ERS: If you could go back in time and give your nineteen year-old self advice, what would that advice be?

PSB: *Take it out.* At nineteen I always had a tendency to overwrite, and a gift for similes and metaphors and so on. And the nineteen year-old me - though he'd learned a good deal about taking things out from reading Robert Nathan - really had a way to go before he could look at something and say "That's very pretty...damn, that's a really good passage of description...it's got to go." That took me time to learn, as it does for everybody. As for the other great lesson I'd share, there are many things in terms of business that I would tell that young man not to do. From that sense I'd simply say find someone knowledgeable about the business aspect that you can trust - and be

very careful about the trust. Don't make that choice lightly. It's like the saying "Trust everybody, but cut the cards." I pretty trusted everyone, and it took me a very long while to learn that I couldn't.

ERS: Several times during the 1990's I read interviews where you said in reference to your novel, *The Last Unicorn*, that you were "unicorned out." What made you decide you were finally ready to revisit it your most popular creation?

PSB: Circumstance as much as anything...and Connor Cochran [Beagle's business manager], who suggested that it would be nice to include some story set in the world of *The Last Unicorn* - not a sequel at all, he never said that - but a fairytale set in that fairytale world which would accompany the audiobook that I'd recently recorded of *The Last Unicorn*. I grumped about it a great deal, and finally sulked off and said "Well, I'll do something." And wound up writing a coda to the original book, told by a nine year-old girl who simply took me over, as characters sometimes do, and insisted on telling her own story of her own quest. By the time I was through with the story I was simply too fascinated by Sooz herself to let her go. I needed to see where she went when she was 17, and that will be the proper sequel. I can't say for certain, but I tend to surprise myself. I'm also going to be working on a totally different unicorn project. A book of mine from 1996, *The Unicorn Sonata*, really deserves to be more than it is. I'm going to expand it into a four-book series with multitudinous characters and many changes of scene. I'm not entirely sure yet where the whole thing is going, but I'm very happily in that stage where you make things up by taking a shower or driving along, and you think of characters. It's like a kid with clay - sometimes you squoosh and start over. That's where I am with that.

ERS: I was fascinated by a statement you made that when you're creating worlds, you don't 'see' them very well, but you 'hear' them wonderfully. How would you say this works to your advantage, and how would you say it serves as a hindrance?

PSB: Any time you see a passage of description of a world or a place, you can be assured I've worked on it very hard. I have to make it visible to myself, and sometimes that's very difficult. I don't think I look at things well the first time. The second or third time I may get it. But I hear very well. I listen to the way people talk. That's important to me. If I can't hear my characters, I can't see them. That's the major thing. I have to hear them in my head.

ERS: Music also holds an important place in your life. How consciously do you work to bring that side of yourself into your fiction vs. how much would you say just slips in because it's an intrinsic part of who you are?

PSB: Very consciously. I've always gotten hooked on the *sound* of words, running together, rubbing against each other, chiming together, since I was quite little. And music constantly turns up in my work. I write songs, and I often think of passages in a book as orchestral or jazz passages - woodwinds, brass, sudden solo riff. I think in musical terms probably more than any other.

ERS: I read and enjoyed a quote where you said your career as a musician helped you understand the desire people have to come to fantasy/science fiction conventions in costumes, celebrating movie characters or something out of "The Hobbit." You said, "They don't just want to read the books, they want to become them." Personally I think this is what good fiction does for people, and you have obviously achieved it many time over with your own stories. Do you have a particular method or thought process that you use in achieving that?

PSB: I don't think so. So much of it is unconscious. Something I do know that I do is to speak my dialog aloud to myself. I'm very conscious of that. It has to be something that a character, human or not, in that particular situation would actually say. I try and make the "unreality" of any fantasy situation as real, as grounded in reality, as possible. That's very important. I don't believe in airy nothingness. I have to ground things very solidly. If it's an imaginary world, it has to be a *real* imaginary world. You're supposed to feel that it is just around the corner, because those are the books that *I* love.

ERS: Aside from music, what are the things most likely to influence your writing?

PSB: I have to be careful whom I read, because I'm a natural mimic, in a literary sense. I can usually tell, if I look back at a book, just who I was reading at that time. So when I'm writing fiction I mostly read nonfiction. Mimicry is trick, a gift that comes in useful if you are writing a movie script based on someone else's book, but it's dangerous otherwise. I have to be careful, because I'm too easily influenced even now.

ERS: How did you get involved with online role-playing games (the MMOG), and what kind of experience has that been?

PSB: I got involved with it because I was asked. I'm a sucker for anything I've never done, which is how I wound up writing an opera libretto based on one of my stories. Here I'd never played a roleplaying game in my life, and I'm still nothing resembling an expert on the field. What I was mostly doing was jazzing up dialog laid out for the eleven races and three genders of Istaria. It was exhausting, but I did enjoy it, and I was pleased that the dialog was accepted and did find its way into the game. And I'm sorry that the game seems to be in some kind of limbo state since it's been sold. Connor wants to see a whole MMORPG built up around my Innkeeper's World, and maybe someday that will happen.

ERS: What are you working on now?

PSB: Altogether too many overdue things. Three stories...no, five. A novel that needs one last pass to be finished. Two other novels that are under way, *I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons* and *Sweet Lightning*, which is a 1950s baseball fantasy set in Pittsburgh. I find myself very often quoting George Burns's line: "I can't die, I'm booked." I don't want to talk about any of the things I'm working on to any great degree, because that kind of unwinds the spring that tells the story.

ERS: Anything else you think we should know about that I'm forgetting...?

PSB: For all the hard times, past and possibly to come - one never knows, as Fats Waller used to say - I wouldn't have done anything else. I might have managed it better, organized it better. But I'm very lucky because I never wanted to do anything but this, and I think that I'm slowly getting better at it. I think.

ERS: Thanks very much for your time.

PSB: My pleasure.

Peter S. Beagle's story, "We Never Talk About My Brother" is the featured story in issue five of Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show.

Who Is Snape?

by Orson Scott Card

Most of the Harry Potter novels were self-contained. You could read them without having read any previous volumes in the series, since the author provided you with reminders of all significant events that had gone before. And when each volume ended, the major issues raised in that book had been resolved.

Always there was the continuing expectation of a final confrontation between Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort, of course, with other questions and puzzles along the way. But the reader felt, at the end of each book, that *this*, story, at least, had ended.

Not so with the sixth volume, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. A series that had been steadily darkening in tone -- growing up, in a way, along with its hero -- now darkened in another way: It seemed to some that we actually knew less about what was going on at the end of that book than we did at the beginning.

We were left dangling, with Harry in more peril than ever, Voldemort stronger than ever, the quest that had driven the story leading apparently to nothing, and Dumbledore dead.

(Though we must remember that dead things do live on in the world of Harry Potter. Rowling has been quoted as saying that Dumbledore is most definitely dead, and the fact that his face appears in a portrait in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts seems proof enough that his death is genuine. Also, as Dumbledore himself said, "No spell can reawaken the dead" [*Goblet* 697].

(But "really dead" doesn't necessarily mean "gone." Isn't Fawkes the Phoenix fully dead before he rises from the ashes of his immolation? While it is unlikely that Dumbledore would fear death enough to choose to remain a ghost, it is possible that there is some deep magic involving the Phoenix that rises from the flames of Dumbledore's funeral pyre just before the location of the body is enclosed in a stone tomb: Could there be a good-magic equivalent of the dark-magic horcrux -- a survival of the soul on earth in a form that can return? Could it be that when Dumbledore says that as long as anyone at Hogwarts is loyal to him, he will not really be gone, he means it literally?

(The evidence for the possibility of Dumbledore rising like a Phoenix is not direct -- how could it be, without Rowling tipping her hand? -- but it is enough that if Dumbledore *doesshow* up again, alive, the readers will nod and say, "Yes, of course." In short, there is no particular reason to think that Dumbledore alone should be irrevocably, invisibly, and silently dead.)

But the biggest puzzle at the end of *Prince* is Professor Severus Snape. The head of Slytherin House at Hogwarts, Snape bears the sinister mark of Voldemort on his forearm and was one of the Death Eaters during Voldemort's previous bid for supremacy in the magical world.

We have learned that he functions as a double agent, pretending to be Voldemort's loyal servant, spying on Dumbledore, Hogwarts, and the Order of the Phoenix, while in fact he is really Dumbledore's agent, spying on Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Or is it the other way around? Is he only pretending to Dumbledore that he is only pretending to be loyal to Voldemort? The questions become, as they always do with double agents, quite circular and unanswerable until you see what the double agent does in the crisis.

Well, we have that answer, don't we? In the climactic scene, Snape kills Dumbledore, which appears to most as conclusive proof of his perfidy. And yet ... we also have reason to believe that what Snape did, Dumbledore wanted him to do -- that by killing Dumbledore, he was actually furthering Dumbledore's plan.

It was important to Dumbledore that it *not* be Draco Malfoy who slew him -- that Draco be protected from Voldemort, along with his whole malicious family. And Dumbledore was so determined to die (or was it just to keep Harry Potter safe?) that he put Harry under a spell of immobility -- and under his invisibility cloak -- during the crisis atop the tower. Dumbledore wanted *no one* to be in a position to prevent his death.

Yet what do we make of the critical moment?

"Severus ..."

"The sound frightened Harry beyond anything he had experienced all evening. For the first time, Dumbledore was pleading" (*Prince* 595).

Pleading? One assumes -- Harry assumed -- that he was pleading for Snape to save him, or at least to refrain from killing him.

But he might just as easily have been pleading for him to do a thing that he knew Snape did not want to do: kill him before Draco could, so that Voldemort's plan to make a murderer of him would fail.

Snape approaches Dumbledore, pushing Draco "roughly" out of the way. Was that roughness to show his scorn for Draco's inability to commit murder? Or was it a bit of theatre, to make the others think that he scorned Draco when in fact he was making sure Draco was not in a position to change his mind and kill?

"Snape gazed for a moment at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

"Severus ... please ..."

"Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" (*Prince* 595).

What did that look of revulsion and hatred mean?

Was it long pent-up resentment of and malice toward Dumbledore, which Snape was finally free to show as he murdered the man he had pretended to serve?

Harry's imperfect ability to interpret the meaning of Snape's facial expression? Harry had long since lost the ability to assign any positive meaning to any act, statement, or expression of Snape's. Was Harry simply wrong?

Was Snape's expression of hatred and revulsion merely theatre, a display for the benefit of the other Death Eaters beside him on the tower?

Or were his hatred and revulsion sincere enough, but caused by the violent act he was about to perform, the loathsome spell he was about to cast, the disloyalty that his loyalty was causing him to display?

Was it that revulsion -- at the idea of killing Dumbledore using a forbidden curse -- that caused Dumbledore to plead with him? Perhaps Dumbledore's "Severus ... please ..." was saying, in effect, I know you hate to do this, my friend, but please, overcome your revulsion and kill me in a way that will save Draco and win you Voldemort's utter trust.

Likewise, when Snape -- still sneering -- blocks Harry's attempts to use the unforgivable *cruciatius* curse, not just against himself but against another Death Eater, is he thwarting Harry as an enemy, or keeping the boy from turning himself into something evil by using such a terrible curse -- the way he shielded Draco in the tower?

After all, as Harry casts spell after spell at him, Snape does not fight back -- though Harry urges him to. Instead he blocks all of Harry's spells before he can cast them.

"Blocked again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!" Who was speaking here? The Snape who taunts Harry Potter -- the Snape who had just said "Coward, did you call me, Potter? Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?" (*Prince* 603)? Or the Snape who was a very demanding teacher, warning Harry which skills he would have to master before he could hope to be effective against Voldemort?

When the *cruciatius* is cast against Harry, he assumes it is Snape who did it -- but no, it is Snape who *ends* it and insists that the other Death Eaters respect Voldemort's order that "Potter belongs to the Dark Lord -- we are to leave him!" (*Prince* 603). But is he just obeying Voldemort? Or saving Harry Potter according to Dumbledore's plan?

In the aftermath, when Harry tells the remaining faculty what Snape did to Dumbledore, they all believe that Snape is therefore a murderer and a sincere Death Eater. But Rowling is careful to remind us, in McGonagall's words, "Snape. We all wondered ... but he [Dumbledore] trusted ... always ... *Snape* ... I can't believe it..."

Are we to believe what they all believe, that Snape is guilty? Or are we to heed McGonagall's unwitting advice, "I can't believe it"?

As if to make sure we got the point, Rowling has Tonks say, "But Dumbledore swore he was on our side! I always thought Dumbledore must know something about Snape that we didn't..." (*Prince* 615)

Of course, immediately after this, Harry Potter offers what he thinks was Dumbledore's "ironclad reason" for trusting Snape -- a reason that doesn't seem so ironclad in retrospect. "Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James [Harry's father] was dead? Snape *hated* James..." (*Prince* 616)

And thus Rowling tosses us back and forth. We know whom to *like*; we even know, mostly, who is honest and means what they say. What we don't know is who is *right*.

If one thing has been clear throughout the series, it is that Dumbledore trusts Snape; could he have been wrong? And even if Dumbledore was right to trust Snape's loyalty so far, can Snape be trusted to continue to serve Dumbledore even after Dumbledore is dead?

The Author and the Character

In one sense, the definitive answer can only be found by reading the final volume in the series.

After all, these books have an author, and the author is free to have her characters do whatever she wants them to do. Until Rowling's words on paper turn into scenes in our minds as we read them, the answer to that question might still turn out either way -- or some twisted combination of tortured moral reasoning and contradictory actions on Snape's part that keeps us guessing right to, or even past, the end.

Or is she really free to do just *anything*?

There is a logic to how a literary character is formed, especially by a writer of such visceral power as Rowling has turned out to be.

I think the power of the Harry Potter books surprised even Rowling. Certainly there is a progression of tone from the first volumes through the later ones. I spoke before of darkening, but it might rather be viewed as a de-lightening. The first volume was like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* in that it was self-consciously a *children's* book, full of delightful jokes. Dumbledore, like the Wizard Gandalf in *The Hobbit*, was a trickster, a jester. The world was full of wonders that were, quite simply, fun; game-playing and riddle-solving were at the heart of the story. It was a romp. Even including the climax, the book was light -- in physical weight, in voice, in mood, and in moral consequence.

But the later volumes steadily progressed to ever-more-serious consequences, with ever-fewer moments of genuine frivolity. There was still humor, but it had a darker edge.

Why?

Because Rowling was no longer telling a children's story, she was telling a story that happened to be about children. The light tale-for-children tone turned to the much darker hues of a story rising out of the author's unconscious.

Much has been said about how Rowling had the whole series planned from the beginning. I believe that this is true -- up to a point. The asymmetry in the lengths of the books suggests that Rowling began to fill her pages, not with deliberate (and intellectual) inventions, but with story that simply flowed and often went in directions that simply felt right to her.

Most important, she went from the sharp, clear black-and-white morality of the first book to a far more shaded and nuanced view of good versus evil. You could almost always tell good guys from bad guys in *Stone* because good guys were nice to Harry and bad guys were mean.

But by the time we found our way through *Prisoner of Azkaban*, we had a "good guy" -- Sirius Black -- who had been, as a student, perfectly capable of setting up the probable murder of his fellow student Severus Snape. Yet Black remained on the good-guy team.

Harry himself becomes morally ambiguous. His "pranks" and sneaking and spying may always have, in his mind, good motives, but they don't always have good consequences, and while he is not motivated by pure malice, he does delight in the occasional malicious prank.

More to the point, on many of the occasions where Snape accuses Harry of having done something dire, Harry is in fact guilty of rule-breaking or worse. Harry cooperates in crimes, like hiding and helping smuggle Hagrid's illegal dragon, and he almost never calls on even the most trusted authorities to help him. We see his deeds, correctly, as heroic -- but they could also, without much twisting, be made to prove that, as Snape accuses, Harry Potter believes that he is above the law -- that he is free to pick and choose which rules to obey, depending on what seems good to him at the moment, based only on the information he has.

We might be glad that Harry cheats in order to prevail in the Tri-Wizard Tournament in *Goblet* -- and it would take a moral cretin not to see that Harry's noble behavior in putting the lives of others ahead of his own chance of victory certainly earns him absolution for his rule-bending. But the fact remains: Harry Potter's larger motives might be good, but he is dangerous: He never has complete information, and yet frequently puts his own moral judgment ahead of public laws and wiser people's advice.

This is not uncommon in fiction -- how many hard-boiled detectives are barely distinguishable from the criminals they pursue? The difference between a knight and a thug is often merely the color of his armor.

What makes Harry's moral ambiguity interesting is that Rowling *points it out*. He is the hero; but he does not always do the right thing, either in the moral or the practical sense. And characters like Snape and Draco Malfoy may be cruel and malicious, but they do not always do the *wrong* thing.

The result is that the moral universe of the Harry Potter novels moves from clarity to a deepening *chiaroscuro* in which truth can lurk in shadows and error can stand in the sun. This is the kind of thing that authors rarely plan; it happens when they themselves become immersed in the tales and let their unconscious mind lead them down paths they had not anticipated.

So ... what is Snape?

A character that has been planned from the beginning to act in certain ways, so that we can see the careful hand of the author preparing him for his role in the final scenes of the final book?

Or is he a character who served a useful function in the earlier books, was almost abandoned when other characters served that function better, but then reemerged from the author's unconscious into a powerful role that expresses her deep inner conviction that it is nearly impossible to judge ultimate moral worth solely from outward behavior?

There are two logics working here:

1. The character is the servant of the story. The author has certain jobs that need to be done in a tale, and devises characters to carry out those jobs. The characters, then, follow an *artistic* logic.
2. The author is also the servant of her own most deeply held beliefs -- the things that she believes without even knowing that she believes them. Characters that endure in a well-made work of fiction are invariably captured by the author's unconscious and are bent in ways that the author might not have predicted. Thus the logic that drives the character -- the system of cause-and-effect demonstrated in the character's choices -- is governed, not entirely by a conscious, artistic plan, but also by the author's inner imperative to create a fictional world that demonstrates the secret moral and causal universe in which she lives.

In other words, the first logic shows us the author's conscious choices -- what the author believes that she believes. The second logic is where the genius rather than mere cleverness comes into play: It shows us what the author believes without knowing that it is possible to believe anything else.

Look at how the pivotal character of Gollum grew in Tolkien's classic tales of Middle-earth. In *The Hobbit*, Gollum exists for one purpose: To give Bilbo the Ring. But he is an intriguing character; for reasons Tolkien himself doesn't understand, he *matters*. In fact, he functions as an anti-hobbit, a creature much like Bilbo but the moral opposite.

When Tolkien set his hand to writing the sequel to *The Hobbit*, at first he only knew that he wanted to have hobbits meet Tom Bombadil, and so he put together a traveling party and sent them into the Old Forest where they met the characters about whom Tolkien had been writing poems for many years. And then ... nothing. He had nowhere for them to go, nothing for them to do. And as many readers have felt, what he'd already had them do was nearly nothing -- it was hard to care much. The events were just one thing after another.

This version of the opening of *Fellowship of the Ring* was the draft that followed artistic logic alone. And, as almost always happens, the draft was empty. Artistic logic does not create great stories, only outlines of stories.

Then, as Tolkien famously explained, he got to the inn at Bree and met a character named Strider. Strider intrigued him -- an unconscious, visceral response -- and in figuring out who Strider was and what he was doing, Tolkien found the *real* story of *Lord of the Rings*.

Still, he left that story-empty section intact, making only one significant change in the story flow. He had Gandalf tell Frodo the story of the original finding of the Ring by Deagol and Smeagol -- and told of how Smeagol became Gollum.

In other words, the only change in that opening sequence that was required to make the novel satisfy that inner, unconscious logic, was to move Gollum to the center of the tale. He was not the hero; nor was he the monster. Instead, he was the center of moral ambiguity, the character who, seeming evil, might also serve the good. Other, lesser characters might also show moral ambiguity (one thinks of Saruman, Theoden, and Denethor), but none is as central to the story as Gollum.

Snape, I believe, is the Gollum of the Harry Potter books. Born at first to be little more than a convenient obstacle and a red herring, he graduates to become the center of moral ambiguity. We cannot know (as we could not with Gollum) which way he will turn. We have seen his malice, but much of it has been justified -- he was more victim than victimizer in his school days, and it was "good guys" who oppressed him. So as we prepare for the final volume in the series, we can see that everything comes down to this: What choice will Snape make?

I do not anticipate that Rowling will push Snape through all of Gollum's paces: Gollum ended up choosing evil, and only inadvertently served the cause of good. There is no reason to think that Rowling's inner logic will echo Tolkien's -- indeed, that is highly unlikely. It is only those who are using artistic logic -- those writers who have consciously imitated Tolkien -- who merely echo his deep choices. Rowling may have learned eclectically from all her literary sources, but she is enthralled by none of them. The Harry Potter books have grown from a conscious plan into an unconscious unfolding of a deeply believed inner universe -- they have become true art rather than mere planned art -- and so Snape, while fulfilling Gollum's literary function, will act out the script that *feels* right to Rowling.

That very fact is actually our key to seeing where Snape's character is going: As we track his progress through the books and see how Rowling uses him, we can discover what he *means* to her as well as what he *does* for the storyline. We may not be able to come up with a definitive answer -- after all, Rowling's unconscious logic may contain twists as yet unrevealed to us -- but we can still come to conclusions that have the ring of truth to them.

I am not proposing that we psychoanalyze Rowling. Fiction is a poor tool for that. Rather I am proposing that we track Snape's progress through the books to see where she has consciously pointed him, book by book, and where it *seems* she found herself *unconsciously* pointing him. It is only when he becomes a deeply important character to Rowling that he also becomes deeply important to us.

Snape's Progress

Rowling is on record as saying that she planned all seven volumes from the beginning. But just how detailed was that plan? Did she, in writing volume one, know exactly what she would do with all the characters who were still around in volume seven? I sincerely doubt it, if only because the tone of the series has changed so dramatically -- darkening, deepening, and lengthening from volume to volume. Rowling is not now the same writer she was at the beginning, and however detailed her outline was, she would have been hampered, if not shackled, by having to stick to an outline she devised when she was still a relative novice.

It is even possible that her "outline" for the final volume was, in its entirety, "Harry has it out with Voldemort."

And even if she had far more details sketched out for the final volume, I'm willing to bet that as she really got to know the characters by writing about them, she changed her ideas about the roles many of them would play later in the series. It will be interesting, when scholars at last have access not only to the books but also to her working notes at every stage, to see how the creativity that emerges in the writing process transformed her plans for the series.

I have read novels where the author went through the normal process of discovering interesting, unplanned things about his characters -- and then reined them in or cut them off so he could fulfil the original outline. Rowling shows no signs of having done such violence to the ideas that come up in the process of writing; on the contrary, each volume has been more willing to "learn" from the books before, which almost certainly means that there are many things in the later books that were not in the original outlines -- and, quite possibly, things originally planned that will no longer happen, or will mean radically different things when they occur.

So in tracking the way Rowling uses and develops Snape through the six volumes we have at present, I believe we will see a character become far more important to the whole series than he was originally intended to be.

And even if his exact role in the overall series *was* plotted from the start, it is certainly true that he is used very differently from book to book.

Stone. In the first volume, Snape's primary role is as decoy. We don't meet him until more than a third of the way through the book -- but that's only because Harry doesn't get to Hogwarts till then. Everything beforehand serves the function of bringing Harry -- and therefore the readers -- from the real, modern world into the wizarding world. Throughout those pages, it is almost all comedy, and even when we get to Hogwarts, we have silliness like Dumbledore saying "a few words ...: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

Indeed, silliness seems to prevail; if Dumbledore had remained the clownish fellow who had everyone sing the school song to whatever melody they chose, it is doubtful many readers would care as much about the series as we do.

In the midst of the silliness, though, Dumbledore does give the warning that signals the beginning of the real story: he warns the students not to go near the "third-floor corridor on the right-hand side" unless they "wish to die a very painful death" (*Stone* 127).

The very next chapter is entitled "The Potions Master" -- like the sixth volume of the series, it is named for Snape. But this is not the Snape of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. He is harsh, he is unfair, he singles Harry out for negative attention, and he ignores Hermione's competence. (He also takes only a single point from Gryffindor for Harry's "cheek" -- in later volumes, point inflation sets in and similar offenses result in ten, then fifty points being deducted).

Snape's nastiness was necessary to further the plot of this volume: There had to be a red herring, someone Harry and his friends could believe in as the likely villain so that the real perpetrator of evil deeds is not suspected.

Thus Snape gets a lot of pages in the second half of the book. When the real villain is revealed, however, we learn that far from Snape being the villain, he was in fact acting to protect the school and, on occasion, to save Harry Potter himself.

Why does he do this? Because Harry's father once saved his life. As Dumbledore explains -- "dreamily," for Rowling is not yet taking Dumbledore seriously -- "I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father's memory in peace" (*Stone* 300).

To me, this is all the evidence I need that Rowling did *not* know the details of Snape's relationship with James Potter when she wrote the first volume. While it is quite believable that Dumbledore would not choose to tell Harry that Snape also felt guilty for having inadvertently provoked Voldemort into killing Harry's parents, it is *not* believable that Dumbledore, knowing the whole story, would "dreamily" say "Then he could go back to hating your father's memory in peace." It is too light, trivial, and dismissive a thing for Dumbledore to say about Snape, if he (and Rowling) had then known Snape's role as a trusted confederate and former Death Eater responsible for Voldemort hearing of the prophecy that provoked his murder of Harry's parents.

Chamber.

In the second volume, Rowling still is not taking her own fictional world entirely seriously. In the Hogwarts of the later books, it would simply not be believable that Lockhart would be hired in the first place, or that he would remain in his position for more than a few days. Rowling clearly recognized some of these believability problems from the earlier books, when later on she goes to some lengths to give us Dumbledore's justification for keeping Trelawney on the faculty.

Even though *Chamber* gets Harry to Hogwarts far more quickly than the first, there are far fewer references to Snape. That's because his role in the novel is to direct suspicion toward Harry Potter, and to serve as comic relief when he is enlisted by Gilderoy Lockhart in the dueling demonstration.

Snape's last appearance in the book is more than seventy pages before the end, when Draco suggests that Snape ought to be made Headmaster to replace the suspended Dumbledore. Snape's reaction to this is to reassure Draco that Dumbledore will probably be back soon enough, "though he couldn't suppress a thin-lipped smile," and he "smirked as he swept off" (*Chamber* 267).

This is *not* the Snape who can hide his thoughts and feelings from Voldemort -- rather this is the Snape that is still nothing more than a device to annoy and harass Harry and his friends. *This* version of Snape covets not just the Dark Arts position, but the Headmaster's office as well. There is no trace of this sort of trivializing of Snape in the last few volumes.

Before that, we saw Snape when Harry and Ron sneak past him under the Invisibility Cloak -- and Snape conveniently sneezes so he doesn't hear their passage (*Chamber* 259). And before *this* trivial use of Snape, the last use of him was in the duel where Harry's ability to speak to snakes was revealed (*Chamber* 193).

It is clear in *Chamber* that Snape is definitely a minor character, only slightly more important than most other professors, and far less important than Hagrid. There is no promise here of what he's going to become. He is merely a caricature left over from the first volume, ready to be trotted out when he is needed ... to sneeze.

Azkaban. In *Azkaban*, the series takes its first serious turn toward the depth of the later volumes. Sirius Black plays the part that Snape played in the first volume -- he's the red herring that seems to be a villain and then turns out to be trying to help Harry. But this time the story centers around Harry discovering far more about his father, and the most important character is actually Lupin, who guides Harry through his discovery that he has the same Patronus as his father, and that James Potter was part of a group of four very talented magical pranksters whose games sometimes got out of hand.

When Ron's pathetic rat Scabbers turns out to be the animagus who actually committed the crimes Sirius Black was convicted of, we see the best example of Rowling taking something very minor from an earlier book and investing it with far more importance. Scabbers is barely present in *Chamber*, but as soon as Rowling knows that he matters after all, he's brought back in full force. When Rowling decides a character is going to be important at the climax, she moves him to the forefront -- which, with Scabbers, consists of his ongoing struggle with Hermione's cat. What seems like a running gag actually serves to keep us aware of a character who is going to be revealed as a villain in the great "reveal" scene.

Snape is important in this plot, but primarily as a complicating factor. He hates Lupin but still prepares the potion that keeps him from turning wolf at the full moon; yet he gives very strong hints to the students about what Lupin really is, and it is Snape who provides the last-minute jeopardy, turning Sirius Black over to the authorities and lobbying for his immediate execution.

As with the first volume, Snape's role is important in the immediate plot, but not yet in the long-range story. It's as if Rowling came up with the idea that Snape's life was once saved by James Potter solely to make it believable, in *Stone*, that someone as malicious as Snape would have been trying to protect Harry after all. Perhaps Rowling thought more about how such a thing could come to be and came up with the details of the foursome who created the Marauders' Map and how James Potter saved him -- from a prank that was heading for something really ugly.

Snape remains in this volume as vindictive as ever, but at least now his malice seems more justified. We also begin to see more clearly that he is becoming an ironic figure: As in *Chamber*, he constantly catches Harry in the middle of some kind of mischief, but whereas in *Chamber* he invariably assigned the worst possible motive to Harry's actions, even when his version was absurdly, obviously wrong, in *Azkaban*, Snape's accusations against Harry are often very accurate. Harry really *is* violating rules, and not trivial ones; Harry really *is* constantly lying; Harry really *is* so arrogant that he thinks that he knows better than anyone, and withholds the truth about what he's doing even from Dumbledore.

Thus Snape is moving closer to the center of Rowling's attention. She is using him now, not just as an obstacle (though he still is one), but also as a tool for pointing out Harry's own moral ambiguity. Harry leaps to conclusions; Harry deceives some of the very people he ought to trust most; Harry has contempt for rules even when they exist to protect him and others. Snape's fury at Harry may have begun with the malice that James Potter earned, but it is Harry's own fault that Snape is able to find so very much ammunition to use against him. Rowling is intertwining Snape and Harry in a far more complicated way than before.

Goblet. When this fourth volume opens with what amounts to a summary of the story-to-date (which Rowling no longer attempts in the later books), it is significant, I think, that Snape does not even rate a mention. Nothing he has done in the previous books is actually important to understanding what is now happening. But this is the last time that is true.

For even though Snape barely appears in this book, in the scene in the cemetery, where the Death Eaters assemble to watch Voldemort resume his physical body and, they assume, kill Harry Potter, we get our first glimmer of Snape's role as double agent: Voldemort's trusted servant, reporting to him about Hogwarts, and Dumbledore's spy, reporting to him about Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Not that Snape is present -- he is only referred to obliquely; and the most obvious reference, that *seems* to refer to him, in fact refers to Barty Crouch, who is masquerading as Mad-Eye Moody. (So once again Snape is a red herring, distracting Harry from the real enemy.)

The *real* statement of Snape's new role comes when, near the very end of the book, Dumbledore asks Harry and Snape to shake hands as loyal compatriots in the struggle against Voldemort, and then turns to Snape and says, "You know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready ... if you are prepared ..." (*Goblet* 713). Snape turns pale and says "I am"; then he leaves to join Voldemort and pretend to be his loyal servant.

Among Snape's few appearances earlier in the book is what is arguably his cruelest moment, when he humiliates Hermione about something she can't help, her personal appearance (*Goblet* 300).

It is also in this book that Snape gives his clearest list of complaints to Harry, right to his face: "To me, Potter, you are nothing but a nasty little boy who considers the rules to be beneath him" (*Goblet* 516). Snape accuses Harry of lying, whereupon Harry lies to him repeatedly. Snape is not unjustified when he threatens Harry with veritaserum -- and both Harry and the readers understand that if Harry were forced to tell the truth to Snape, the truth would *not* vindicate Harry the way it would have in *Chamber*.

For the first time in the series, the reader can't help but recognize that Snape has a point. For the first time, Harry's shenanigans are seriously questioned -- and Snape does the questioning. This is how Rowling prepares us to see Snape as being something other than malicious, and we are not appalled or incredulous when Dumbledore trusts Snape with his mission among the Death Eaters.

Phoenix. Snape's new role in the story -- as the member of the Order of the Phoenix who is fulfilling the most dangerous assignment of all (at the moment, at least) actually keeps him out of the book for a long time. He shows up briefly in page 69, where the kids talk about how much they loathe him, and then surfaces again only as potions teacher at Hogwarts, where he evanesces a potion that Harry did, in

fact, botch (232-234). It's annoying, but not as vicious as things Snape has done in the past. He shows up again on page 309, again merely as a teacher.

Why is he so invisible? Because Dolores Umbridge is filling the role of persecutor now, providing a powerful contrast with the relatively mild punishments Snape inflicts. The contrast is, I think, deliberate: Rowling is rehabilitating Snape a little, making him seem better than before because Umbridge is so much worse -- and for so little reason. Snape, at least, had some justification for resenting Harry; Umbridge is simply evil.

When, on page 362, we begin Umbridge's visit to Snape's class, we see Snape acting with dignity. Gone are the smirks that afflicted him constantly in the early books. Now his answers are quiet, his expression unfathomable; when his lip curls, it is with impatience at genuine stupidity. He still wipes out Harry's potion yet again and assigns him an extra essay, but now we see him as a man with some self-control, and his punishments as a mere annoyance compared to Umbridge's sadism.

On page 400 we catch a glimpse of Snape overbooking the Quidditch field for Slytherin's team, and then don't see him again until he comes to Harry with the news that Snape is going to teach him occlumency, at Dumbledore's request.

Then begins a rather intense series of scenes between Harry and Snape, as Harry resists Snape's lessons and Dumbledore's orders (typical of Harry) and does not practice occlumency, preferring to keep having his dreams of the room where a great and important secret is being kept. When we finally discover what was really going on with these dreams, we realize that Harry was being suckered by Voldemort, and if he had paid more attention to Snape, things might have turned out better.

Meanwhile, though, we learn considerably more about Snape's character -- including Harry's indecent penetration of Snape's secret memories (*Phoenix* 639-650). The result of this act is that Snape discontinues the lessons in occlumency, Harry is appalled at his father's cruelty and rushes to Sirius Black to help with his disillusionment -- and the readers now have vastly more sympathy with Snape than ever before.

This is where Snape turns: Rowling has elevated him to become a complex character rather than the iconic figure he had been before. We actually care about him as a person, and not just because of what he might do to interfere with Harry's plans. Snape is the hero of his own story now, and we are interested in seeing what becomes of him for his own sake. It is only now that Snape becomes worthy, as a fictional character, of playing the role that is being prepared for him in the final volume.

On page 833, Harry's and Dumbledore's assessment of Snape is patently unfair. After telling Dumbledore that "Snape stopped giving me Occlumency lessons! ... He threw me out of his office!" he goes on:

"Snape made it worse, my scar always hurt worse after lessons with him --" Harry remembered Ron's thoughts on the subject and plunged on. "How do you know he wasn't trying to soften me up for Voldemort, make it easier for him to get inside my --"

"I trust Severus Snape," said Dumbledore simply. "But I forgot -- another old man's mistake -- that some wounds run too deep for the healing. I thought Professor Snape could overcome his feelings about your father -- I was wrong."

Harry is grossly unfair -- he neglects to point out that Snape threw him out of his office *after* Harry indecently pried into a hidden memory that Snape clearly did not want him to see. And Harry also neglects to point out that even when Snape was teaching him, Harry didn't really try to learn how to blank his mind.

Dumbledore is unfair to answer Harry's wild accusations with the mere assertion that he trusts Snape, followed by an irrelevant statement that seems to throw the blame for the failure of the lessons on Snape alone, because he couldn't "overcome his feelings about" James Potter.

I don't know how many readers reacted to this passage as I did -- perhaps most took these statements at face value. But I found myself mentally defending Snape exactly as, in previous book, I mentally defended Harry against Snape's wild accusations. For me, at least, Rowling had succeeded in momentarily transferring my allegiance to Snape.

Prince. Volume six is Snape's book, to put it simply. He is the title character. The volume begins and ends with his actions. Throughout the story, Harry has a close relationship with Snape's younger self through his marginal notes in a potions book. Thus we learn to experience Snape as a brilliant, creative young wizard -- though we don't know it's Snape, of course, until after he has killed Dumbledore.

Ay, there's the rub -- Snape does kill Harry's sole remaining father figure.

Hermione repeatedly points out to Harry that whatever he learns from the Half-Blood Prince's book, he could have learned just by paying better attention to Snape's lessons right from the start. It becomes perfectly clear to us that if Harry had not been distracted from Snape's teaching by his loathing for the man, he would have become a better wizard.

At the same time, it was hardly Harry's fault that Snape goaded him mercilessly before Harry had even had time to do anything wrong. But just as Snape never got over his treatment at the hands of James Potter and friends, so Harry couldn't get past Snape's malice in order to learn from him. Snape's loathing for James Potter didn't stop Snape from becoming a powerful wizard with skills that, in one area at least, Occlumency, surpassed those of Voldemort. But Harry's loathing of Snape *did* stop him from learning the very things that Snape was uniquely capable of teaching him.

This volume draws Snape upward to the level of Dumbledore in importance to the story. Meanwhile Ron and Hermione become less central -- they are shut out of the core story of this volume, serving more as distractions and comic relief. It's as if Rowling has to keep reminding herself to include them, because the energy of the story is now being generated by Harry, Dumbledore, Snape, Draco, and Voldemort himself. Harry's enemies are, in fact, more important to this story than his friends.

But that's partly because this is the first volume whose story doesn't actually end. None of the major problems in this book are resolved -- only the relatively trivial problem of the identity of the Half-Blood Prince. Instead of being self-contained, this volume is rather a long first act, setting up the final volume of the series. There are no important new characters introduced; rather, the existing cast is thrust forward into new, more demanding, more mature roles.

And when that happened, Snape came into his own. From the red herring role in the first volume to the complicator, obstacle, and even comic relief he was in the next few, Snape has forced his way into being one of the most complex and interesting characters in the series. He matters now.

Which is why we can be sure that Rowling has no intention of throwing him away. If he is now merely another Death Eater, serving Voldemort faithfully, all that preparation was essentially wasted. We've seen what happened to Wormtail after his prominent role at the climax of Azkaban -- once he joined Voldemort, he showed up now and then, but we didn't actually *care* about him. Rowling wasted no effort trying to make him into somebody.

Thus Rowling's elevation of Snape into major-character status only makes artistic sense if Snape's actions in the next book are pivotal. And his actions will only be pivotal if they are in doubt. And they will only be in doubt if we are given clear reasons to believe that his killing of Dumbledore might *not* have been the evil action that Harry and his friends assume it to have been.

Speculations on Character

Another approach to predicting how Snape will act in the final book is to try to understand the traits that dominate his character.

Snape As Slytherin. Slytherins are not necessarily evil -- what typifies them is ambition.

Persons of limited ability can only satisfy their ambition by attaching themselves to someone stronger who will raise them up. Thus ambition leads to slavish loyalty -- but to immediate abandonment when the person they have attached to seems to be slipping or failing.

We saw plenty of that during Voldemort's time as one-seventh of a soul, after he "died" from the rebound of his killing curse on baby Harry. A few remained loyal, clinging to their faith in Voldemort's supremacy; others denied him immediately, lest they be brought down by his fall.

Slytherins, however, make untrustworthy servants *and* untrustworthy masters. Because they are ambitious, they will resent the one they serve -- Voldemort's followers, except perhaps a few demented ones like Bellatrix -- do not love him; on the contrary, they hate him, because they resent him for overshadowing them. Each *wants* to be supreme; it is only because Voldemort exists that their ambition is suppressed.

And Voldemort will also resent everyone who helps him. He wants to stand alone. Once he stands without significant enemies or rivals, he will certainly destroy everyone whose help he depended on to reach that position, because it will be unbearable to him to be in anyone's debt.

Now let's consider Snape as an exemplar of the Slytherin personality. Quite independently of any connection with Voldemort -- before he was a Death Eater, in other words -- Snape's ambition led him to style himself, albeit privately, as "The Half-blood Prince." He was brilliant and knew he was brilliant; he created new spells and invented new potions. He learned occlumency to the degree that he could hide his thoughts from anyone.

No wonder his humiliation during school days at the hands of Sirius Black and James Potter could not be forgotten, and colored his response to James's son -- especially since one of the unhappiest memories was an occasion when James afflicted him with a spell that Severus Snape himself had invented.

Snape's ambition is more telling when it comes to his relationship with Voldemort. The second-most-ambitious wizard in the world will not be Voldemort's *servant*, but his rival. No one will suffer more frustration at Voldemort's supremacy than the person who believes that position is his by right. In fact, it is no accident that Snape's background echoes Voldemort's in being the child of a miserable mating between a cruel Muggle and a lovestruck wizard woman. Both of them loathe "Mudbloods" precisely because they are themselves tainted.

But they are definitely not the same person. Voldemort, in his youthful days as Tom Riddle, had the self-control to make himself seem a model student at Hogwarts -- he became head boy even as he was already committing murders and creating horcruxes. He was attractive and gathered followers around him.

Snape, on the other hand, was vain enough not to bother altering his appearance in order to seem attractive to others. This might mark him as less ambitious than Voldemort; or it might mark him as being more proud, at least in his youth, for he would not stoop to seek the approval of anyone he did not respect. Perhaps he is less ambitious than Voldemort -- or more proud.

What is certain is that if there is anyone among the Slytherins of the wizarding world who would hate, resent, and happily work against Voldemort, it is Snape. If he serves Voldemort, it will be with resentment at having to be subservient; but that is also true if he serves Dumbledore.

Knowing that Voldemort is immortal must be exceptionally galling to an ambitious wizard -- Snape knows he will spend his *whole life* subservient to Voldemort, even if Voldemort doesn't eliminate him. His ambition will never, never be satisfied.

So if Slytherin ambition really is the primary key to Snape's character, then he himself has no loyalty to anyone. He hides his feelings from all, and pretends loyalty to both Dumbledore and Voldemort, biding his time. However much Snape hates Harry Potter, he will not allow permanent harm to come to the only person who might have the power to defeat Voldemort.

In this light, it makes perfect sense that Snape sees Harry as weak, careless, vain, grandiose, and not particularly talented. Because of the magics of other people that protect Harry, the boy wizard has so far bested, or at least evaded, Voldemort at every encounter. Snape may well believe that if he manages to be present at the deadly final encounter between Harry and Voldemort, then he might be able to turn circumstances toward satisfying his own ambition:

1. If Harry wins, Snape would believe he could certainly kill Harry, having no magical bond with him the way Voldemort has. No linking of wands, no connection of minds through the scar -- Snape can simply finish him off and stand alone in Voldemort's place.
2. If Voldemort wins, but is seriously weakened by the encounter, Snape could strike instantly and fatally, killing Voldemort himself.
3. If Voldemort wins, and is all the stronger for it, then Snape can continue to present himself as Voldemort's loyal servant, and at least survive until he can find some other way to best Voldemort -- or until Voldemort eliminates him precisely because he owes him so much.

This view of Snape is not inconsistent with anything Rowling has shown us of the man. This might be precisely how she is planning to use him at the climax of the seventh book.

In that case, we must view Snape as having been a triple agent, deceiving both Dumbledore and Voldemort.

But Rowling will then have the obligation of explaining to us why Dumbledore trusted him so completely.

Snape As Love-Starved Genius. Let's leave in place our assumptions about Snape's ambitions, but now let's say that a hunger for love and/or respect is another determining factor in his character.

When Harry cast his *protego* spell against Snape during an attempt to teach him occlumency, and was given a rush of Snape's memories, what did he see?

"A hook-nosed man was shouting at a cowering woman, while a small dark-haired boy cried in a corner ... A greasy-haired teenager sat alone in a dark bedroom, pointing his wand at the ceiling, shooting down flies ... A girl was laughing as a scrawny boy tried to mount a bucking broomstick ..." (Phoenix 591-592)

It is tempting to read into this a profound loneliness -- the pride in Snape hates humiliation, but is humiliation perhaps worse in front of women? Or is he merely starved for respect?

Or is it parental love that he needs? Is that what he gets from Dumbledore? What he loves about Dumbledore is not that he is good, but that he shows respect and trust to Snape?

Far from being love-starved, however, Snape seems to seek to be alone. When he has the respect and devotion of Draco and his fellow students, Snape definitely favors them -- but he is quite capable of being stern with them when he feels like it, and there is scant sign of him sharing intimate friendship with anyone. If he wanted love and respect, he could have dressed to conform while he was a student and offered an occasional smile or sign of warmth; it seems more likely that that particular part of him has been shut down.

Snape Surly Good Guy. Maybe Snape secretly loves the Good and loathes Evil. Perhaps this will lead him to save or help Harry Potter, or destroy Voldemort, at the end. Perhaps this is why he has served Dumbledore all along -- including, finally, killing him when that formed part of Dumbledore's plan.

By that view, one could see all of Snape's meanness as an act. But it's an act he maintains so consistently, relentlessly, and egregiously that one has to think it's an act that he enjoys -- which would mean it wasn't an act at all.

Snape is so consistently, needlessly cruel and unfair that he is obviously ruled by malice. There are plenty of examples in his treatment of Harry, but the example that sticks out most to me is his response when a stray curse has left Hermione with overgrown front teeth. "I see no difference," says Snape, sending her away in tears. To needlessly hurt a socially powerless child, however annoying she might be, is a cruelty that is hard to explain away.

So maybe he is a good person who is also mean. Doesn't that also describe the way we are expected to view James Potter and Sirius Black? Black was a "good guy" even though he once, as a cruel joke, sent Severus Snape down a tunnel leading to a ravaging werewolf - an act of attempted voluntary manslaughter at best.

James Potter knew this was going too far and stopped Snape just in time, saving him -- but it was also James Potter who maliciously, for nothing more than his own and Sirius's amusement, dangled Snape upside down, exposing his dirty underwear and skinny body in front of several girls.

If people can behave this way and still be "good guys" in these books (though to my mind, Sirius Black stopped being a good guy as soon as I knew these things about him), then one can only admit that Snape might be a good guy, too.

One can more easily justify Snape's meanness than that of James Potter and Sirius Black. Snape is ashamed of his own ancestry and therefore especially despises "Mudbloods," and Hermione *can* be an annoying know-it-all. As a know-it-all himself you'd think Snape might be a bit kinder; but it's just as logical that what he hates in Hermione is precisely her resemblance to himself; since she is an unattractive (at that point in the series) know-it-all, and so was he, he hates her as he hates those aspects in himself.

Or perhaps he hates her because, despite her brains and mudblood ancestry and unattractiveness, she has found some very close friends. Perhaps his malicious treatment of her has to do with the fact that *she* was accepted by Harry Potter and became part of his group, while Severus Snape was never accepted by Harry's father, or admitted into *his* group.

As to Snape's malice toward Harry, one can find some justification in Harry's resemblance to his father, his contempt for the rules, and the awe that others hold him in. To Snape, this was simply James Potter all over again -- and except for not being anything like the outstanding student his father was, Harry seems to go out of his way to justify Snape's opinion of him.

So, from what we see of Snape's pointlessly malicious actions, he is somewhat more justified than James Potter and Sirius Black ever were in their treatment of *him*. If we admit them as "good guys," then we certainly cannot rule Sirius out, at least not on that basis alone. (It was fine that Sirius and Lupin both repented their bad acts toward Snape, having learned to be better people. But their cruelty to him arose out of their nature, and not out of any harm Snape had done them, while Snape has genuine grievances against them, and damage done to him in adolescence does not evaporate just because the perpetrators later regretted what they did. To say he should have gotten over it is to hold him to a higher standard than most people are able to achieve.)

We have seen Snape's malice and vindictiveness, but what we never see from him is actual evil. When Snape punishes Harry, it is usually for genuine offenses, and if the punishment seems excessive, it is never actually cruel. In case we miss the point, Dolores Umbridge's vicious physical punishment of Harry during detention shows us what a truly evil person might do with a position of absolute power over an annoying child.

The line between meanness and evil seems to be clearly drawn in the moral universe of the Harry Potter series. As Bellatrix says to Harry when he casts the Cruciatius spell on her in the Ministry of Magic: "Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?" she yelled.... 'You need to *mean* them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain -- to enjoy it -- righteous anger won't hurt me for long -- I'll show you how it is done, shall I? I'll give you a lesson --'" (*Phoenix* 810).

We know Bellatrix is evil -- she drove Neville's parents insane with the cruciatius and took pleasure from it. And that is the dividing line, where ambition and pride cross over into true evil -- that the death and suffering of others become ends in themselves rather than merely means to an end. This is what marked Voldemort from the start, even before he came to Hogwarts as Tom Riddle. He was a torturer simply for the pleasure of it; when he killed, he took trophies, because it was an occasion he wanted to remember.

This was also the dividing line for Draco Malfoy. He thought he was very bad, and he had attempted to cast unforgivable curses before. His feeble attempts to murder Dumbledore -- the cursed necklace, the poisoned bottle of mead -- had shown his reluctance to do such a deed: It had to be kept at a remove. When he stood before his intended victim, face to face, he could not bring himself to do it.

Draco was malicious, but he had not surrendered his human dread of murder; he had kept shreds of decency that now tripped him up. And this was so even though it would have been a murder, not simply out of malice, but required in order to save his own life and the lives of his parents. People who are far from evil have chosen to kill under such circumstances. Yet he could not do it. Therefore he was still redeemable.

Consider Snape in this light, and we have no conclusive evidence that he had ever crossed the line into true evil. Not that other characters in the books would agree with that statement. When Harry is discussing Snape's killing of Dumbledore with other members of the Order of the Phoenix, he says, "Snape passed Voldemort the information that made Voldemort hunt down my mum and dad. Then Snape told Dumbledore he hadn't realized what he was doing, he was really sorry he'd done it, sorry that they were dead."

"They all stared at him.

"And Dumbledore believed that?" said Lupin incredulously. 'Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James was dead? Snape *hated* James'" (*Prince* 616).

Nobody in the room argues with Lupin's statement, but Harry himself should have known better than to regard that as a serious answer. Remember that Snape felt a debt to James Potter for having kept him from dying at the hands of a werewolf (Lupin himself, ironically, as recounted in *Azkaban*), and repaid the debt by repeatedly saving Harry from Quirrell's attempts to kill him in *Stone*. If Snape felt he owed that debt to James Potter, is it likely he would deliberately have provided Voldemort with information that would provoke him to murder James and Lily? And even if we suppose that Snape actually felt indebted partly *because* he had indirectly caused James's and Lily's deaths, that *still* contradicts Lupin's opinion that it was impossible that Snape could be sorry James was dead.

In fact, the whole scene on pages 615 and 616 of *Prince* consists of people talking each other into a firm belief that Snape had always been deceiving Dumbledore, with no one advancing the possibility that just as Harry had done awful things to Dumbledore *at Dumbledore's command*, Snape might have killed him for the same reason. It is hardly surprising that they would be unable to make that mental leap, partly because Dumbledore was so newly dead, and partly because they all had disliked, despised, or resented Snape for their own reasons. It seemed to them so much likelier that Snape, a reformed Death Eater, was actually a double agent who had been deceiving even Dumbledore, than that Dumbledore's murder at Snape's hand had been planned from the time that Draco Malfoy was assigned to do the murder.

For that is the only viable alternative explanation for Snape's killing of Dumbledore. When, near the beginning of *Prince*, Snape takes the Unbreakable Vow to kill Dumbledore himself if Draco could not do it (56), it can be taken at face value, or it can be taken as something Snape agreed to do only because he already knew that it was part of Dumbledore's plan to die.

We can speculate about why Dumbledore might plan such a thing, whether or not he is going to be resurrected: Perhaps he believed that if Voldemort fully believed that Dumbledore was dead, he would act carelessly and prematurely, underestimating the power that resided in Harry because of the purity of the love inside him and all the bonds of love that surrounded him. Perhaps he thought that as long as Harry believed Dumbledore would always bail him out in a crisis, Harry would not prepare himself as intensely as he should for the inevitable confrontation with Voldemort.

Evidence

The only evidence I'm aware of that Snape might have been assigned by Dumbledore to make that Unbreakable Vow and then act on it, killing him on the tower, is deliberately inconclusive. It comes from a conversation between Dumbledore and Snape that was overheard by Hagrid, who reluctantly told Harry about it. Rowling could hardly have made the report more unreliable and less conclusive: Hagrid isn't the best witness, and his telling is distorted by his own desire to minimize the importance of what he heard:

"Well -- I jus' heard Snape sayin' Dumbledore took too much fer granted an' maybe he -- Snape -- didn' wan' ter do it anymore --"

"Do what?"

"I dunno, Harry, it sounded like Snape was feelin' a bit overworked, tha's all -- anyway, Dumbledore told him flat out he'd agreed to do it an' that was all there was to it. Pretty firm with him.. An' then he said summat about' Snape makin' investigations in his House, in Slytherin'" (*Prince* 405-6).

Hagrid has his own lame theory about what this conversation might have meant, but it's obvious nonsense. But we readers, who know about Snape's Unbreakable Vow to protect Draco and kill Dumbledore if Draco failed to carry out the assignment, can easily see that what Hagrid overheard *might* have been Snape's insistence that he did not want to carry out the plan to kill Dumbledore, and Dumbledore reminding him that he must do it or die himself. The sentence "You took an Unbreakable Vow" is just the sort of thing that Hagrid might repeat as "Dumbledore told him flat out he'd agreed ter do it an' that was all there was to it."

And the need for Snape to investigate Slytherin House was because Snape had to figure out, without Draco telling him directly, just what his plan for killing Dumbledore *was*. The fact that Snape did *not* know it nearly kept him from being in the right place at the right time to fulfil the terms of his Unbreakable Vow and kill Dumbledore.

If this was not the meaning of what Hagrid overheard, then what else could it have been?

After Dumbledore is dead, Harry Potter never thinks of or speaks about what Hagrid overheard. In effect, Rowling drops this information into the middle of a nice thick book, nearly four hundred pages after the taking of the Unbreakable Vow and nearly two hundred pages before the event that the conversation might have anticipated, and none of the characters gives it great significance or brings it up when it might provide an alternate explanation for Snape's behavior. Rowling has played fair with us, she has tipped her hand, but only for a brief moment, in a blur, expecting us to forget it as thoroughly as Harry does, because Hagrid's telling is so confusing that we never hear directly what was actually said.

If the words "Unbreakable Vow" had been said at that point, we would have remembered, and we would know that Snape was trying to get out of killing Dumbledore. The conversation that Hagrid overheard was, in effect, Snape's equivalent of saying, "Let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, thy will, not mine, be done."

In light of that conversation, I believe that we can actually be quite sure that Snape, in killing Dumbledore, was doing his will, exactly as Harry had done Dumbledore's will by forcing him to drink all the liquid in the cave, which is what weakened Dumbledore so much that he could hardly stand when Draco faced him. Obeying Dumbledore tested the moral fibre of his dearest friends -- they had to choose between doing good (i.e., not killing people, not forcing them to drink slow-acting poisons) and being loyal and obedient to him.

What Will Snape Do Now?

Knowing that it was Dumbledore's will that Snape kill him does *not* tell us much about what Snape will do in the next book. Like Gollum, he is still unpredictable.

After all, Rowling goes to great pains in *Prince* to show us that Dumbledore is not always right. The locket he nearly died to obtain is not one of Voldemort's four missing horcruxes; he makes other mistakes and admits them. He might have counted on Snape's continuing to obey him and follow his plans after killing him; but will he?

Snape certainly knew Dumbledore's plan up to the point of killing him -- but did he know *anything* about what Dumbledore intended to do (or have someone else do) after he was dead? Though Snape is a gifted occlumens, that does not mean that Voldemort will *never* be able to penetrate Snape's mind; therefore it is most likely Dumbledore told Snape nothing more than Snape needed to know.

Thus Snape may now feel himself to be a free agent. Even if he would gladly continue to help Dumbledore accomplish his purposes, he can't do much if he doesn't know what Dumbledore's plans are. He may even conclude that whatever Dumbledore's plan was, it must have failed, and now Snape must make his own accommodation with Voldemort ... or wait for whatever opportunity presents itself, as I suggested before.

What we do know is this: In Snape's last contacts with Harry, he repeatedly saves the boy he despises so much, and gives him advice that is undoubtedly going to be crucial to Harry's surviving or prevailing in his final confrontation with Voldemort: He must learn to hide his thoughts and cast spells without speaking them aloud or even thinking them in such a way that the "most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen" might discover them in time to block them (*Prince* 26).

In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Snape is the title character; his vow at the beginning and his murder of Dumbledore near the end frame the story; the book he annotated succeeds in doing what Snape himself could never do in person -- teach Harry to be an accomplished potionmaker. One can argue that despite all distractions, the sixth volume of the series is *about* Snape.

It is highly unlikely that Rowling would do all this if Snape were not to be important in the final book. Rowling has carefully avoided letting us know, with certainty, just what motivates Snape's actions; but she has also kept Snape from ever crossing the line into evil. Thus we will, in all likelihood, come to the climax of the final book, not knowing what Snape will do in the moment of crisis.

My own prediction is that Snape will reveal himself to be as loyal to Dumbledore as Harry Potter himself; in fact, I go farther, and offer the thought that Rowling will have Snape give his life in the process of helping Harry Potter prevail in the final battle. There are several reasons I believe this -- though I suspect one of the major ones is simply that that is how I, as a novelist myself, would use the character of Snape.

My other reasons for believing this are simple enough:

1. Rowling has built him up so much, in the fifth and sixth volumes, that she must be planning for him to play a major role in the climax of the series.
2. Rowling has laid the groundwork (in Hagrid's report of the overheard conversation) for revealing to Harry that Snape has been loyal to Dumbledore all along.
3. By having Dumbledore refuse to explain his reasons for trusting Snape, Rowling has, in effect, promised us that we *will* find out the reason, and it will be far more convincing than the lame reasons that the Order of the Phoenix speculates about at the end of *Prince*.
4. There is no other character whose sacrifice would be so powerful *and* acceptable to readers. Of course she could have Ron or Hermione or Ginny sacrifice themselves, but they've all been in jeopardy before, and acted nobly, and I think Rowling has no desire to torment her loyal readers like that. As for Harry dying in the process of killing Voldemort -- well, she could do that, but she won't enjoy going through the rest of her life without a single literate person ever speaking to her again.

And aside from those four, there is no character whose noble death would mean as much as Snape's, once his loyalty is revealed. Rowling has set him up for sacrifice.

5. Rowling has made Snape so malicious, so unfair, so vindictive, so cruel to Harry and his friends over the course of the first six volumes that, even though we have been given some justifications for his actions, it would be very difficult for her to bring him through the final confrontation alive -- for she would then have the problem of deciding how Snape and Harry will treat each other after Snape behaves nobly.

What is she going to do, have Snape wash his hair and, now that he doesn't have to act so bad, give Harry a big old hug and say, "I knew you could do it, Harry, my lad!"

Not that there wouldn't be a precedent: At the end of the *Star Wars* trilogy, George Lucas shows us Darth Vader, a mass murderer and war criminal, so completely redeemed by the act of saving Luke's life that his soul appears as the moral equal of Yoda and Obi-wan, when they all appear to Luke at the Ewok sock hop.

If Lucas can get away with such an absurd moral turnaround, I suppose Rowling can make Snape be nice -- or maybe have him still be a bit snippy but good-at-heart. I think Rowling has more integrity as an artist than Lucas, however, and we'll see no such nonsense. If Snape does live, he will still be Snape. But I think he will not live.

Snape's offering himself as a noble sacrifice, to save the world from Voldemort and, more specifically, to save the life of the undeserving (in his view) son of one enemy and godson of another, would satisfy Snape's ambition for greatness and recognition and honor. His name would go down in history as one of the greatest of wizards. It's the only motive that would get a Slytherin to act so nobly -- but for that very reason it is true to Snape's character.

Like Gollum in *Lord of the Rings*, Snape is not the character we are rooting for, but he may be the character whose moral struggle means the most to us in the end. And if, like Gollum, Snape dies in the process of bringing down the Dark Lord, we will feel, not pleasure in Snape's downfall, but a wistful longing that things might have turned out differently for him.