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## Mythic Circle #19

Tina Cooper

C.I.S. Lowentrout

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# The Mythic Circle #19

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Tina Cooper & C.I.S. Lowentrout, Editors

Table of Contents

THE THUNDERSLAMMERS by Christopher A. Zackey . . . . . 1
FEATHERS IN THE WIND by Lloyd Alan Fletcher . . . . . 5
USED FURNITURE by Bill Embly . . . . . 11
JUST IN THE AFTER by Kyle Jarrard . . . . . 15
LIVE-IN HELP by Margaret L. Carter . . . . . 19
Amber by Corrine DeWinter . . . . . 23
FLIGHT by Tim Scott . . . . . 24
MOVING ON by Tom Liberman . . . . . 25
Fire by David Sparenberg . . . . . 28
Transformation of the Dragon and Book of Kings by David Sparenberg . . . . . 29
THE KRAKEN CUP by Douglas A. Rossman . . . . . 30
Europa by John Grey . . . . . 32
God of the Dragging Feet by Sue Nevill . . . . . 33
Moon Marks by Sue Nevill . . . . . 34
Editorial/Letters of Comment . . . . . 34
ONCE UPON A PRINCE by David Sandner . . . . . 36
THE THREE CROWNED FLAME by David Sparenberg . . . . . 37

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# THE THUNDERSLAMMERS

*Christopher A. Zackey*

Two individuals stood on the Interbranch Transit platform at the Apricot Flat stop, somewhere in West Frondland. Out from them, the jungle stretched endlessly, not only north, south, east and west, but also up and down. There was no land, only tree interplaited to tree, like a climbing apparatus in a children's playground. The insufferably humid realm seemed to thud like a huge, drowsy heart.

"Are you going far into the interior?" Capst Fresen asked, his eyes insufferably kind.

Prisniffy Opbobble flinched from him.

"Yes, very," she said, in a voice that both nipped a bite and pulsed despair.

She was funny-looking, Capst judged. Her body was knotty, or maybe flumphy, like a dust mop or a wild dishtowel. She moved hunched in a slump and had a long nose that was always sniffing at everything, even though her yellowish hair was long and kind of pretty. He didn't think she was a human. But then, neither was he. He was a zend.

"I might just not ever come back again," she said defiantly, as she eyed his handsome, perfectly symmetrical slimness, and, above all, those unabashedly compassionate eyes. The young zend seemed done all in brown; brown clothes, milk chocolate brown hair, a face like the shell of a tan-colored egg.

"I might not come back, either, though I'm not sure it would be of my option," he confided, jokingly, in a voice gentle enough to catch birds with.

Prisniffy's raglike fibres hurt all over. Why did he have to torment her so, by being so kind? Her face wrenched up horribly, like a disgruntled dishcloth. She knew she wasn't a human, a zend, or an animal. No, she was just some old rag thing, a sort of scarecrow that some children made out of old scraps of cloth one day. They called her "the prisniffy." But she had somehow come alive, and rag-things needed to be loved, too. She had never had anybody love her, ever. They had just made fun of her. But there was no use being lemon-faced about it. She scrunched, and sniffed some leaves.

Two eggplant-shaped wicker hanging basket-chairs whizzed up on pulleys running along a cable. In the Frondland public transit system, these were the equivalent of subway cars. Capst hopped one.

"See you, Prisniffy," he waved cheerfully, having telephated her name. The rag-thing shook as if windblown. He could see her queasily take seat in the other chair. Pulling the go-cord, he propelled himself singingly into the jungle's depths.

He liked Prisniffy, he thought happily, as oranges, mangoes, papayas, and all manner of other fruit swifted

past him along the sides of the grotto down which his basket-chair sped. She had a nice essence. He never cared at all what people looked like...zenden never did. It was the presence that counted. But for that matter, Prisniffy was a lot prettier than she thought she was, and, unbeknownst to her, was growing prettier and more softly girl-like all the time. Anyway, no matter; Capst had business to do. A few of the small grapefruit-like suns with which the jungle was illuminated sped in front of him.

After about an hour's ride through leafed wastes perfumed by pink and purple flowers the size of old victrola horns, he came to the shore of a rushing river. Since there was no land in the jungle, only hanging growth, the river was cylindrical, flowing through mid-air, and had its own gravity running down its central spine. Thus, boats could sail on any part of the cylinder and still seem right-side-up, even though, with respect to the surrounding jungle, they might be upside-down or sideways.

At a boat-rental place near the transit terminal, he got off and rented a small outboard. Moments later he was roaring upstream, the river's sharply curved horizon looming up like a frown in the windshield. He was headed toward the Bananas Trading Post, which was responsible for much of the flow of goods in West Frondland. Only lately, the flow of goods had almost stopped, because the trading post had been having a war with a newer outfit, the Scales Trading Post. The Bananas Post, as he understood it, was run by two monkeys, Eucalyptus and Erasmus, while the Scales Post was run by an alligator and a crocodile, named Al and Crock. A lot of the animals in Frondland talked, forming a separate race; a lot of them didn't.

About a half hour past the odd intersection between his river, the Wishyfish, and another river, the Greenfrond, he spotted, up ahead, a high circular dock circumferencing the entire river, with scores of little docks abutting like cards, out to the sides. Hefty musters of longshoresmen gorillas were on the docks trundling goods on and off of boats. His heart gathered in gulp; he hoped none of these apes would try to bother him. Usually zenden were seen as walking peace badges, so there was no problem.

As he anchored his boat to a little dock, and walked up a stair to a big one, he heard sporadic machine gun fire out in the brush. Nerves tremored him; there was definitely some kind of rotten fish in the pot. He looked up; down from overhead hung the upside-down roof of a large A-frame house, which was surrounded by an upside-down patio. The A-frame seemed upside down, of course, because it was built relative to the jungle's gravity referent, whereas the dock at this point was gravitied relative to the river.

Capst had to laugh. On the dock below the house sat six gorillas eating out of lunchboxes, while on the patio



right overhead sat six other gorillas, also eating from lunchboxes, but upside down with respect to the first bunch, as if the two sets of apes were reflected in bamboozling mirrors.

A stairway led from dock to patio, pausing at a landing to switch gravity referent. When he reached the landing, Capst dived forward, did a handstand, and flipped himself into the new gravity zone. Previously he'd been climbing up; now he was happily walking down.

"Top of the morning to you," he greeted the lunch-eating gorillas, but got not even a grunt of reply.

He looked in the flasheous, floor-to-roof A-frame window. The two monkeys were in there, all right, one dressed in orange, the other flighted in yellow, with Hawaiian designs. Capst walked in through the open front door.

"Hi, folks," he summoned up as much gumption as he could. "My name's Capst Fresen. I've heard you've got a trade war on your hands."

The two monkeys, who'd been bent over accounting ledgers, looked at him suspiciously.

"We do; what's it to you?" asked Erasmus, the yellow-shirted one. "Whose side are you cahooted on, ours or the crocodiles'?"

"Well, now obviously he must be partly bananaed with us, or our gorillas wouldn't have let him on the premises,"

reasoned Eucalyptus smoothly. "They're very acute about such things."

Erasmus snorted.

"If you say so, but if it were up to me, I'd made him walk the plank. I'd keelhaul him first, though."

"Erasmus, don't be so primitive."

It took a while before Capst got them to feel at ease with him, but eventually he did. Apparently raids had been made on the goods their trading post carried, reducing their inventory drastically and making prices inflate like tractor tires. The monkeys accused the crocodiles of responsibility, while the crocodiles, on their part, accused the monkeys of staging raids on *their* goods. In any event, Capst was invited to stay as houseguest for awhile if he thought he could solve the situation. When they installed him in a plush room on the second floor, he didn't exactly object.

After a similar odyssey up the Greenfrond, Prisniffy, garbed in a beautiful floral dress she'd bought along the way, found herself on a similar dock before a similar A-frame. Again, the dock girdled the river, but here the A-frame was gravitied with respect to the river, not the surrounding jungle. And the floor of the A-frame was not a floor, but an indoor pond. Instead of bearing floors, the house's upper reaches were filled with beautifully sculptured, cloud-lordly swimming pools, suspended like components of a sunset. An elaborate system of water-filled sluiceways ramped like swans' necks from level to level, and from pool to pool sighful waterfalls fell. But most breathtaking of all...Prisniffy could barely believe it...every piece of furniture floated, and had a miniature outboard motor attached to it.

"Z-z-Zoom!" yelled out a deep, sandpapery voice, as an engine roused up from the background. "Look out below, you hunk of ballast!"

"Who's a hunk of ballast? You'd better watch out what you say, or I'll sell your hide to a wallet factory."

"Oh yeah? You do, and I'll turn a taxidermist loose on you."

Prisniffy shook her head. An alligator with a chartreuse beret and a crocodile with a heliotrope beret were racing outboard furniture around the upper pools. The quick glimpses she could snatch showed the alligator was riding a bucking mustang sofa while the crocodile rode a sleek

outboard toilet. Prisniffy got terribly nervous; her rag fibres, which were slowly turning into something like flesh but much nicer, shrank all up inside. She half wanted to laugh, half wanted to hide, so she just got down on all fours and started sniffing everything she could with her gentle-inflected nose, for her face had grown into a soft, shy melt now, and her nose was no longer huge and protuberant.

"Hey, there's somebody downstairs. Let's get her!" one of the reptiles cried. Outboard engines revved hungrily, speeding the reptiles down the rampways to ground pool's edge in seconds. Prisniffy, down on her knees before her captors, flinched and gulped and wondered if she really wanted to do what she had thought she wanted to do.

"Who are you?" Al scythed gleaming teeth at her. "One of the monkeys' lackeys, no doubt."

"Of course she's a monkey-flunkey," judged Crock, the huger, more ominous of the two. "The bananas are written all over her. Can't you read them? She's a spy."

"No, I'm not a spy!" She started to get mad. "I'm Prisniffy Opbobble, and I came here to get eaten."

"Eaten!" exclaimed Al. "What made you come to me and my cousin Crock?"

"Crocodiles and alligators do eat people, don't they?"

"Crock, is that a service we perform?"

"Nope, not so far as I can see, Cousin. But by the look of her, she's not a person, either."

"No, I'm a rag-thing, but so what? The rags that I was made with have grown into something kind of like flesh, now. I wouldn't taste that bad."

Al's eyes became like kind ebony.

"Girl, if you're that unhappy, you don't need to be eaten; you need a vacation. C'mon and stay with us awhile and let us take care of you. We can boat around the house and have races."

Prisniffy could not believe the feeling of sunrise in her.

Capse dillied around the monkeys house for several days, trying to decide who was really responsible in the trade war. Day after day fresh reports came in of raids on the monkeys' boats. Out in the jungle sounded the staccato outbursts of guerrilla machine-gun fire. Capst needed the A-frame's posh carpeting and susurrant air conditioners to keep his nerves relaxed. Truly this war was ambiguous; he couldn't find any clarity anywhere. As far as his telepathic powers went, trying to read these monkeys' minds was useless; they were as opaque as safari boots.

Then one evening the mosaic began to crisp together. He was meandering upstairs near Eucalyptus' closed-door bedroom when he found himself stopping and listening at the door to a telephone conversation going on within.

"So, Crock, how's our war going on your end?...Oh yes, stiff as an upper lip or a clothesline over here...Ho hum, I daresay war gets almost boring sometimes. We're lucky we've got a zend investigator to liven it up...You've got a *what?* Weird...Do you suppose there's any connection? Prisniffy's a pretty name..Oh, sniffs all the time,

eh?...Okay, good-bye. Don't forget you're coming over for canasta Wednesday night."

The moment Eucalyptus hung up, Capst slammed in.

"Ha ha! So that's it! You and the crocodiles are the best of friends, and there isn't any war at all!"

Eucalyptus looked at him as if he were an imbecile.

"Of course there isn't any war. How do you think Erasmus and I and the crocodiles make so much money? By pretending there's a war, keeping the flow of goods low and the prices high. We and the crocks split the profits fifty-fifty. It's what you'd call a hidden corporation...even the stockholders are hidden. Would you like to be one?"

A sudden impulse snapped in Capst.

"I want to call Prisniffy, may I?"

Eucalyptus looked flummoxed.

"Sure, I don't see why not." The monkey tossed him the flumph of the open Frondland telephone directory, with the alligators' number underlined.

"Hello, Prisniffy?" he found himself actually speaking to her, after punching out the touch-tone digits. "This is Capst Fresen, from the transit stop, remember? I know we didn't really get a chance to meet, but I've been thinking greatly of you, and was wondering if you'd go out with me Wednesday night when our hosts have their card game...You would? Oh, that would be wonderful, Prisniffy."

The moment he hung up, his insides were doing dances. And Prisniffy had sounded like a sunrise with all the goshes knocked out of it. Even over the phone he could telepath her out as someone who had been loved little, if at all. That meant she had deep seressual needs, and from first sight, he had had seressual fantasies about her. The whole zenden intimacy system worked on seress, a very beautiful-feeling force through which those in love could ensplend and transfigure each other through touch and holding, and sometimes blend their very presences like shared suns, soft and scenten. It didn't really matter if the two lovers were of slightly different races since they were, essentially, doing no more than blessing and beautifying each other. A romance with Prisniffy would be okay, then. Capst had wanted a sweetheart for a long time.

Suddenly his telepathic sixth-sense winced in him. Two fruits, a mango and a papaya that were growing in through the window, made him nervous. He didn't know why. But some hair-raising of fear made him leap across the room, flounce on the bed, grab Eucalyptus' bedside derringer, and fire two quick shots that blasted the fruits to hot splats.

The echoes died in the air. Eucalyptus was shaking.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Why? Something told me I should."

Capst went around picking up pieces. Amidst the puree was a lot of sharded metal.

"Hey, what is this? These fruits have got metal inside." Going to the window, he ripped away a dangling casaba melon and tore it open. Nestling inside was "A closed-circuit TV camera! And that mango I shot had a transistorized

tape recorder in it. I see the spools. This fruit is filled with bugging apparatus!" He turned toward Eucalyptus accusatorily.

Erasmus stood in the doorway now, tail practically lashing.

"You wrecked everything," the monkey accused, full of mixed anger and fear. "We had a paradise here, and you and Prisniffy could have joined it. Now there won't be anything."

"You mean you *had* to have a paradise, don't you?" Capst acted on a hunch. "Didn't that bugging apparatus *make* you stage this fake war to slow up trade, and then help out with the special effects?"

"Yes! Yes!" the confession tore from Erasmus.

"Who puts that bugging stuff in the fruit?"



"I don't know!" the monkey screamed, his body like a crumpled paper bag. "It could be anybody, or millions of anybodies, or the fruits themselves, or maybe the suns or the moons. Don't you know that this whole jungle is a hidden communications network? Whoever runs it is irrelevant. You've stepped on its toes, and we're the ones who will pay the price."

"Go, get your Prisniffy quick if you ever want her at all," said Eucalyptus, shaking like a sheet. "Get her, and get out!"

Seconds later Capst found himself hurtling on a private basket-chair like whose cable shot straight from one of the monkeys' windows, out across the night-gleaming river, and into the dark, pulsed jungle. The jungle seemed hungry and tense tonight as the basket-chair cannonballed down vegetable grottoes throated with perfumed flowers and palely phosphoresced fruits. The air was so damp and soggy it seemed to thwap his face like a dishrag. There were night-sounds: voracious roars of lions, swift slitherings of

cobras. In Capst's body, every nerve was on guard like a drawn bowstring as he counted seconds of luck-marked time. The endless growth-clogged miles across which he swished promised only omnivorous anonymity.

Lights flagoned up, spasms of water hunched back by dockwork reared near, and Capst was dumped right through the crocodiles' window into the ground floor swimming pool.

"Capst!" cried Prisniffy, who was boating around on an outboard kitchen sink/cupboard unit. "Aren't you a little early?" The alligator and the crocodile, on their respective sofa and toilet, boated in close to hear.

"Didn't Eucalyptus and Erasmus call you?" Capst sputtered water, as he pulled himself back up into his basket-chair.

"The phone's been dead for over a half hour," rasped Crock. "What kind of stew is brewing?"

"A kettle of rotten fish. We're in danger, all of us, unless we get out of here right away."

"Mister, you're crazy, putting it bluntly," said Al. "We aren't evacuating this joint for anything."

"Prisniffy, come with me, please..."

"Capst, there's hardly room for two of us in one basket-chair," she protested, half plaintively, half mockingly.

"There is if we sit close, or you sit on my lap."

She gave a very beautiful smile from her pert-cherry lips, and her huge, round blue eyes poeticized into gently plaintive skies.

"Oh, all right, if you really want me."

Like some kind of jackrabbit she hopped up with him. They scrunched together like compressed breadloaves.

"You'll be sorry for this!" threatened Crock.

"Please leave!" Capst cried. "The electronic surveillance equipment accidentally got injured...I did it...there's going to be revenge."

"I don't care what got injured, we won't," declared Al stubbornly.

Feeling kicked with sickness, fear and guilt, but yet warm and nestly with Prisniffy so close, Capst maneuvered the chair for an about-face on its pulley and set it speeding out the window, up into the air, and into the frondage again. Just as the chair touched jungle, multiple roars, deafenings, pandemoniums exploded behind. Whiplashing back their heads for a rear glance, Capst and Prisniffy saw the whole dockwork go up in dynamite, the A-frame buckle and collapse, groan down in flame, a raging orange Gomorrah, with struts of docks spitzing and twisting and wild window glass shooting out like eruptions of transfigured scythes. Capst and Prisniffy felt sick inside until two small moons, one orange one and a pink one, highlighted on the two reptiles roaring away from the wreckage, one on a motorboat sofa and the other on a hot, go-power outboard toilet. Somehow Al and Crock had gotten clear, and the bizarre forces that, through endless electronic surveillance equipment, kept the jungle at bay, were hope-



fully appeased.

"I hope the monkeys are all right," murmured Capst. "I hope I'm forgiven for what I've done. I hate destruction; it's awful."

Prisniffy, her heart unstoppably happy, held him, held him, and began to feel fillings of emptiness she never knew could be appeased. She reached up, pulled the start-cord, and sent their temporarily-stopped chair skimming into the jungle, which suddenly seemed a whole lot friendlier.

"Where do you want to go, my darling Prisniffy?" he murmured to her, for he knew, without knowing her, that he loved her, and would always be with her.

"I don't know," she said, almost crying as his touch

seressed within her wonderments like glass vases holding their breaths. They were feelings like spun song, singing honey, and milk-washed roses all at once. She thought she was inheriting some fairy tale. "I just want to ride with you, ride with you, all through the night, and let morning find us close and dear miles from anywhere we've ever been."

"As you wish, my Prisniffy," he gentled her soft, yellow hair as if he were playing a harp, and shared a long, soft wish-granting of a kiss with her.

Pulling the appropriate guide-cords, they shuttled their basket-chair onto another line and sped off through the humid, heavy-lidded jungle in search of a new dawn.

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## Feathers in the Wind

*Lloyd Alan Fletcher*

Jarred was first among the Callers. Not just according to his own opinion, but to his fellows, that dissolute guild of wanderers, he was Bird, for no one had Jarred's touch with creatures that clung to freedom so fiercely. No Caller could reach higher than the sky.

To the folk he encountered on his wanderings, noble and common alike, he was Red the Caller, on account of the flame of hair that spilled like a horse's tail down his back. Red being the color of life's blood and creative power, the few who were given such a name bore it as a mark of respect and influence. And yet, despite the accolades of citizens, the friendship of nobility, the gold that his talents brought him, he could not forget that he was, in the language of his past, simply *Jarred*: "a feather in the wind."

Jarred tried to ignore the gut-churning roll of the boat, the unnerving creak of the mast. He peered into the fog beyond which a mystery awaited him on Karad.

Rarely these days did he need to barter his talents for the price of comfort; reputation alone was enough to buy his ease. But he could not resist a request from such a source, and so now he found himself at the mercy of a cocky youngster in a leaky little boat that stank of fish: an impromptu ferry struggling out into an unwelcoming sea.

He knew the Karadin by reputation of course: merchants of renown, source of the Blue Dust. But only once had he encountered a member of the clan. Years before in the Northern Hills he had called a savage wolf pack into the deep forest, away from the settlements it had been worrying. As he was taking his payment from the local baron, a very round little man, red of face and bright of smile, arrived. The Karadin had come to trade their fine blue powder for tracts of forest. Within the year, the trees were gone and farming families had come to settle, buying up the Blue Dust by the barrel load. Jarred had not seen the

Dust used so widely until he came to the East.

He relished the Eastern Shore. Here the ocean breeze was thick with the cries of countless living things that crawled among the rocks, roamed above the dunes, scuttled across the flats: an unequaled variety of creatures that he could make dance to his whisper and sing to his will.

Now, with ten years of wandering behind him, other pleasures ranked as high as the company of birds. He had learned to savor the lavish hospitality that awaited his return to the Shore each year. The Queen of the East was a frequent client who held banquets in his honor in the palace high above the brooding sea each winter. It was she who had help spread the name of Red the Caller throughout the rich trading cities of the East.

It was to the Queen's City he had come when barely in his twentieth year, seeking the burdenless life that he hoped his talents would bring. And here he returned each winter to spend the dark months learning the complex social dances of nobility, artisans, and the wealthiest families of the East. Memories of his simple past had begun to fade with time, like legends told around the camp fire.

The boat began to pitch more violently as it headed from the lee of the headland into the open sea. The boy gave an exuberant cry as the sails hammered madly against the mast and the spray splattered the deck.

Jarred gripped the gunwales, wishing now that he'd stifled his impatience and taken the long road north to one of the ports to wait for a merchantman; but the message had been insistent, and signed by the Grand Karad himself.

"Yer not gonna lose yer guts, are ya mister?" yelled the boy, grinning.

Jarred shook his head, but that made him feel worse. He fixed the boy with a stern eye. He was unaccustomed

to such uncouth talk, although this rough village boy reminded him of his own half-forgotten childhood.

"Yer first time to the Karad, is it?" asked the young fisherman, as he fought with the tiller and smirked at Jarred.

"Yes, first time." He found that talking made him forget the discomfort of the boat.

The boy grimaced into the spray, the lines around his eyes the marks of a young face already weathered by the sea. "It's a stupid-bad time to go across!"

Jarred paused, wondering if this impudence was merely the jesting in which the common folk liked to engage. "My presence was requested by the Grand Karad himself. You do not keep such people waiting," he sniffed.

The boy whistled. "A friend of the Grand Karad, no less!"

Not a friend, thought Jarred. He had never met the Exalted Merchant of the Karadin, Lord of the Blue Dust, Richest Man in the East.

"But yer no merchant, sir. You must be a minstrel or an artisan, am I right?"

Rumor had it that the Karadin "collected" the greatest artists and musicians. The Queen had told him that some stayed for decades in the employ of the Karadin; some never left the Eyeless Palace.

"No," Jarred said simply, "I have other business." Although he had no idea what it was.

The boy scratched his head. "Not a teller of tales then, nor builder, nor a great cook—the Karadin do love their food!" he laughed.

"None of those," said Jarred, beginning to tire of the boy's unseemly interrogation.

"What are you then, sir?" asked the boy, the smirk creeping back to the corners of his mouth.

Jarred sat up straight, pulling his great coat around him. "A Caller."

"A Caller?" the boy breathed, almost letting go of the tiller, "A Caller, by the Life!"

"That is it." Jarred looked casually away from the boy, beyond the stern to where the dark cliffs were sinking into the mist.

The boy was quiet for a moment.

"There was a Caller once in our village, when my grandad was alive," he said finally with a reflective look. "Back when the herring had been gone five years. The village found the gold for a Caller from the South.

"He stood out there in the bay in my grandad's boat." He jerked his head in the direction of the rocky cove, now almost vanished behind him. "Stood there all day, humming and singing and talking to the water. He called sea creatures all right, but they was eels and dolphins, even a family of seals; none of which we could eat or trade."

"There must have been no herring to be called," Jarred said sharply, leaping to the defense of one of his fellows.

"That's what he said, and he was right, for they've

never been seen again. So he gave back our money and went on his way."

Jarred wondered who it could have been. Tiger had a way with sea beasts: he'd once called a family of whales against raiders along the Southern Passage. The great beasts had destroyed the pirate ships, leaving the trading routes in the power of the Southern Syndicates. But Jarred hadn't seen or heard of Tiger in years.

"What was his name, boy?" asked Jarred. The boy shrugged.

There had once been a Caller named Salt, one of the old breed whom Jarred had never known. It was said Salt never accepted gold for a Calling, only food and drink and a bed, though Jarred doubted that tale. He had heard the old man was still alive somewhere in the far West. Perhaps it had been Salt who tried to call the herring, finally realizing the reward of gold for his skills?

Jarred had never had the knack with fish, as he had not with insects or worms. But as a boy, he had found within him a strange urge to stand on the shore of the Winter Lake and call away the gulls when the fleet came in. He remembered the sky flapping with angry white wings, feathers flying, hungry beaks snapping in frustration as the catch was landed, eyeing the prize that Jarred would not let them have. His father would wade ashore laughing at his son covered in gull feathers, "You're well named, boy!"

"Is it fishes the Karad wants you to call?" the ferry boy asked.

"We shall see."

"It must be fishes he wants, now the mining is dying the death."

Jarred had heard rumors in the Queen's Court. A thousand years of mining, and the Karadin had nearly exhausted the source of their incredible wealth.

The boy read his thoughts, "Will be a dozen years before it's gone, so the miners say. Then what may they do? There is nowt else there but fishes!"

"I think the Karadin have enough gold put aside to keep them happy for generations," said Jarred, dismissing the idea of the great merchants reduced to fishmongering.

"I hope it is so; we can't compete with their likes!" the boy laughed. "Look!" he said suddenly, pointing away to port. There the headland still lingered in the mist, a thick black finger dipping into the sea. "See there, at the point."

Jarred followed the boy's arm. Where the shadow of the cliffs met the gray churn of the sea, a huge white rock rose out of the water like a wave frozen on the point of breaking.

Jarred squinted into the mist. "Is that chalk?"

"Some think it is, until they gets close by. Can you not guess it, sir?"

Jarred was in no mood to play games with a ferry boy. He frowned. "It is not ice; is it sand?"

"Nay, sir. It's birds!"

Jarred looked again. The great white rock seemed to shimmer at the edges, as if pieces were flaking off to be

carried away by the wind towards the dark expanse of the headland beyond. Now he could make it out: the rock was covered by a living mass of birds. An immense colony the like of which he had never seen. There must be tens of thousands, he thought. He imagined he could hear their cries now echoing through the mist: gulls, white cormorants, gray-tailed waders, rockwhite, perhaps some Eastern varieties he did not know.

"White Bird Rock," the boy said, "the rock itself is white with their leavings!" he chuckled.

A broad shape like an upturned dish began to emerge from the mist. "There it is," said the boy flatly, "Karad: ugliest place this side of the sun."

As they approached, the upturned dish became a jagged crown of red rocks that rose steeply from a broad band of salt marsh around the island's base. The marshland was hemmed in on the seaward side by a jumble of rocks that held back the dunes and sea grass along the shore.

The boy turned the boat toward a narrow opening to a cove where the harbor lay. "The Eyeless Palace!" he said, pointing further up the shore. Jarred followed his arm: a massive gray wall rose from the edge of the flats where they joined the red cliffs. The palace narrowed in a series of tiers until a single tower surpassed the rim of the cliffs and thrust into the sky, ending in an unostentatious turret a hundred feet above. The castle was unmarked by windows or decoration.

"But see there," said the boy, pointing in the other direction. About a mile further south were the miners' camps, wooden huts in neat rows stretching from the edge of the marshland down to the shore.

At the mouth of the cove, two large pillars of stone rose out of the sea. A scaffold atop one of them told Jarred that they were hand-made, perhaps construction for a new harbor wall. No, he noticed four or five more of the great pillars rising from the sea offshore from the miners' camp.

The port was very orderly and neat, unlike most sea towns Jarred had visited. Above the harbor wall, a paved road led off to north and south, encircling the island. Along this, groups of miners trudged towards one of the larger harbor buildings from which raucous music and laughter spilled.

"Miner's Rest," said the boy as he tied the boat to a bollard, "the only place of pleasure for a miner's year on this rock."

A small welcoming party waited for Jarred at the harbor master's office. One of the roundest people Jarred had ever seen stood smiling warmly between two dour mercenaries.

"Elith Karad," the round person announced in a clear and pleasant voice. Her entire appearance spoke of wealth. The expansive gown was of deep blue velvet encrusted with sapphires that made her shape sparkle even in the fading evening light. Her smile shone as brightly as the loops of

gold around her neck. Her eyes were like two tiny emeralds set in a smooth round boulder, almost hidden by the folds of bronze flesh.

The ferry boy departed quickly for the Miner's Rest, agreeing to meet Jarred at noon the next day for the return journey. Elith directed Jarred to a simple open coach pulled by eight oxen. The mercenaries mounted the lead beasts and began up the road towards the Eyeless Palace.

Elith and Jarred exchanged pleasant formalities in the short time it took to reach the gate. She was niece of the Grand Karad, and was to be Jarred's host during his stay. The Grand Karad was very busy and would meet him in the morning to discuss business.

The dull exterior of the palace concealed the kind of accommodations Jarred relished. He was shown to a spacious room fitted with thick carpets from the Desert country; colorful tapestries depicting Karadin feasts and merriment hung from the walls. He flopped down on the huge Karadin-sized bed.

Jarred felt his joints begin to loosen as he sprawled among the plump cushions. He looked up at the ceiling where an intricate plasterwork of Karadin cherubs feasted on mountains of food and danced among piles of gold.

The room was lit with ornate oil lamps, but there were no windows. He itched to discover what wildlife inhabited this place. On the short journey from the harbor he had noticed weedwaifs and sandfinches hopping daintily in and out of the marsh grass, but there were no gulls, none of the large waders or diggers or scavengers he so often found along the shore. The air had seemed stale without the clamor of gulls, the raspy cries of rooks and crows; not even the tiny birds in the marsh were singing.

Jarred had barely washed away the stink of the boat when Elith arrived with two gaunt servants and led him away to supper.

The menu was prodigious: huge platters of fruit and smoked meat, several kinds of bread, jugs of sweet wine. There was a saying in the courts of the East: the only reason a Karadin leaves a feast is to go to another one!

"An interesting tapestry," said Jarred with practiced tact, nodding in the direction of a garish scene on the far wall. It seemed to depict the various uses of the Blue Dust: a beefy herder cast a handful of dust into a barrel, while another dipped his sheep; a vintner cast a pinch of dust into a fire to ward off beetles from her grapes; a farmer spread a cart-load of dust over the springtime earth, and next to that, the same farmer harvested the bounteous result.

"The artist Qiosh," said Elith with pride. Jarred was impressed. Qiosh was perhaps the greatest painter who had ever lived in the East, her work had decorated the halls of the wealthy for decades, yet Jarred had never seen a tapestry under that great name.

"I didn't know she..."

"From her design," interrupted Elith. "A dozen weavers and sewers were commissioned to turn the scenes into

fabric. If you look closely, you will see that it is made from feathers: colored feathers woven into the silk. Thousands of feathers of various sizes and sorts!"

Jarred looked more closely. Where could they have found so many birds of such variety? And how had they persuaded them to donate their plumage in such great quantities? Birds who owned the open places were subject to no rule without force; only a Caller might make them do his bidding, and then only for a short time.

"Qiosh lived out her last years in this palace in the time of my grandfather," said Elith, beaming.

Jarred was barely paying attention, still wondering about the feathers. What price would a Caller demand for such a task? Would he even agree to such a thing? Jarred had never refused a task for the right price. Not since he first turned his talents to profit; but that memory he would rather have left behind on the Winter Lake. Yet it ached in him like an old wound.

A boy of ten, he had entertained his friends by calling a doe, mesmerizing it with his sweet young voice, trapping it in a thicket while his brother crept up behind and slit its throat as Jarred held it with his whispsers. His friends had given him five coppers for that trick.

"Yes, only the best for the Karadin," Elith was saying. "That is why you are here, I believe." She smiled pleasantly at him before plunging in to her third round of bread and meat.

Elith's words helped Jarred fend off the old memories that had come to call. Certainly there had been youthful excesses, mistakes, but now he was known as the greatest of the Callers, a Caller to kings and queens, his services sought by the mighty and wealthy. He picked up a large pear and began to cut into it, forgetting about the tapestry and the feathers and the deer.

After the meal Elith led Jarred along a broad carpeted hallway, through a heavy oak door, and into a dim, cavernous room. "Perhaps you would like to spend some time in here before retiring?" she suggested, as a servant lit a large oil lamp in the center of the room. "The Grand Karad maintains a library for the benefit of guests and employees." The glow from the lamp began to reveal stacks of books rising out of the gloom. "Architects and artists require such things I understand."

Jarred stepped into the center of the room, surrounded by shadows.

"You might enjoy the Grand Karad's collection." Elith pointed towards a dark corner where the servant was lighting another lamp, "since your specialty is birds."

Jarred walked to the corner where a large glass case squatted between shelves of dusty books. In the center of the case a whitethorn tree, bare of leaves, spread its stout branches to nudge the panes of glass. On each branch a dozen or more birds of various types perched in a life's frozen moment. Their jeweled eyes strained to sparkle in the gloom of the library.

Jarred felt a chill tickle over his shoulder blades and down his spine; the birds seemed to stare at him accusingly.

Here was a red-beaked guillemot; once, he'd called a hundred of these down on a plague of rock worms in the city of Sea Beast, receiving thirty gold for saving the harbor wall. Here was a Dappled Owl, largest of the night creatures and not seen for years in the East, not since he'd called a family of them to flap comically around the birthday party of a Syndicate elder's daughter at Mountain Top. And here was a Piping Chaffinch, sweetest of songsters; he'd persuaded a chorus of these to attend the appointment of Baron Aral at Desert's Edge.

Jarred marveled at the collection. "I do not recognize all of them, except perhaps from books. Were they all birds from the island?" he asked Elith.

"Yes, most once lived here. Though some not for a hundred years or more, and even then only in small numbers. Many were great delicacies at the Karad table. All gone now. Only the small marsh birds remain. And they are of no use."

Elith said goodnight, leaving Jarred alone in the library with the birds staring at him from their glass tomb: the squat dump fisher, renowned for its prolific breeding, the crab catcher, known for its tenacity, and its prolific waste! The common blue-breasted gull, friend and foe of fishermen. And near the foot of the tree in wing-spread splendor, there sat a myth.

The gold-winged flying leopard. Every child knew the old hearth tales: the flying leopard's blood was fabled to be as precious as gold; just a drop on barren soil would cause a tree to sprout there. Jarred had not believed in this creature until now.

The Grand Karad was the largest man Jarred had ever seen. His flowing robes seemed designed to emphasize his bulk. But like all the Karadin, he was pleasant-featured and bright-eyed, with a permanent smile and a rich, laughing voice.

They ate breakfast in one of the state dining rooms. The Grand Karad polished off two plates of oysters and a game pie before Jarred had finished his small bowl of fruit.

Between mouthfuls, the Grand Karad regaled Jarred with the feats of his ancestors. He recounted how the best architects and builders had been employed to add a new tier to the palace every hundred years to accommodate the expanding Karadin clan. He reveled in the names of the great entertainers who had performed here. He chuckled over the tales of how royal contracts had been won and lost. He mused over the exotic, distant lands acquired but never seen by their Karadin owners.

After breakfast, the Grand Karad led Jarred on a tour, climbing slowly higher and higher in the palace.

"I notice that all your servants are off-islanders, your grace," observed Jarred.

"Indeed," said the Karad, "No one born on this island

has ever had the need to labor.”

Eventually they came to a plain door at the end of a long passageway. After climbing a short flight of dusty steps beyond, they reached another door that led out onto a turret and the open sky.

Jarred looked out over the parapet towards the sea far below. The water was calmer today, but still in a gloomy winter mood. Gray clouds gathered in the north, whipping the sea into a foamy boil near the horizon.

The harbor was already bustling: tiny specks moving to and fro in clumps and columns, a barge pulling out from the quay, a square-rigged trader approaching from the North loaded with timber.

Jarred followed a line of miners as they pushed carts up into the red cliffs that guarded the center of the island. He followed their direction and at last looked down into the middle of Karad.

Even the Great Desert was beautiful compared to this utter wasteland.

A smoky haze hung over the white heart of the island. The land inside the crown of cliffs was featureless, save for an immense pit where the center of the island had been scooped out over the centuries. The expanse of white itself was wearing thin in places: red rock showed through like open wounds in pale flesh.

“It is not an attractive sight,” said the Grand Karad with a wry smile.

Jarred shrugged. “It is a mine, after all, your grace.”

“Indeed,” said the Karad, brightening, “it is the greatest open mine ever known, the source of incredible wealth!”

“How long will it last, your grace?” asked Jarred, examining the places where the white gave way to red.

“That is what I wish to discuss with you.”

The Grand Karad ushered Jarred to the edge of the parapet on the seaward side and pointed out into the bay. “You see the stone columns at the edge of the shore?”

Jarred looked to where a flat boat carrying blocks of stone, wooden hoists, barrels of mortar, had moored next to one of the pillars. “Yes, your grace, I was wondering about them.”

“A cage,” the Grand Karad said simply, “I have the best builders in the known world working here. In five years there will be a structure over the island.” With a broad gesture he shaped a dome in the air. “Great columns rise and then arch landward, a network of timbers and cables in the sky, then a net of steel, and a net of rope to complete the covering.”

Jarred pictured the ugly little island with a helmet of stone and netting. “A cage? To what purpose?”

The Grand Karad held his gaze for a moment, then stared into the sky. “We wish the birds to return.”

Jarred gaped. The Karadin would have the largest bird cage ever built. A cage that could hold all the colonies on the Eastern Shore, and perhaps more.

And Jarred was to call them.

The Grand Karad seemed to know his thoughts. “You can call that many birds?”

Jarred pondered. “I don’t know...yes, certainly. Perhaps not all at once, but...”

Jarred’s head spun at the thought of holding them long enough to be imprisoned.

“I hear great reports of you from the Queen of the East. Did you not bring a mighty flock down for her amusement at the jubilee?” the Grand Karad asked.

“Yes, more than a thousand geese and swans.” Jarred remembered the event with pride. He had persuaded them to circle the turrets of the castle where the Queen stood reviewing the parade, until some had begun to drop with exhaustion. “But to hold them in one place...”

The flock he had called down on the locusts near the Great Desert had been his greatest work. It had exhausted him, his chanting and humming becoming weaker as he called them to the desert’s edge where none of them wanted to be: “Come and eat! Come and eat!” he had whispered on the breath of the wind. The hundred gold had barely seemed enough for his recuperation.

The Grand Karad shrugged. “You will not need to hold them for long, just call them, and we will close the net quickly.” He slapped his hands together as if springing a trap.

Jarred imagined the furious cry that would ensue once the Karadin closed the dome over the birds: talons raking the cage, a cloud of feathers, tiny bodies crashing against the mesh, falling back to the white desert below, painting the dust red with their blood like the rock.

Jarred shook his head.

“Is it the price you ponder?” asked the Karad, grinning.

“I’m sure you can offer me the right amount,” Jarred replied, quadrupling his usual fee in his head and adding half as much again.

“I know that Bird has never refused a Calling,” said the Grand Karad. Jarred flinched on hearing the name only his fellow Callers used.

The Grand Karad smiled. “Will ten thousand gold be sufficient?”

It was more than Jarred had earned in the entire ten years of his wandering.

“Let us not haggle, now,” said the Grand Karad, “If that is not enough, name your price!”

“That is more than enough, your grace.”

“Then it is agreed?” asked the Grand Karad excitedly. “In three springs we must begin to bring the birds. I will give you an advance of half the amount to secure your services, and of course you will stay in the safety of the palace until the time comes.”

“Three years?” exclaimed Jarred.

“If you will not take the contract, then it may take years to find one your equal. But I think you will take it. No artist has ever refused the Grand Karad, and you have never refused a Calling, is that not so?”

Jarred considered for a moment. "May I inquire," he said, still weighing the fortune in his mind, "why you wish to turn the island into a giant aviary?"

The Karad turned away. He looked out to sea where the clouds were drawing in and drew a long breath. "Do you know what the Blue Dust of Karad means to us?" he said softly.

Jarred shrugged. It meant incredible wealth.

The Grand Karad continued. "This island is the purest, richest source. No other can compare. Yet our stocks dwindle. In less than ten years it will be gone. And it takes centuries to replenish by natural means.

"Certainly we have our investments abroad, but my people care nothing for life outside this island. This has been our home for a thousand years. The source of our prosperity, and it will be so, even to the last generation. From the beginning, the coupling of birds of the free air and the red rock of Karad has been our source of life."

Jarred thought of the wonders he had seen in the library, but remained puzzled. "Can birds, even in such great numbers, give you that? A monopoly perhaps on rare sea pheasant eggs, or delicacies of the rock snipe?" He hesitated to mention the Flying Leopard.

"Such things are possible," said the Grand Karad vaguely, waving a hand in the air. He had lost his smile.

The Grand Karad pressed for an answer that Jarred could not give. "I beg your grace to allow me some time. This is a great undertaking and not without implications: what will the Queen say if all the birds vanish from her shores?"

The Karad waved the idea away: "The Queen will be compensated; I shall give her a selection of birds for the palace if she so worries over them."

"If I may, a month to think, to plan how it may be done. Then I will send word."

The Grand Karad thought for a moment, his expression stiffening. "Let it be so," he said finally, and pressed a pouch into Jarred's hand. "And a hundred gold to make the decision easier. But I know you will not refuse!"

Jarred had company on the journey back to the mainland: two miners returning in wealth after their year on "the Filthy Rock."

"Stinking place!" said one, a thin young man with a wispy beard.

"Good riddance," said his mate, spitting over the side of the boat in the direction of the island, now lost in the distant haze. She looked at Jarred across the deck and winked. "One of the seven hells; but the suffering is eased by the price!" She chuckled.

The miners' hair was graying to almost white, yet their pale faces were still young. "See the marks of the Karad miner?" said the ferry boy privately to Jarred. "The dust don't wash out after a time."

The grumbling of the miners turned to laughter as they speculated on how they should deploy their new wealth. Jarred whispered to the boy, "The Karad dust I have seen is always blue. I did not know it was white in its pure form."

The boy stifled a chuckle. "It's white in *any* form, even the rough stuff they dig from the mountain caves up North. The Karadin dye it blue, though most folk don't know."

"Yes, I suppose so. The smoke from a Karad fire is blue, the ashes white. I had never thought about it."

The boy began to laugh, "Caller, do you not know what Karad is?"

Jarred had given it no more thought than how gold or salt were made.

The boy continued. "See the birds?" He pointed to White Bird Rock, emerging now from the mist at the edge of the land. "Visit that rock in a hundred years, and you'll be knee-deep in Karad dust of the finest quality! You'll make a fortune!"

The miners caught his words and laughed. "The Queen should sell that rock to the old Karad. He's running out of the stuff!" joked the young man. His companion slapped him on the back and joined in: "Perhaps we could buy it from her and sell it to the old man for a tidy profit?" Their mirth rocked the boat.

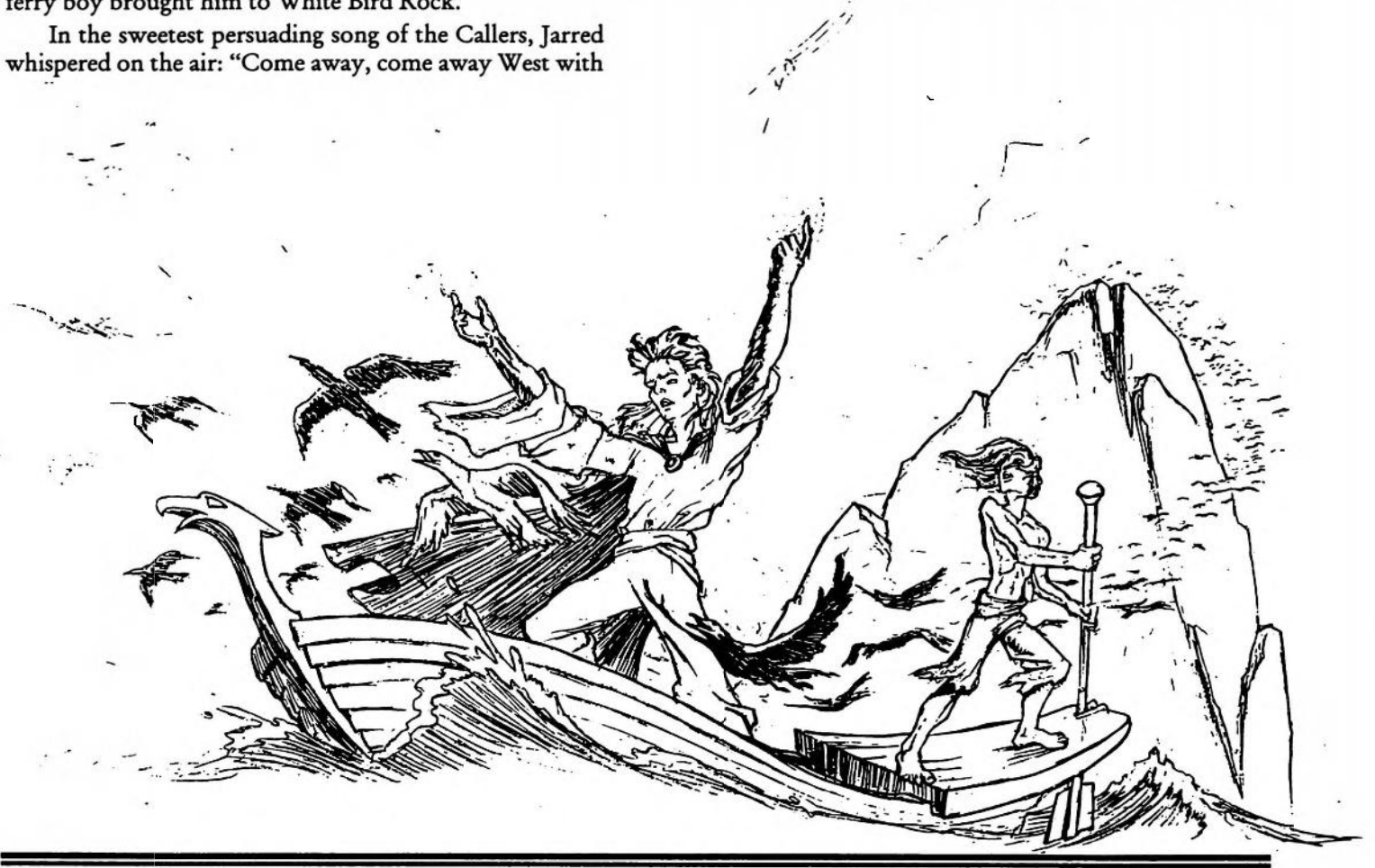
Jarred stared back at White Bird Rock with its tiny flecks that were feathered creatures circling free against the black cliffs beyond.



In the spring, Red the Caller slipped quietly into the Eastern Shore again, bypassing his usual noble hosts. The ferry boy brought him to White Bird Rock.

In the sweetest persuading song of the Callers, Jarred whispered on the air: "Come away, come away West with

At sunset, a cloud of white and gray and black rose from the shore and merged with the orange of the Western sky.



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## USED FURNITURE

*Bill Embly*

Grandfred Dubow and I were out on Hidden Lake, running a broad reach up North Cape Ridge toward the Army Corps dam in Cumberland. This was about a month before he died. Lashing the tiller to a cleat, he kicked his long legs up on the gunwale and leaned back against the transom to tell me a story. He told a good story, and typical of his best, they began in the here and now and ended up somewhere I'd never been before. "Mark and his Granddad were out for a day sail," he began, "when the old man clutched at his heart and fell dead in the bottom of the boat."

"Grandfred," I said, "what kind of story is this?"

"Now be still," he said. "Close your eyes and watch the sunlight playing on your eyelids. The old man was just that, old, and his time had come. The boy knew well enough what had happened. He put a cushion under the old man's face to keep it out of the bilge water, he brought the boat up into the wind, and he sat there listening to the

lap slap of the sea, trying to figure what he should do. It was a difficult situation, but he didn't panic. He began to sort through his thoughts as if picking at a tangled knot and pretty soon he located the bind. If I take Granddad back, he thought, they'll only lay him out in a satin lined box and plant him in the cold ground. Granddad, he thought, had always wanted to be buried at sea, and the sooner the better so he could be reunited with his dear Eleanor once again. How many times had he heard Granddad say, 'It's the bottomless deep for me, and no sad farewell<sup>1</sup>.'"

I opened one eye, as he had me worried, but with a nod of his hand to reassure me, he went on, "Mark tied the anchor line around old Granddad's ankle and threw him overboard. There, that wasn't so bad, was it? Think of all the trouble he'd saved for everyone, not to mention, he'd just cheated the undertaker out of his fee. Granddad was

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<sup>1</sup> *Crossing The Bar*, Alfred Lord Tennyson

sure to like that. Still, it was a solemn moment for the boy. He said a brief prayer, took his bearings off a steeple that lined up with the fire tower on Bear Mountain, and laid down to think it over.

"When he sat up again, he couldn't see North Cape Ridge nor Pine Top Ridge, nor nothing at all but a column of smoke on the horizon. Working the tiller to position himself for what little wind there was, he set a course for this smoke. As he drew near he saw a small island, and nearer still he saw that the smoke was rising from a fire on the beach. A man was tending the fire, but when he saw Mark sailing in, he immediately shook it down and kicked sand over it. Mark pulled the daggerboard and jumped out, dragging the boat ashore.

"The man motioned for Mark to stay where he was, and began to plow a furrow in the sand. He shuffled along with his head down and his arms pumping. He plowed a furrow that looked to Mark like a script Y, with a long graceful tail. He shuffled back along the tail to the trough of the Y, and with a great leap sprang out into the cup of the Y. There he fell to his knees and dug a hole, only a shallow hole, then he backed away, raking out his footprints with his fingers.

"That should do," he said to Mark. "I'm Mr. Kingsley, caretaker of this island, but there's no time to explain. You're not the only who saw the smoke, I'm sure, and they'll be here right quick." This Kingsley was a queer fellow, short and stout, with a thick spray of dark hair. His face was like a porpoise, with the same playful expression. He wore a pair of baggy shorts and had a vertical scar that ran the length of his chest.

"But where is here?" asked Mark. Looking one way, then the other, he discovered the beach stretched on endlessly in either direction. A wide expanse of white sand rose into a rill of dunes. Beyond lay green clad hills that butted up against a cliff of sheer rock.

"Didn't your Granddad tell you about this place?" said Kingsley, taking a small tin from his hip pocket. "Balm of Seafoam. I'll tell you where we are, but first rub this on the back of your neck."

"As he spoke, Kingsley began to disappear from the ground up. At the same moment, a crowd broke from the dunes and rushed onto the beach, making for the script Y. 'Be quick, Mark!' Kingsley disappeared until only his head remained. It popped like a balloon. Rubbing the balm on his neck, Mark felt himself disappearing. When his head popped, there he was, standing in front of Kingsley again.

"I knew they'd come nosing around," said Kingsley. "Anthropologists, theologians, journalists. Watch carefully, they're quite amusing."

"They encircled the script Y, flanking to the left and the right. Some took pictures, some drew sketches, some took samples of the sand. Others began to measure. Soon they fell to arguing, for they could no longer make out the design for their own tracks in the sand. As they didn't seem to notice Mark and Kingsley, Mark assumed they had become invisible, but then he remembered his boat. Turn-

ing to look, he saw only sunlight playing on his eyelids. He heard the whisper of the sea and felt a gentle rocking motion.

"Kingsley took him by the arm and they began to walk along the beach. 'Years ago I raised a man from the dead. It was meant as a sign, but everyone took it quite literally. I haven't had a moment's peace since. Raise my wife from the dead. Raise my son from the dead. I have a friend in the east who put it this way. Show me a man who hasn't lost a loved one, and I'll bring your wife back.'

"But if you can do that, Mr. Kingsley," asked Mark, "why not do it?"

"Think for a minute, Mark, of how crowded it would be. Besides, when a man comes back from the dead there's a horrible smell about him. No, Mark, there's a better way. You came here looking for your Granddad...'

"No, Mr. Kingsley, I buried Granddad at sea."

"So you did, but you came here all the same. I didn't bring you here. I built that fire and you decided on your own to come here."

"Kingsley nudged Mark and pointed to the crowd. They were filing off like ants from a picnic. 'Every so often one will lag behind and I'll toss him a bone, but not today. All right, Mark, it's time we go visit your Granddad.'

"Mark again looked from one end of the endless beach to the other. 'But where are we going, Mr. Kingsley?'

"It's not a question of where so much as how. Listen very carefully, Mark. You must do exactly as I do. Put your arms straight out to the side, like so, and let your head hang forward. Imagine you are the loneliest man in the world, and when you feel the weight of the world on your shoulders, simply take a step to the left.' Having said this, Kingsley took a step to the left and quite abruptly disappeared.

"Mark held his arms out and dropped his head forward. He did in fact feel very lonely on this endless beach, and he only had to think of what lay ahead, when he returned by himself, to feel the weight of the world on his shoulders. How would he ever explain this to mom and dad. 'Don't think of that now,' came Kingsley's voice, as if from an eddy of wind. Stepping to the left, he found himself standing before Kingsley again. Only Kingsley had changed, and they were no longer on the beach. They were in a kitchen, his Grandmother's kitchen. He recognized everything: the curtains, the hand towels, the hutch, the trivets, the canisters, the table where Granddad had carved a heart. He stood in the midst of it like a vivid memory that had crystallized. Mr. Kingsley was now a chair, the ladder back chair Granddad had purchased at an auction.

"I'm almost afraid to ask, Mr. Kingsley."

"Do you remember the stool you liked to sit on, so you could see what everyone was doing?"

"Mark looked down and saw that he was in fact a stool. 'And Granddad is here!?'

"Your Granddad is now a sofa. He's come here to rest, and what better way to rest than as a piece of furniture.



Granddad is the sofa, the sofa is Granddad, it's important you understand that. And Granddad the sofa is resting in the parlor. This way please.'

"Kingsley, walking quite jauntily for a ladder back chair, led the way. His four legs, though braced all around, appeared to be moving independently of the braces. Looking down at his own legs, Mark observed this same action, his legs moving as if thumbing through the pages of an action drawing. In the parlor, which was exactly as he had remembered it, he saw Granddad, stretched out as the old sofa. 'Granddad!' he cried, running to him.

"It was strange to see a sofa reach out an arm, but once in his Granddad's arms, he forgot they were two pieces of furniture. 'Marky, Marky,' Granddad mumbled like old fabric.

"Hello, Grandfather,' said Kingsley. 'I must say, you're looking well rested.'

"You must be Kingsley, at last! Too bad I had to pass away first.'

"You've passed, Grandfather, but not away. What keeps us going here is memory. This house, from its foundation to its roofing nails, is memory. Soon as you realize that, and it's no easy trick, you're free to go. Of course, you'll need the map.'

"I've been pondering that map long and hard,' said Granddad. 'As maps go, it's rather odd. No cardinal points, no landmarks.'

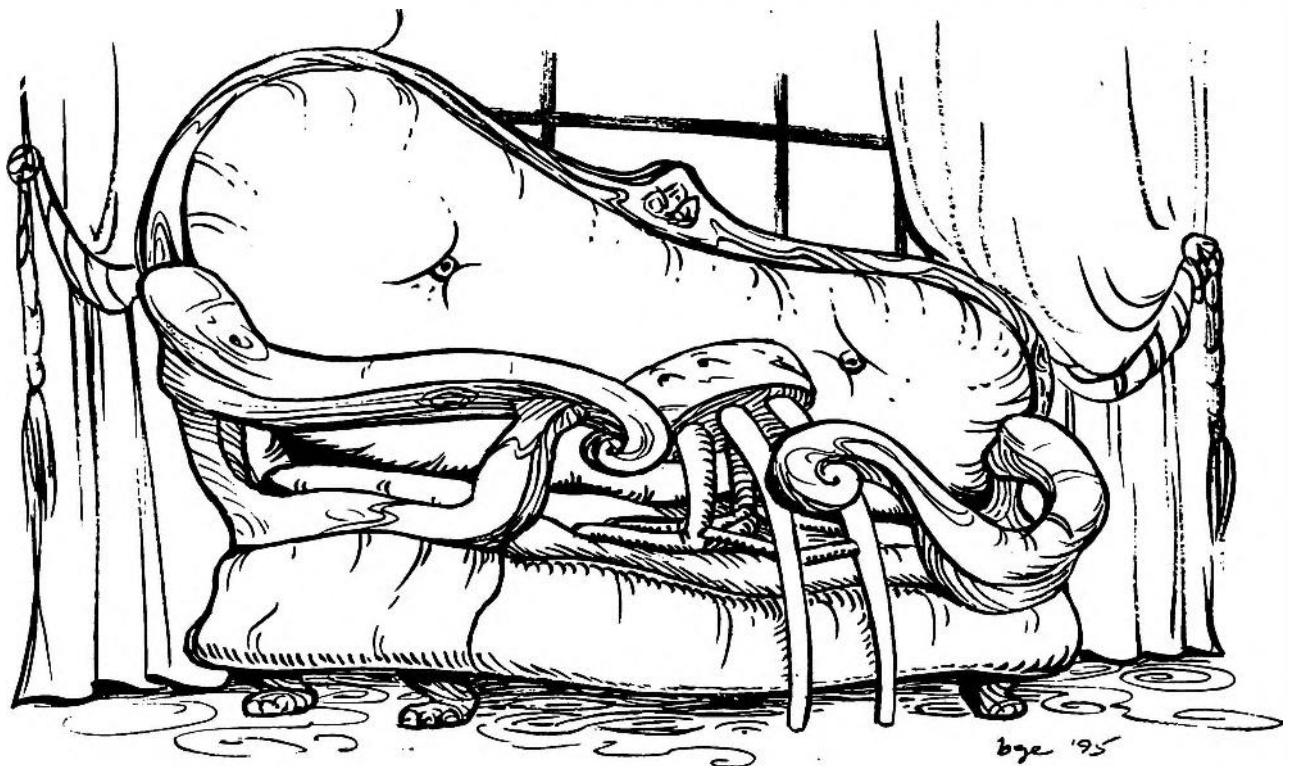
"There are no more cardinal points or landmarks, Grandfather,' said Kingsley. 'The map is an ancient symbol that describes a release point. Do you think you could sketch it for me?'

"Granddad, whose eyes were in the armrest, looked across the room. 'If you'll bring me paper and a pencil, Mark, I'll satisfy Mr. Kingsley. You'll find what I need on the desk.'

"Turning to the desk, Mark noticed the old China cabinet, inside the crystal bowl full of hard candy. There was a blue teacup on top, out of the reach of children. He was sure the key was still in that cup, the key Gramma took down to unlock the cabinet to give him a piece of hard candy. Next to the China cabinet hung the heavy mauve curtains, drawn over a window that looked out onto Wentworth. He couldn't resist taking a look to see if anything had changed, but outside he saw a dazzling light, like a glare of sunlight on the water, but nothing more. He moved on round the old oak table, past Granddad's musty old books. The desk, also, was just as he remembered it. Mahogany, with brass handles. The lamp with a frosted globe like a daffodil sat in one corner, and the Dutch vase with dried flowers in the other. It looked so like Grandmother he was not surprised when the drawer slid open in an unmistakable yawn. 'Why goodness gracious, it's Mark. Manfred, why didn't you tell me he was coming. Oh, dear me, I do hope you're only visiting, Mark.'

"Yes, Gramma, I'm only visiting. Mr. Kingsley brought me here. I didn't know you would be here.' He lowered the flat top of his stool head against her desktop, but it was just as he always remembered, soft as her bosom, smelling faintly of lavender water.

"Mr. Kingsley is such a clever man,' said Grandmother, her drawer moving in and out. 'I'm very pleased to met you at last, Mr. Kingsley, you have no idea. But are you



sure it's safe to bring Mark here?'

"I didn't bring him, Eleanor, he came on his own'.

"And how are your parents, Mark? Oh my, there are so many things I'm dying to know. Well, that's not what I meant to say. Dear me, it's so confusing.'

"They're fine, Gramma. I can't wait to tell them I've seen you.'

"Do be careful, Mark. This goes against everything I used to believe. If anyone had ever told me I'd become my old desk. How will you ever explain this?'

"They'll have to believe me, Gramma, because Granddad isn't coming back with me.'

"Eleanor, now don't fret. Mark will do fine. Give him paper and a pencil so I can sketch Mr. Kingsley's map.'

"The upper left drawer opened and Mark took out a sheet of blue stationery and a pencil. He closed the drawer himself, gently, as if patting Grandmother on the shoulder. Returning to the sofa, he knelt to watch Granddad draw the map. With a graceful stroke and back, and confident dot, he reproduced the script Y Kingsley had plowed in the sand. Mark sprang to his feet. 'Mr. Kingsley, if you already knew, why put Granddad through this?'

"Mark, this is the only map there is, there is no other, and we have it from birth. The dot and the cup of the Y are the breast, and the back sweeping tail is the umbilical cord. But recall the men on the beach. They saw this same map and it didn't mean a thing to them. I had to be sure it was clear in Grandfather's mind.'

"Do you understand any of this, Granddad?' asked Mark.

"To understand, one must have a choice, Mark. I have no choice but to rest.'

"Home is the sailor,'<sup>2</sup> said Kingsley. 'You'll like Mr. Stevenson quite as much as his poems. And Eleanor, I'm confident you'll find Miss Alcott a charming guest. You'll meet them all, in any case, but now it's time for Mark and me to go.'

"Mark threw himself on the sofa once again, and ran on his strange four legs to the desk. 'Rest well,' called Kingsley, as he and Mark returned to the kitchen.

"This time step to the right,' said Kingsley, extending his arms, 'we must now go back to the world of mortals.' He stepped to the right and disappeared.

"Thinking ahead to what he must explain in the world of mortals, Mark considered staying behind. But no sooner did this thought cross his mind, then a horrible chill came over him. He quickly thrust his arms out, let his head drop forward, and stepping to the right, found himself once again before Kingsley. He was the same as before, wearing the baggy shorts, tan except for the long vertical scar. They were on the beach again.

"Kingsley stooped for a conch shell, and putting it to his lips, produced a low humming sound. Mark found it pleasant and fascinating. Each time Kingsley paused, the sound would reverse and go back into the shell. 'A chariteer from the Far East taught me that,' said Kingsley. 'The

best conch player of all time. If you have a minute, I'll show you a trick you'll never forget.'

"Mark turned to look up and down the endless beach. He looked out to sea, and once again saw nothing but the sunlight playing on his eyelids. 'I don't know how you can top what I've just seen, Mr. Kingsley, but sure, why not.'

"I'd like to show you a blowout, Mark, an absolute marvel of Nature, a cavity formed in the dunes by the action of the wind. The wind swirls in and goes round and round until it hollows out a place of its own. At one time they were considered sacred ground. Come on, let's have a look.'

"They climbed an embankment and at the top Kingsley gave a mighty blast on the conch shell. The sound was like the powerful throbbing of an engine. Below, scooped out of the sand over the course of many many years, lay a blowout. It looked like a crater on the moon, only it was covered with a soft ankle deep grass. The action of the wind was clearly visible combing through the grass, working down into the crater and back up again. Lying scattered and partially covered in the grass were fallen trees, the bark smooth and silver. Only one tree remained standing, a tree unlike any Mark had seen before. It was perfectly straight, its silver bark smooth as marble. Instead of limbs it had spikes, each sporting a cluster of tiny heart shaped leaves.

"It's beginning to work,' said Kingsley, 'you'll want to give me plenty of room now.'

"He again raised the conch shell to his lips. The sound he produced was taken up by the wind until it swirled and swirled about them. But as Mark listened, he heard another sound. It seemed to be coming toward them, indeed, coming toward them very fast. All at once hundreds and thousands of doves flew into the blowout and flocked to Kingsley. They covered him from head to toe and yet more came until it was impossible to know that Kingsley was in the midst of them. All together they formed one giant dove, quivering with the rapid heart beats and blinking eyes of the many doves.

"As Mark looked on, the giant dove began to grow smaller and smaller, though the doves were not flying away. He didn't know exactly where they were going until he saw Kingsley again, plucking doves from himself and stowing them in a sack. Finally Kingsley stood before Mark holding a bulging sack no bigger than a pillow case.

"At that point Mark sat up and realized he had been dreaming, for there was his Granddad, seated on the aft bench, and there was the steeple, lining up with the fire tower. Only now it was to the port side instead of the starboard. It was the same wind leaning a shoulder into their sail, only now they were going home."

<sup>2</sup> *Requiem*, Robert Louis Stevenson

# Just in the After

Kyle Jarrard

The old red bus shipped over the blank land late in the afternoon. Dust swirled through the windows, into faces and throats. They'd been gone a long time, some said. Others insisted it'd been forever. No one took the short view.

Now and then, Oneiros slowed, steered with one hand and fought the map with the other. He'd neither turned left nor right for ages but simply kept to the vague pair of wheel tracks stretching endlessly across the valley floor.

"It's like I've been saying," said Mrs. Los Angeles, in the back. "Oneiros can't read a map. Look at him. First he holds it up. Then turns it one way. Then the other. Upside down. Backwards. The idiot has no idea what he's doing."

As if he'd heard her, Oneiros crumpled the huge red and black map and chucked it. Then he sped up. The grind of the motor rose to a scream.

"And then he heads off again no questions asked!" Mrs. Los Angeles said. "We'll never be in Bodie in time. Dr. Park?"

"Yes?"

"Why don't you drive? You've been to Africa, after all. You know your way around. Surely you could get us across this desert!"

Dr. Park pulled off his baseball cap, wadded it. "I don't think so. I mean, first, there is the question of knowing how . . . the mechanics of . . . It's been so long, I'm afraid that -"

"My, my," Mrs. Los Angeles said. "Are there no men left?"

A couple of the men shook their heads no. So did Dr. Park.

Mrs. Los Angeles huffed, shifted her rooster to her other arm. She held the bird on its back like a baby. It didn't seem to mind, though, and made little sounds.

"I suppose," she said, "you think I complain for the sake of complaining. Maybe so. But listen. The older, or should I say more advanced, I get, the less I want to hold back. How can we expect to hook back on to the tails of our lives without first securing a good, solid guide to lead us thither? I told you. You can't just pick a bum up off the streets and get him to usher back 30 people without incident."

"But the price was right," Dr. Park said. "And a lot of us, if I may say, are on the thinnest of budgets. Surely you understand some corners had to be cut. Madame."

Mrs. Los Angeles shrugged. "So?"

"A professional would have landed us all there in no time. But with empty pockets. You know how inflation has been raging. You've read the papers. We'd be in the streets."

Mr. Los Angeles grubbed her purse for a cigarette.

"Give me a light, doc."

He obliged her. The first cloud of smoke, heavy and thick, had a sour odor, like garbage.

They watched Mrs. Los Angeles smoke.

"Maybe you're right," she said. "Preter-la-Terre was, after all, *supportable, si vous voulez*. Maybe we're being silly to go haunting around like this. Maybe we're being greedy."

The others nodded no, disagreeing.

"We all voted. So did you," said Dr. Park. It was unani-

Mrs. Los Angeles cut him off. "Nature calls. Get the idiot to stop."

Dr. Park hesitated, as if gauging the distance to the front of the bus, then called, "Mr. Oneiros! The passengers request a short break, if you please."

His reverie broken, the Greek screwed his face into a black knot, spit out the window, and slowly brought the vehicle to a halt in the middle of the byway. With a flick of a handle, the door slapped open with a screech.

"Two minutes! I no got all day. Two minutes."

The weary passengers climbed down. Bucked and tripped by a swirling wind, they scattered across the open sands in search of proper places.

Dr. Park proffered a hand. "May I help you down, Mrs. Los Angeles?"

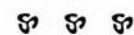
"No, no thanks, doc. Don't really need to go now after all."

She lowered her voice. "Tell you the truth, I quit going a long time ago. I did it mostly for the others, you know, and for some peace and quiet while the horrible engine is off."

"We won't be long," he said.

The rooster plucked the smoldering cigarette butt from between Mrs. Los Angeles's fingers, flapped to the floor and strutted off down the aisle.

"I'll just rest here with old Pierre," she said. "Don't mind us."



Mrs. Los Angeles looked ahead to a second go-round. Free rent, that's what the ad said. Clean, white cottages with central heating. Free utilities. Free transportation at all hours in and out of the little town. Security guards to keep out the curious, the salesman, the taxman. What more could one ask for?

How long had it been since she'd actually had a place to live? How long had it been since she baked a cake in her own kitchen? How long had it been since she'd been shopping, bought things, brought them home? When was

the last time she'd done Christmas with all the trimmings?

There remained the matter of making the right impression on the owner of the dream cottages. Again and again she had had to remind the group that back there, back there in the mainstream, they'd better stay sharp and neat. One's looks was all.

Onward, Mrs. Los Angeles commanded herself. She took her makeup case off the overhead rack, set it on her lap and flung it open. Time to get with the new program. Or the old one, depending on how you thought about it. But she preferred not to think too hard, really. Only the basics mattered now.

First, she dabbed a bright orange cream on her sunken cheeks, smearing it deep into the pores. It gave her face a pleasing glow, like that of a paper lantern. Next, she squeezed her eyelashes with a shiny, hooked instrument that made them point up straight. Then she ran a steel brush through a black wig and pinned it on. She put on mustard-colored lipstick.

There was nothing worse, she was convinced, than to see or be near those who just let themselves go there in the after. How many times had she had to get up and move? How many times had she had to hold her tongue when there was nothing more in this world she wanted to shout than, "Why don't you take a bath!"

For a moment she held up an old bottle of eau-de-toilette, then tossed it out the window. There were limits to everything. With that, she shut the case and set it down.

Where, she wondered, had her rooster got to?

"Pierre?"

He wasn't under her seat, nor under the others. She checked sacks and satchels, then went up front and called out the door, "Anybody seen Pierre?"

She still had a powerful, arresting voice, but no one heard. The others, bunched together a ways off and pointing at something, swayed in the heat like weeds in a sea. Was this another one of those silly vision things? Would they be sidetracked again, for hours?

Mrs. Los Angeles cursed and climbed down. She took a few aimless steps in the sand, then squatted and looked under the bus.

"Pierre?"

Thick red oil dripped from the engine onto the exhaust pipe and smoked. Three of the four back tires were nearly flat. The muffler had several fist-sized holes.

"Here, boy. Here, boy."

She struggled up the ladder to the top of the bus and searched among the boxes, crates, trunks, furniture, ruffling all the rain cloths. The scorching wind tugged at her wig, billowed her skirt.

"Damn bird, where *are* you? Pierre!"

He'd never gone far before. He'd always answered her, come right away. No, Pierre had to be in trouble.

She scanned the horizon. No bird in sight.

But now she could see what the others were looking at: a white bus on its side down in what looked like an old bomb crater. People in bright clothes were milling around. There'd been an accident.

"That's all we need," said Mrs. Los Angeles. "Damn."

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Friendly Gloria Sidensticker, the former Olympic swimmer lately emigrated to Preter-la-Terre after setting a world record in the 200-meter butterfly only to drown from exhaustion, immediately started babbling right into Mrs. Los Angeles's face.

Mrs. Los Angeles hated the girl's habit of bursting into speech and assuming that everybody was ready, able and eager to hear, but held back. There was no time to waste on another tedious descent into the realms of etiquette and genetics.

"What's she saying, Park?"

The doctor was focusing his field glass on the crippled bus.

Sidensticker repeated her spiel. Dr. Park nodded.

"She says she was worried you were baking in the bus, that we've found this bus and have so far learned that they started down into the crater to have a closer look simply for amusement when the vehicle suddenly dropped onto its side. The Lord, however, saw to it that no one was hurt."

The German said more. The doctor obliged.

"She says they've invited us down for dinner and a sing-a-long and maybe even some table dancing."

"What do you think, doc?"

"I see no harm, actually. And if I might add, I believe the stars will be quite splendid this evening. Perhaps we'll see the Thorne Road Comet!"

Sidensticker, forever misunderstanding, shook her head vigorously, rubbed her belly, then her breasts, before launching a kiss into the air.

"Poor thing," said Mrs. Los Angeles, genuinely touched by the girl's worrisome state. "Well, I don't see why we can't take these people up on their offer. But let's keep it short. We have a rendezvous to keep. Or has everybody forgotten?"

Sidensticker bounded away. Mrs. Los Angeles and Dr. Park, watched her go, plunge into the crowd. There was a lot of laughter, and one woman was up on a rock plucking a guitar and singing a country song.

"Say something," Mrs. Los Angeles finally said.

"You've fixed up, madame."

"Oh, a little bit. I was sure we were near Bodie. But now it seems it doesn't matter, does it? I mean, isn't it always true, haven't we always been haunted by the fact, I mean, that the closer you get to something the less you want to get there? *Quelle contradiction!* I mean, to tell you the truth, doc, I couldn't give a hoot if we ever get there."

Dr. Park cast a worried look around. "So Monsieur Pierre's gone again, is he?"

"Yes."

"We'll find him. Don't despair. It does your heart no good, you know."

"What's a heart when you've lost Pierrot? He came from France, you know. The best."

"We'll find him. I assure you."

He paused, then added, "Didn't I tell you about the research results I came across just the other day?"

"No, but you will."

"Well, experiments carried out in Central America apparently prove that animals that are regularly transported on buses, such as chickens and pigs and such, tend to develop a sort of rider's mentality, if you will. That is to say that once the means of transport is removed from them, they have a tendency not to want to put one foot, or whatever, in front of the other, and will content themselves by simply flopping down and refusing to budge until the bus does. If true, Pierre's surely near!"

"You think so?"

"Only reporting the facts, Ma'am."

"Thanks, doc," she said. "You do have a way with words. But Pierrot's still missing."

"That's the good news. There is the bad."

"Hit me."

"Oneiros has no idea where we are. We could be anywhere, he says. According to his map, we seem to have driven off the proverbial edge of the world."

"It doesn't matter."

"Don't be that way. We'll figure it out, I assure you."

"At least we're off the streets of Preter for a few days like this. I mean, it is fun to be in the bus, even if we're not really getting anywhere."

"Here, here, Mrs. Los Angeles. Don't be that way. We'll find our way. You have my word."

Mrs. Los Angeles looked him up and down. "Oh, that."

Dr. Park ignored her gloom and had another look down in the crater. "How nice everyone looks in their Sunday best. At least people show up in a semblance of civilized attire. The day we start getting people in rags out here ..."

Mrs. Los Angeles sighed. "I don't know if I can go through with a party. You know how it is: They're just as chatty as parakeets. I can't take that anymore. I think I'll just sit here and wait it out."

"Why, Mrs. Los Angeles! And miss the comet?"

He put out his arm for her to take.

Mrs. Los Angeles sneered, gave in, hooked on.

"I bet they thought it was just a little hop and skip to Preter-la-Terre," she said. "No one tells them about all the kooky time zones out here."

"No," said Dr. Park, "no one does."

"Do you think we'll ever get to Bodie, doc?"

"Sure we will," he said, patting her hand. "Sure we will."

"Hey, doc?"

"Yes,"

"Don't pat my hand."

A hook of moon, baited with a red cloud, hung in the northeast.

Below, some of the men were righting the bus.

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A lanky man in blue overalls broke away from the fire and went up to them. "Howdy! American?"

"Mrs. Los Angeles," she announced.

The man opened a lighter and spun the wheel, making a long green flame which he put to a corn cob pipe.

"Yeah?"

"Indeed she is," said Dr. Park. "And who might you be, sir?"

"Me? Just Jacky Rance. You?"

"Cornelius Park. Professor emeritus at Queen's College. Explorer."

"Explorer, eh," said Rance. "Got a lot to explore out here, don't cha." He laughed, pointing around.

Dr. Park and Mrs. Los Angeles looked at each other. Could it be, they seemed to be wondering, that they'd actually forgotten just how bad things really were back there? Were they making a huge mistake?

"Africa, sir. I opened huge tracts of Africa."

"Yeah? Well, that's dandy. Me and Sharlene? We went to Kenya once. Looked at them giraffes and stuff? It was great. Could've done without some of them locals, though. I mean, it's not that I don't like --"

"Yes," interrupted Mrs. Los Angeles. "No one was hurt?"

"Hurt?"

"In the bus."

Rance turned. "Oh, that. Nah. We got the Lord on *our* side, lady."

Mrs. Los Angeles waved her hand in front of her mouth as if the man had bad breath.

"Yes, I'm sure you do," she said. "So it seems you've invited us to join you for a meal?"

"Hell, yes, lady. Ain't you hungry?"

She thought a moment, then replied, "Apparently. But then one can never be sure out here."

Dr. Park said loudly, as if speaking to a classroom, "I like to think of appetite out here as being a sort of cosmic background radiation left over from the hunger you had back in the old days. It's just a glow of a hunger now, but it's still there."

"Y'all's way too smart for me," said Rance. "I'm just talkin' about a little barbecue. That turn you on, or not?"

"Why not," said Mrs. Los Angeles, with a gasp. "We've come this far. Whatever that means."

Dr. Park laughed and Mrs. Los Angeles grinned. The American squinted at them and sucked his pipe.

"Definitely weird," he said.

The newcomers' bus was a splendid modern model, equipped with a sauna, jacuzzi, satellite dish, 500-channel TV, fax, mobile telephones, laptops, real-time stock indexes and currency quotes from around the globe, and a well-stocked drugstore.

Painted the full length of the side was: Bodie Dude Ranch.

"You see that, doc? Bodie. They're from Bodie."

"you been there or something, lady?" asked Rance.

"No, never. But that's where we're headed."

"Our rendezvous is there," said Dr. Park. "We're going back."

"What for? Ain't a soul in Bodie. Been a ghost town for at least 80, 90 years. Ever since the uranium ran out."

"Ghost town?" asked Mrs. Los Angeles.

"That's right."

"That's not what the ad said. Dr. Park?"

"I don't understand, either," the doctor told her.

"You don't understand what," said Rance.

Dr. Park showed him the ad from the Preter newspaper.

"Oh, my," said Rance.

"What?" the doctor said.

"Looks like you've been taken for a ride, folks. There's nothing in Bodie but a bunch of rotten buildings, cold wind, dust and tumbleweeds."

"Rotten buildings," said Mrs. Los Angeles, dazed. "Cold wind."

"Cold as the Klondikes. Us, we're headed for San Diego. warm down there. Goin' to catch a few rays, check out the action. Buy a few, sell a few. Know what I mean?"

"San Diego," said the doctor.

"Don't tell me you don't know San Diego."

"But aren't you going to Preter?"

"Where?"

"Preter-la-Terre."

"That in America?"

Dr. Park tried to think.

Rance said, "Oh, I get it. Y'all's from Mexico. That right?"

"We certainly are not," said Mrs. Los Angeles. "Just who *are* you people?"

"We run a summer camp up by Bodie. Now we're going down to winter on the coast. Y'all FBI? We ain't drug people. Not us. We've got the Lord --"

"You're not dead?"

"Dead? Us, dead? Now hold on a minute here. You people from one of them cults or something? Is that it? Is that your game?"

"Not at all," said Dr. Park. "It's just that --"

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Mrs. Los Angeles gave Rance a shove. "What have you done to Bodie? What happened?"

"Lady, I don't know what you're talking about. And

I'll tell you what."

"What."

"You push me again and I'll knock your lights out, lady. Don't care *who* you are."

Dr. Park backed away.

Mrs. Los Angeles gave him another shove anyway. Then she sat down on a boulder and emptied the sand from her high-heels.

Rance stared at her awhile, then said, "Perhaps you are the devil. Perhaps you're *all* the devil. Here to tempt us. Make us sin. Jesus was tempted in the desert, you know. Thirty days, thirty nights."

"Forty," Mrs. Los Angeles said.

"That's what I said, forty! Just what do you people want?"

"Where's Bodie?" Dr. Park said.

"Just over there." He pointed.

"How far?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"It just depends. You go that way, though. Now come and eat with us. No hard feelings. No tricks, either."

Rance went off to rejoin the good-sized group around the fire.

"I've had enough of this," Mrs. Los Angeles said.

"Likely they don't realize the full extent of their predicament yet," said Dr. Park. "If I recall, it was quite the same with us when we first arrived. An inability to face reality, the fact on the ground. I can't help thinking how sad."

"Phooey on it all. That's *their* problem. Let's take advantage of their grub. Who knows when we'll ever eat again."

Arm-in-arm, they went and introduced themselves around. To their surprise, many people had heard of both of them, knew of their exploits and achievements, could trace their careers. Why, it was Mrs. Los Angeles who'd been the first woman to bare her breasts at a White House dinner! And Dr. Park, he had not only opened darkest Africa but postulated the existence of a half-world of the neither here nor there, forever invisible but traversed by all on the way to the hereafter. More, he'd even written from there after his death to say it really existed! Why it wasn't a year ago that his first postcard arrived!

Everyone was very friendly and relaxed, and there was plenty of cold beer. In no time, Mrs. Los Angeles and Dr. Park felt like they were back in the old flow, back at the heartbeat with the real people. It felt like family, like all their families, like the ones they'd left behind so long ago. Bodie, the bum ad, the whole dream cottage business, faded to the background, ceased to matter.

Sidensticker seemed to have the most fun, prancing around waving a barbecued drumstick and spewing German poetry no one could understand. A few of the younger men kept pawing her, but it didn't look like she minded,

and Dr. Park and Mrs. Los Angeles joined in the laughter and clapping.

Passing out paper plates loaded with food, Rance was saying, "I still can't figure out how that sucker got all the way out here. Damn thing jumped right in front of the bus, like it'd been waiting on us. Like it'd been sitting right there in the sand just waiting for us to come by. Like it'd wanted to kill itself or something, if that's possible. Had to scrape it off the radiator we hit it so hard."

"Had to scrape what?" said Mrs. Los Angeles.

"Why the rooster, ma'am."

She took a look at the sauce-covered wing on her plate, and fainted.

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When she came to, Dr. Park was holding a plastic sack full of ice on her forehead. It had leaked, ruining her makeup.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Home, dear. Home."

She sat up and looked out of the cardboard box at the black snow slush in the street and the cars and trucks flying back and forth, at the legs in nice pants and nice hosiery, at the boots, all the wonderful, warm, dry boots marching past.

"We must've really tied one on," she said. "Was I bad?"

Dr. Park patted her hand, scooted over some to give her more room. "We sure did. And, no, you weren't."

A wind caught the box and shook it. They pulled their wraps tight as the rush hour swelled.

"What's the name of this city, anyway?" Mrs. Los Angeles asked.

Dr. Park didn't answer. He never answered that one anymore. It just didn't matter.

A dirty pigeon waddled by.

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# Live-In Help

Margaret L. Carter

At first, Julie thought the attic had mice.

She wouldn't have been surprised to see them, considering that the core of the house dated to pre-1700, and the building stood on the outskirts of Newport next to a weedy vacant lot. But why should rodents invade the attic and not the kitchen or the detached garage?

While hauling boxes of baby clothes (a nuisance, but giving them away would invite a surprise pregnancy) and past years' Christmas cards up the folding steps, Julie caught Smog, the gray Maine Coon cat, sniffing at a hole in the baseboard. She deposited a box in the middle of the attic floor and tiptoed over to check the cat's find. Smog growled and lashed his bushy tail as she knelt down with a flashlight. Something was blocking the hole. Dried leaves or crumpled paper? Looked like a mouse nest, all right.

She fastidiously gripped the edge of the wad between thumb and forefinger. When she tugged, it came loose in a single lump. Yellowed paper. Smog's back fur bristled, and he let out a yowl. Julie thought she glimpsed a brownish blur flash past. Smog leaped up and darted down the steps.

*If that was a mouse*, she thought with a shiver of disgust, *I hope he hunts it down*. She unfolded the paper, wondering how old it might be. She and Ted could have qualified for Navy housing on the base, but a preliminary scouting tour with a realtor had unearthed this place at a bargain rent. Its age, despite the later accretions and (thank goodness)

modern plumbing, fascinated her. The roof even featured a nineteenth-century "widow's walk," accessed by a trap door in the ceiling of the upstairs hall. They would never be able to afford to buy such a house, so why not snap up the chance to enjoy it for a couple of years? She'd been disappointed to find it unfurnished, but of course the owners wouldn't have left any valuable antiques in place. Maybe this bit of paper would contain something interesting.

Just a page of script in faded sepia ink, apparently Latin, of which she knew only a few words, from plaques and mottos. Probably some long-dead schoolboy's exercises. She absentmindedly stuffed the page into the top of a box filled with threadbare blankets.

Again she beamed the flashlight into the small hole. The cavity looked clean. It didn't smell any worse than the overall odor of dust and mildew. Inhaling deeply to check, she sneezed. *Enough of this grubbing around for one day*. Meg would be getting off the high school bus any minute, with Mark home from middle school soon after. Julie wanted to get in some of "her own" work before she had to start supper. Since the move, she'd had to neglect her soft-sculpture dolls, which she sold steadily, if modestly, by mail and at local bazaars. It helped her self-image to have a source of income she could carry across country with her. The wives' club on base was sponsoring a fall craft show in two months, and Julie wanted to be ready for



it.

Down in the kitchen, she tried to ignore the piled-up moving cartons and the grimy linoleum. The adjoining room, the enclosed remnant of what had once been a back porch, was neat and swept, stocked with her sewing supplies. If she could find more than an hour at a stretch to work there. Shaking her head, she closed the door to shut out the silent accusation of the messy kitchen. *What I need is a maid.* She picked up the pattern of a sailor-boy doll she'd begun designing the week before. *No, make that a three-person cleaning team.*

She discovered she'd been mistaken about the "mouse-hole" soon after she and Ted gave their first party for some of his fellow instructors at Officer Candidate School. She awoke on a Saturday morning to the gloomy thought of dirty glasses and used paper plates strewn over the living room, dining room, kitchen, and screened front porch. When the last of the guests had left at oh-one-thirty, she'd paused only to wrap and refrigerate the leftover sausage rolls before stripping off her clothes and flopping into bed.

She raised on one elbow to squint across Ted's inert body at the digital clock on the other side of the king-size bed. Eight thirty-five. She didn't have to get up so soon on Saturday, but she knew the vision of beer stains on the coffee table and burgeoning mold colonies in the kitchen wouldn't let her sleep any longer. And the cat was probably gorging himself sick on crumbs from the chips and dips.

Julie sat up. No sound from the kids, of course. She gently poked Ted in the ribs. He emitted a faint snort and rolled over. "Slug," she muttered. *Well, the sooner I start, the sooner it'll be done.*

After a hasty wash-up, she scrambled into shorts and T-shirt and headed for the living room. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and scanned the scene with her mouth open.

No glasses with puddles of beer, wine, or cola. No crumbs ground into the carpet. No paper plates and plastic forks. Not even any stale-smelling ashtrays. The room looked as if that cleaning crew she'd fantasized about had blown through like a benign monsoon. It even smelled clean, not like pine or lemon cleanser, but like a garden after a spring rain.

Julie shook her head. *Now I'm imagining fragrances, and thinking like a commercial on top of it!*

A quick peek into dining room and kitchen showed that whoever had beaten her to the mess hadn't missed any of it. Even the trash bags had disappeared. One strange touch, though – the glasses were displayed on the counter instead of put away in the cabinet. Displayed in a rectangular pattern, at that. *Weird. Well, I'm not complaining.*

She crept down the hall to listen at the kids' bedroom doors. Silence. She didn't really think Meg and Mark had done the work, anyway. Aside from the cataclysmic personality change that would entail, they couldn't cooperate on a task without yelling at each other like rival fans at the

Army-Navy game. But when had Ted managed to clean up? He'd staggered off to bed right along with her, and surely she would have awakened if he'd tried sneaking out at dawn to surprise her.

*Why quibble about details? Let the gift horse sleep; he's earned it.* After bringing in the newspaper and feeding the cat, she settled at the kitchen table with a pot of coffee.

She luxuriated in the quiet for some time before Ted appeared, his thinning blond hair uncombed, his usual faded Bermuda shorts displaying his jogger's build. She jumped up and threw her arms around his neck. "Thanks a million for cleaning up." When he opened his mouth to answer, she kissed him.

"Umm," he mumbled into her neck. "What are you talking about?"

She pulled back to gaze up at him. "You did a great job, but why on earth did you leave the glasses like that?"

"Huh?" He stared at the counter by the sink. "Hey, not me. Must've been the kids. Does this mean I have to return the kiss?"

She dodged his lips. "What kids? Not ours – you must mean the changelings who replaced them overnight."

Ted shrugged and poured himself a mug of coffee. "Who else? Unless it was a flock of little elves."

Luckily, Julie was alone in the house when the answer popped out at her that afternoon. The kitchen faucet had mysteriously developed a steady leak, and Ted had driven to the hardware store for repair parts. Both Meg and Mark, scenting the threat of work, had run off with friends. As Julie sat at the sewing machine, hemming a doll's skirt, Smog sprinted into the room and skidded to a halt next to the old bureau where she kept fabric scraps and patterns. The cat whipped his tail from side to side and challenged unseen prey with a deep-throated yowl.

Julie edged close to him. "Did you find that mouse? Good boy." She leaned over to peer between the chest and the wall. Yes, she definitely saw something moving. "Hang on, I'll flush it out for you."

She brought a broom from the kitchen and prodded at the thing behind the bureau. It darted out, and Smog pounced. He sat at Julie's feet, growling between his teeth, grasping the creature in his jaws.

No, not a mouse. Too big. Its four limbs dragged on the floor, even though Smog held his chin high. And two of those limbs looked more like arms than legs. Mice could be brown, but they didn't have humanoid faces. And they didn't wear ragged shreds of clothing.

Julie sagged into the rocking chair. *What am I looking at? Whatever it is, can't let him kill it --* She hurried into the kitchen and returned with a large pyrex mixing bowl. The creature was still there. Smog apparently didn't know what to do with it.

"Neither do I, kitty." She crouched next to the cat, holding the bowl poised above him. "Let go! Drop it!" She poked the cat, who must have tightened his grip,

because his prey squealed. Fighting her repugnance – and fear; it might have sharp teeth – she grabbed one of the thing's legs and tugged. The startled cat let go, and she slammed the bowl down over the creature. Smog stalked away, indignant at being robbed of his catch.

Julie sat on the floor beside the bowl and stared at the thing. It was muddy brown and had pointed ears and a shriveled, squashed-in face. The bent limbs were long and stick-thin, like a spider monkey's. She noticed that the hands and feet ended in blunt stubs, with no fingers or toes. It glared at her.

"What in heaven's name is that thing?"

"What do you think I am?" The voice penetrated the dome of the bowl as a querulous squeak. "And are you going to leave me in here forever to suffocate?"

"If you've been inside that hole in the attic for who knows how long," she said, "I'm not sure you can suffocate."

The thing's tone became coaxing. "Let me out, Mistress. I won't run away. You have my sworn word. We can help each other, you know."

She removed the bowl. *I can't be cruel to a helpless animal – or whatever.* Her brain churned, trying to process this anomaly. *Unless I'm dreaming, in which case it doesn't much matter how I treat it – him.* "You cleared up the mess last night, didn't you? How?" *No fingers.*

"By magic, how do you think?" He delivered an awkward seated bow. "And my apologies, mistress, for the damage to your pump."

"My what?" Julie shook her head to settle the rattle of confusion. "You mean the faucet? You did that?"

He shrugged. "The wonders of this time are new to me. But I trust I performed the other tasks to your liking?"

"Why did you do that?"

"'Twas my duty, since you left such lavish refreshment for me."

"Refreshment?" Did he drink the dregs out of the glasses? *Must have, he couldn't mean stale tortilla chips.* "What are you?"

The mannikin sat cross-legged on the floor with his arms folded. "You'd say a brownie. Or some folk call us boggarts."

"Brownie." Julie rubbed her eyes. *I haven't had enough sleep to deal with this today.* "Aren't you supposed to work for a bowl of milk?"

He sniffed. "Milk, pah! I liked your offering much better. Speaking of drink –"

"What? Oh, sure, wait here." If she played the generous hostess, he might stick around longer. A little man who could clean the whole house by magic had definite possibilities. She poured a couple of ounces of leftover blush wine into a wide-mouthed juice glass and set it on the floor. The brownie extruded an insectoid tongue and siphoned up the liquid without stopping for breath. If he needed to breathe at all.

He smacked his lips. "Ah, that hits the spot."

"Uh – do you have a name?"

His face wrinkled even deeper, in what looked like a frown. "Names have power. We don't just give 'em away."

"Well, I have to call you something besides 'brownie.'" She giggled, quickly biting back the impulse before hysterics could seize her. "How about Charlie Brown?"

The creature snorted but offered no direct objection.

"So, Charlie, how does this deal work? I've never had a live-in brownie before."

"Very simple, Mistress. You set out refreshments for me every night, and you needn't give another thought to your household tasks. You don't bother me, I don't bother you – and keep that beast away from me!" His skinny limbs shivered.

"The cat? I'll shut him in the sewing room at night. I don't want anybody else cleaning in there, anyway." *This will be great! No salary, no record-keeping, no Social Security copayments!* "During the day – well, you could hide in the pantry. I never let Smog into it."

"Good enough." He unfolded himself into a semi-crouch.

"Wait, don't disappear yet! I have to know – how on earth did you get here in the first place?" *Unless I'm dreaming all this.*

The creature shrugged. "A plain enough tale. Mistress Fletcher brought me over from the old country. When the folk of the Massachusetts colony drove her out, she settled here."

"Drove her out?"

"The parson and the elders accused her as a witch. They thought I was a demon familiar." He emitted a creaking sound that might have been a laugh. "Mistress Fletcher grew dissatisfied with my services and stuffed me into that hole." He scowled. "With an incantation writ on parchment to keep me there. So, Mistress, I'm forever in your debt for my release." After bowing to Julie, he vanished in a brown blur.

Rising to her feet, Julie shook her head. *Brownies. No way can I tell Ted about this. He'd think I've totally lost it.*

She glanced around the room, which held no sign of a visitor except the empty glass. *Maybe I have.*

Nevertheless, she left a cereal bowl half full of cheap sherry on the kitchen counter that night. When she woke Sunday morning, she found the house spotless again, scented with that outdoorsy fragrance. The dishes had even been put away. Juice glasses were mixed in with coffee mugs, and the saucers were stacked upside down, but she didn't quibble. Any employee needed time to adjust to a new routine.

In the following two weeks, she got no glimpses of "Charlie," but she saw the results of his magic every day. The copious free time allowed her to get far ahead of schedule in her doll-making, and she placed several new ads in anticipation of filling more orders than she'd previously

had time for. She happily contemplated showing up at the craft fair with more than enough items for the impulse purchasers who might buy an early Christmas gift on the spot but, on cooler reflection, wouldn't bother to order one custom-made.

If Ted noticed how often she replenished the liquor cabinet, he didn't remark on the change. She took care to buy only a couple of bottles of sherry at a time and hide them toward the back. Luckily, the brownie didn't mind the bargain-priced brand. She idly wondered why Mistress Fletcher, the supposed witch, had become "dissatisfied" with such a useful servant. True, the TV often turned itself on in the middle of the night, and one morning Julie awoke to find the Beach Boys' "Little Deuce Coupe" playing on the stereo in perpetual repetition, but those were minor inconveniences.

She got her first inkling of trouble one morning when Ted rummaged through his sock drawer and growled, "What is this, a late April Fool joke?"

Half-asleep, she threw off the sheet and sat up. "Huh?"

He tossed a couple of pairs of socks onto the bed. She unrolled one set, discovering that it consisted of a white and a black. The other turned out to be identical. She giggled. "Hey, at least it's consistent."

He pawed through the drawer and pitched three more pairs toward her. "They're all like that. Aren't you a little too old for this stuff?"

No use trying to explain. And blaming the kids would just complicate matters. "Sorry, I don't know what got into me. Irresistible madcap impulse." She suppressed another giggle.

With an exasperated sigh, Ted snatched up two white socks and resumed dressing.

The next day, Meg's favorite blouse and jeans turned up in Mark's closet. Julie had to take the blame for that error, to prevent fratricide.

Gradually the anomalies became more bizarre -- a crystal vase of rosebuds in the refrigerator, a dozen eggs in Mark's underwear drawer, Smog's food bowl in the oven, the dining room chairs upside down on the patio, the entire contents of the dishwasher stacked in a precarious pyramid on top of the clothes dryer. All except the flatware, which she'd noticed the brownie never touched. Julie was particularly upset when she heard the blender whirring one Sunday morning and found the colorfully confettied remains of the comics inside it. *Well, he did say he had trouble with the "wonders" of the twentieth century.*

Ted began making remarks such as, "You aren't going through the change, are you? I thought you were too young for that." Her denial of responsibility led to Ted's accusing the children, followed by yelling contests.

One evening when Ted, Meg, and Mark were all out, Julie made a closer than normal examination of the liquor cabinet. *Oh, no! Why didn't I think of this before?* The sherry wasn't the only alcoholic beverage whose level had decreased. Ted's seldom-touched bottles of Scotch and brandy were half empty. Charlie hadn't settled for her

"offerings"; he'd started helping himself. Wasn't that against the fairy code of honor? *My brownie is a lush. No wonder the witch fired him.*

If he could use his magic to steal booze at will, stopping the nightly handouts wouldn't make any difference. It might even annoy him, and heaven knew what havoc he'd create if he started *trying* to cause trouble. Julie decided it was past time to learn more about her live-in help.

She spent the next afternoon at the public library downtown, reading an illustrated tome on fairies. The fanciful drawings and conflicting legends didn't inspire confidence. Some of the information seemed authentic, though. She read that a brownie was supposed to appear as a small, brown man in ragged clothes, with no digits on hands and feet. Accurate so far. She hoped the various safeguards against fairy magic were equally reliable. She made a mental note of those that might be of practical use in the home.

*What am I supposed to do with him?* she wondered while making her preparations late that night, after the rest of the family had fallen asleep. *Put him on Antabuse? Send him to a twelve-step program? Seems cruel just to stick him back in the attic.* Well, she could decide once she'd caught him.

With her supplies ready at hand, she stood in the middle of the kitchen and said in a harsh whisper, "Charlie, come out here. We have to talk." No answer. She raised her voice a bit. "You show yourself right this minute, or I'll sic the cat on you."

He popped out of a corner and appeared at her feet. "Does my work not please you, Mistress?"

"You know darn well it doesn't! You've got my husband thinking I'm crazy. Or blaming me for your boozing!" She knelt beside the brownie, one hand behind her back. "You didn't tell me you had an alcohol problem."

"What problem? All the fair folk enjoy a wee sip of the grape or the grain." A whine crept into his voice. "And you'd indulge, too, if you'd spent nigh three hundred years in a musty hole."

His self-pity kept him from noticing how close she'd sneaked. In one quick stroke, Julie swooped down with the carbonized steel carving knife – and pinned the hem of his smock to the floor. *Cold iron, just like the book said!* Ignoring Charlie's outraged squeals, she grabbed the box of salt she'd left on the nearby counter and poured a circle around the creature. "Shut up, or I'll sprinkle it on your head." He wrapped himself in a ball and fell silent. *Great, the salt works, too.*

Hardening her heart against his pleading expression, she used a second butcher knife to force him into a gopher trap she'd hidden under a pile of newspapers. The clerk at the garden shop had assured her that the cage was made of steel. "I ought to put you right back where Mistress Fletcher left you. I still have that piece of paper with the Latin on it."

"No, anything but that," he whimpered.

Not only did Julie hate the idea of losing her free cleaning service, she almost felt sorry for the grotesque being. "Don't you have any self-respect? Look at you! Do you really want to spend the next however many centuries as a slave to chemical addiction?"

"Give me another chance, Mistress. I'll mend my ways."

*Yeah, right.* From what she'd read about the problem, addicts would say anything to manipulate people. "Give me your word of honor to do exactly what I tell you." According to the book on fairies, leprechauns and such were absolutely bound by their promises. She hoped that rule applied to brownies.

Charlie nodded with a show of pathetic eagerness. "Yes, yes, you have my sworn word."

"Okay, but remember, if you break it, there's still the cat. And I'm not about to trust you running around loose. Too much temptation." She couldn't get rid of all the liquor in the house; Ted would *really* think she had a problem if she went that far. After a moment's thought, she said, "First off, you're living in that cage." She cut off his squawk of protest by raising the salt box over his head. "I'll keep you in the attic where Smog and the kids won't find you." Neither would Ted, who never bothered with the attic unless she drafted him to carry up heavy items. "You'll get a bowl of milk every night – more than you got when you were trapped inside the wall. I'll let you out once a week to clean up, and if you behave yourself, maybe I'll add a shot of brandy to your supper that night." She knew he ought to quit cold turkey, but she suspected he would rebel at that degree of strictness.

"You're a hard woman," he grumbled. "Almost as bad as the witch."

"If you're good, I might even let you watch TV sometimes. That's the deal. Take it, or out into the cold, cruel world you go."

Folding his arms, he bared his teeth at her.

"Think about it. You expect to find another home? How many people do you think will feed a brownie these days? If they decide you're not a hallucination, they'll probably call an exterminator or turn you over to a gov-

ernment lab."

"I'll take your – deal," he said, still scowling.

"Your promise? You'll obey my orders and return to the cage when you're told?"

"Aye, you have my promise."

"Wonderful." Julie put the knives and the salt away, then poured the brownie a cup of milk. "Drink up. I'll bet malnutrition is part of your problem. You'll see, in the long run this will be for your own good."

And to make sure Charlie got the full benefit of the new agreement, she bought an hour-long videotape on overcoming chemical dependency, which she made him watch every Monday after he finished his chores.

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## AMBER

by Corrine DeWinter

Gather honey, coriander  
and charms  
for the wide eyed  
sleepless child.  
I will keep the wolf  
from the door,  
the trees from beckoning  
to you  
on restless nights,  
the witches from consoling  
and bargaining  
for earthly secrets,  
the seven seas  
from swallowing you.  
Wonderland trembles  
for one so little,  
but sleep sound  
on the half shell  
of dreams,  
no gypsy shall win you  
with a riddle.

# FLIGHT

*Tim Scott*

It was by accident that Cyril discovered that he had been granted immunity from the lazy laws of gravity, which assume compliance, without enforcement. Cyril had been climbing up to the balcony of the second floor condominium which, for financial reasons, he shared with his mother. He was climbing up onto the balcony, rather than taking the more conventional route of the stairs, in order to play an admittedly childish prank on his cat, a furball of a Maine Coon that stared at him with shocked fascination, agape at her human companion behaving as if he were a giant squirrel. It was just after making eye contact with the cat, Clovis, that he did a most unsquirrellike thing. He slipped. And fell. Or began to fall. He twisted his body abruptly about in space, attempting to turn the fall at least partially into a leap. With the motion of his torso, the downward motion stopped. He bobbed easily in mid-air. Silently, he pondered. He looked up and down the walkway of the building, and was relieved to note that no one was in sight. He felt absurdly guilty, as though he were doing something obscene. He knew that this was a private moment, and he did not wish to be observed. Strangely, this concern for privacy eclipsed, and for the moment precluded, amazement. But not for long. Experimentally, he flexed his muscles and concentrated on altitude. Tentatively his body bobbed upward. Clovis sat transfixed, enormous green eyes following his progress through space. Cyril closed his eyes and stretched. He was even with the third floor window of the likeable elderly couple living above him. They, too, had a grown child living with them, a daughter named Nancy, whose only obviously unattractive trait was her smoking. Nancy, her back to the window, was just slipping out of a pair of panties. Naked, she bundled her clothes and padded barefooted into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Cyril blushed and stretched once again. He was above the roof of the building, and came in for a gentle landing. He walked to the edge of the roof at the front of the building. He had never been on his own roof before, and he wanted to see what he could see. Three floors in Chicago, even in a quiet residential neighbourhood, is not a commanding height. The perspective on the spire of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, less than a block away, was a new one, however, he had to admit. A quick look up and down the block revealed no pedestrians. If anyone was watching from the concealment of a window, that was their problem. He stepped off of the roof, and permitted himself to fall gracefully to the condominium lawn. He had thinking to do. He went upstairs, using the stairs.

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The wind was strong, with gusts tearing at his light windbreaker as if it were a canvas sail on a gale-tossed sea.

From his particular perspective, from where he was standing on the Golden Gate Bridge, his view of the lights of the Bay Area was passable, but not surpassing.

He had spent literally every last cent he had had on a coach-class airline ticket to San Francisco, with enough left over for two meals per day from MacDonald's and a single room at the Hotel Beresford for the duration of his stay. He did not understand his sense of urgency. He only knew that, for the first time in his life, he trusted his instincts completely, and San Francisco drew him like a magnet. The Bridge did not make it easy for jumpers, though there were enough suicides from the Bridge for all of that. He had a bit of clambering to do before reaching access to empty space. His uncle Roberto, a civil engineer in San Jose, had once told him that the Bridge was suspended approximately seventy stories over the waters of San Francisco Bay. Cy had seen the view many times by light of day, and it had not seemed that far to him. But what did he know?

He jumped. He discovered that he had to fight the breeze, but it was only slightly more difficult than walking head-on into a very strong wind. Not easy, but certainly do-able. He soared. He soared as man was not meant to soar. He thought briefly of Icarus, and looked towards the moon. She was full of secrets, and She would keep his. With an adrenaline rush that kept him from feeling the strain on his muscles, he rose. He gasped with astonishment to find himself very far above, perhaps seventy stories above, the Golden Gate Bridge. The yellow and red lights of traffic snaked across the Bridge in both directions. The lights of the city climbed the hills into the distance. The surrounding communities, Berkeley, Oakland, were the beacons of the landbound, and for all the glory of the present moment, he knew that it was to them and not to the eagles he was kin.

But not for a while yet. For the moment, for the moment, he exulted. He rose and dove and swooped. He shouted his wild glee into the ridges of the wind. For the instant, he knew perfect freedom, was perfect freedom. A nanosecond of greed rose and seemed insatiable. He wanted New York Harbour this way. The Golden Triangle of Pittsburgh. He wanted it all, every view, every city, just as he sometimes believed that only every woman in the world could satisfy his appetite for female flesh. The nanosecond passed, and that moment, the one perfect moment, was enough.

He did not land until almost dawn.

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He sat, in a seat in the waiting area of a gate at Chicago O'Hare's C Terminal. He did not yet desire to take the Rapid Transit home. His flight home from San Francisco had arrived just under an hour before. The gift had been

taken back. He had known it immediately upon awakening, after his night of flight. He had spent the entire flight from California back to Chicago pondering the gift which he had been permitted to borrow. He wondered what had made him worthy. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps that was part of the gift's beauty. Who knew? He had decided, in any event, how to integrate the experience into his life. He

would not question it. He would let it be. He drained the last of his lousy airport coffee from the styrofoam cup, and tossed the cup into the nearest wastebin. He stood, picked up his one small suitcase, and began the trek towards the train, his feet solidly upon the ground.

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## MOVING ON

*Tom Liberman*

The sun hovered at its apex in the sky, driving its heat into the old dirt road. From far off in the distance a shallow rumbling sounded and a cloud of dust indicated fast-approaching movement of some kind. Soon a black and gold Camaro came charging around the bend and a young man wielding an aluminum baseball bat leaned out the window on the passenger side. The car slowed its pace as it approached the front of an old house and the boy reared back with his bat taking aim at the unpainted mail box at the head of the drive.

A loud crash followed as the bat made contact with its target and the car spun around in a circle its tires throwing up a cloud of dust. The entire scene became cloaked with flying particles although the steady hum of the car stopped and the sound of opening and closing of doors came through the murk.

As the dust began to settle five boys loomed forward towards the wreckage of the mailbox that littered the driveway with unopened envelopes. The tallest of the boys, about 18 years old, still held the bat in his right hand and he led the other four towards the house. All had grim expressions on their faces and the others carried chains, knives and a paint bucket.

The leader of the group approached the two story country house with determined footsteps and climbing the front porch hit the door with a heavy blow. The other boys busied themselves with the paint and various other weapons, defacing the property. A short red headed boy with a thousand freckles and a lean body busied himself tearing up the beautiful rose garden on the east side of the house. Another boy, wearing a black leather flight jacket with brown hair and sensitive eyes, climbed the outside of the porch and began hammering in the windows on the house that were all on the second floor.

The boys continued their frenzy for some time before one by one slowing down and moving back towards the car. The leader stopped last, his hands sweaty, the front door and porch half demolished, and turned to look at their work. He surveyed the broken windows, the destroyed gardens and the random splashes of paint as his breath

slowly calmed. He looked back towards the house a final time and then glancing quickly at the slowly descending sun hurled his bat towards what remained of the front door. It whirled through the silent air and crashed heavily into the side of the house.

The boys piled back into the car and it vanished down the road with a loud growl, spewing rocks in every direction. Soon the dust settled and the scene became quiet again. Envelopes lay still in the breezeless air and dying roses littered the yard with their bloodless corpses. Still no movement came from within the house as the sun slowly descended.

The Camaro sped down the dirt road for a quarter of a mile before it intersected a blacktop street where it turned right. Following the blacktop it roared past a sign reading, "Hamilton 2 miles." Soon a small town appeared on the horizon and the car slowed to 55 as it passed a faded billboard for Budweiser just on the edge of the city. From behind the billboard a blue and white police car pulled out and headed into town behind the Camaro. The blacktop road soon turned into Main street and the boys rolled down past a brick building where a group of men sat having lunch.

The men watched the car roll past and a few shook their heads sadly but for a couple of seconds no-one said a word. Finally, Mort Cooper, a gray haired man with blue eyes and a big belly, broke the silence. "Nobody much minded him as long as he stayed up there in his house and didn't bug anyone."

"How old is the girl?" asked Ralph Patterson, a local apple farmer.

Some discussion took place before Sam Thomason, a scarecrow-like man who owned a good deal of the land outside town, clarified matters. "She just had her fifteenth birthday two weeks ago. I remember because my girl Tracy went."

"It's a damn shame," piped up Harold Pinter, who ran the insurance office on State before turning it over to his son a few years back. "He spent a lot of money in this town. Don't you think there's some way we can tide the matter over?"

"He'll be pissed off about what those boys did. Made-line Conner, that's Randy's ma, told me the boys took paint and baseball bats and planned to burn down the place if they could."

"Serves him right," chimed in Cooper. "It's unnatural, the devil's work, that's what I say."

"He never hurt anybody," said Pinter. "I've known him for 30 years and my pop knew him before that and grandfather before that and nobody can say he's done a thing to hurt this town."

"I've seen him in church in the evening," said Thomason.

"Sam," said Cooper, "when have you been to church lately?"

"I go every Sunday and you know it, Coop. Besides, that isn't the point. That boy can't help what he is and he never touched a person or a pet in this town or any other around here. I've heard father Vincent talk about all the help he's donated for charity in these parts."

You call him a boy but young he ain't and that girl is only fifteen," said Cooper. "He may look like he's eighteen but he moved into that house at least 60 years ago by my reckoning."

The discussion quickly broke down into an argument about exactly how long the boy in question lived in the house. The lively debate lasted long through the lunch hour and different members of the town slipped in and out of the conversation and the building. The crowd thinned later in the afternoon except for a few older gentlemen and then as evening approached people began to fill the restaurant again.

A burly man wearing a police uniform came into the building, taking off his hat at the doorway, and sat down heavily at the counter and mopped his sweaty brow with a white handkerchief.

The conversation died down to a few whispers and an occasional glance for a couple of minutes. Soon a red haired woman in her late forties with a cigarette dangling from her mouth plunked down a plate of food and a glass of ice cold Coca Cola in front of the sheriff.

He took a deep breath, picked up his hamburger and took a large bite before sitting back in his chair. "Well, boys," he said. "I'll be heading out there pretty soon to see what he has to say."

"You be careful, Sheriff," said the red-haired waitress. "The devil is loose in Hamilton, that's what Emmy Carpenter told me."

"That's right," chimed in Cooper, slipping in from the bathroom. "That boy's inner soul finally came out and it's evil. The Good Lord won't take any of us if we don't do something about it."

The outside door opened revealing the quickly approaching dusk and Doc Powers, who came in with his head down and his lips pressed tightly together. Doc wore a pair of wire rimmed glasses and carried a copy of the *Hamiltonian* under his left arm. His step remained lively

despite his 67 years.

"Doc," cried about half of the men in the place.

"Afternoon, Doc," said the Sheriff with a slight nod of his head, and the two exchanged a knowing glance. The doctor sat down and gave his order to the waitress.

The Sheriff pushed his heavy wooden chair backwards, causing a dull scraping sound, as well-worn wood slid on the floorboards.

"Lyle," said Doc Powers to the Sheriff as he put down his cup of coffee. "You be careful out there. I know how strong that boy is."

"Doc," said the Sheriff. "If he wanted to hurt anyone he surely would and there's not a thing anybody could do about it 'til tomorrow morning. He's never hurt anybody in this town, although plenty of people have done and said pretty mean spirited things to him." With that he slammed his way past the front door and soon the sound of an engine broke the quiet. Moments later came a siren that soon faded off into the growing darkness.

Inside the restaurant a momentary hush fell over those assembled but soon Mort Cooper broke the silence. "Doc, you examined the Conner girl. What did he do to her?"

"Mort," said the tall, thin doctor. "I've got to keep my patient-doctor relationship private. You know that. That's for the rest of you, too," he said looking around the room. "I can't discuss this case in public unless a crime's been committed and I'll tell you this. No crime has been done."

"You should check her virginity, Doc," cried Donald Prack, a heavysset farmer wearing a John Deere cap and a dusty old blue Jeans jacket.

"Couple of years too late for that," cracked the waitress and the bar cackled with glee at the joke while Prack sat in the back with hatred in his eyes.

"I'll tell you folks one thing," said Michael Howden, who owned *The Rodeo* bar. "If you all run him out of town it'll be the worst thing to happen to Hamilton since the flood of '66."

"Hear that!" cried Cooper. "It's the folks whose money he's got that defend him. Mike, Doc and Pinter earlier. This ain't about money, it's about what's right and wrong. It's about God and the Devil and you folks looking in your wallet better check your soul because your better off empty in one than the other."

"That's right," yelled Prack, jumping to his feet. "We've got a moral duty to go on down there and burn his place up." He started for the door, but everyone else remained seated. "What's the problem? Ain't you fellas good Christians? C'mon Coop, let's go."

Cooper sat silently drinking his coffee. "Prack, you moron. Look outside. It's dark and I'm no fool."

Prack moved back towards his seat quickly with a grim-faced look over his shoulder and out the window into the darkness. "Well, we've got to go out there first thing in the morning and solve this problem once and for all. Somebody should have done it years ago."

"Why?" said Doc, looking up from his soup. "That boy has done nothing to anybody in all the years he's lived out there."

"Until now," said Cooper.

"What's he done?" said Howden. "He took a girl out for dinner. What's wrong with that?"

A murmur of approval came from the rest of those gathered at the restaurant.

The doors opened again and this time Father Vincent and the Mayor, Frank Scholz, came through, their faces grim.

"Mayor," cried one half of the crowd, while the other greeted the local priest equally boisterously. "What brings you out tonight, Father?" asked a voice from the back. "Mayor, what is going to be done about it?" yelled another.

"Gentlemen," said the Mayor, putting his hands up with his palms forward in a pacifying gesture. "We're looking into the situation and rest assured that appropriate action will be taken as soon as we've completely discussed the problem."

"Oh, shit," said Cooper. "Washington's come to Hamilton."

Most of the crowd laughed quietly, although a few, including Prack, sat with puzzled expressions on their faces.

"Seriously," said Scholz. "We can't go rushing into things until we've had a council meeting. We can't just throw him out of town and you know Lyle won't put up with a lynching."

"Hell," said Mark Viehl, who ran the hardware store on the corner of Eighth and Main. "We've got almost the entire council sitting right here. Let's call an emergency meeting and try to get a hold of Ann Williams and Paulie Marcowitz."

"I don't know...," said the Mayor.

"It's legal," said Cooper. "My daddy served as councilman and I know the rules. We can call an emergency meeting and, if we get a quorum, anything we do is legal. With the Mayor here, along with Mark, Andre, and Howie, we've already got four of the six."

"All right," sighed Scholz. "We've got a council meeting but we need the secretary and this is new business so it'll have to wait for protocol."

"Screw that," said Prack. "This meeting's to decide whether to kill that devil thing living outside of town or not."

"You're not on the council, Prack, so shut up. I'm the Mayor and I decide how things are going to run. We are going to wait for Ann and Paulie to get here and then we'll address that issue. Until then I want everyone to just calm down."

Most of the crowd sat quietly waiting for the two missing councilmen to show but word of the meeting soon spread and quickly the entire town seemed to pour into the place. By the time Williams and Marcowitz arrived the crowded diner's floorboards were creaking in protest.

"I call this emergency meeting of the council to order," said the Mayor. "We've come together to discuss the problem of Alexander Cornelius."

"Burn the bastard," cried Prack from his prominent place at the front of the restaurant.

"Shut up, Prack," said the Mayor "or when Lyle gets back I'll have him throw you in the cooler for a few hours. This is a council meeting and you'll have your chance to talk. Now then, we all know about Cornelius' problem. The question is whether or not that problem poses a threat to this town. Before the council debates this issue we'll let the townsfolk say what they want. Harold Pinter, why don't you start."

"Mayor, that boy's done a lot of good for this town. I know religious folks will say bad things about him but I go to church and I've read the Bible. There's nothing in there about him or anything like him. If the devil is associated with that boy I'll eat my hat. He's good at heart and if he wants to go out with a young woman than I say we let him."

"You're just looking out for your wallet, Pinter," said Cooper. "Cornelius is a Demon and you're just denying it through greed. What if he marries that girl and starts to raise a family? What then? Pretty soon we'll have a whole town of those things and then what'll you say? How about it, Father, what do you say?"

Father Vincent stood up slowly and paused for a moment before saying anything. "I've thought a lot about Cornelius since I took over the parish. He does do a lot of good things for this town. It's undeniably true. He contributes more than money, too. We all know how he helped get the Applebees in town. Still I can't deny qualms about what he is. It's unnatural and not the work of God. I say we ask him to leave but I'll have no part of a lynching and those boys that went out there this afternoon need to be punished."

"There, ya see," cried Prack. "Even the padre wants him out."

"Shut up, you thick bastard," yelled Howden. "If we toss him out of town we can kiss a lot of other things goodbye, too. We wouldn't have the hospital without him. Sure he needs it but without his money we could never support it and then we'd have to drive to Quincy for medical care."

"He needs it to supply him with food," yelled Prack. "It's unholy and our souls will be doomed if we support it."

"Prack," said the Mayor. "Hold your tongue. I think we all know where you stand on this issue."

"Cooper's right," said Ann Williams from the head of the table. "We could live with just him out there but if he starts a family then what? The kids will have to go to school and be with your children and grandchildren. Do any of us want that?"

"He hasn't even gotten married yet, and you're trying



to start a family. Don't you think we should wait until there is a problem before we get all up in arms?" broke in Pinter.

"I think there already is a problem," said Williams. "It's just that none of us wants to deal with it because it would be costly. I've heard what Father Vincent has to say and that clinches it for me. I say we vote on the thing and get it over with."

"There won't have to be a vote," said a deep voice from the doorway.

The crowd split to each side and Sheriff Lyle Peter walked through the middle. Droplets of water lay on his jacket and as the group grew quiet they could hear the splattering of rain on the roof.

"I've been out to Alex's. He knows what's going on. He wanted me to tell you all he's very sorry if he's caused any trouble. He'll be moving tonight and he won't bother this town again."

"All right," said Prack. "Let's make sure he gets out and give him an escort."

Peter grabbed him by the collar and lifted him off the ground. "Prack, you asshole. That man has done nothing wrong. He's just in love and you bastards can't deal with it. He said a lot of nice things about the people in this town but I'm not in the mood to repeat them to you lynching son's of bitches. That boy has a good heart and I know he'll be in heaven when I get there."

With that the Sheriff turned and walked back out the door, leaving the town behind him.

## PIRE

by David Sparenberg

A small bear  
is a flame  
on the tundra.  
A small bush  
is a flame  
on savanna.  
A strange fire  
is a tree  
in the shadow  
of the mountain.  
A small bee  
is a flame  
in a flower.

A red leaf  
is a flame  
of transition.  
A red hawk  
is a flame  
in blue sky.  
A strange fire  
is a tree  
in the shadow  
of the mountain.  
A small touch  
is a flame  
of desire.

## BOOK OF KINGS

by David Sparenberg

Look there!  
A false king  
grips  
with bloody hands  
the holy throne.  
Drunken  
and degenerate  
his madness  
meets the morning.

Deep  
in the shadows  
of the heart  
a shepherd, pure  
with tenderness  
strings  
a singing harp.

Over  
each greening knoll  
the white clouds  
of spring  
imitate  
white flocks of sheep.

A  
face alive  
with childlike wonder  
joins  
a happy voice.

Behind his tent  
the mad king ponders  
ruination  
of a kingdom  
hesitates  
and regrets.

Deep  
between note  
and silence  
anointment happens  
a name  
is spoken.  
Over  
each greening  
knoll...

## TRANSFORMATION OF THE DRAGON

by David Sparenberg

Go up in the water  
where the serpents run  
the phosphorescent lizards  
in spirals to the sun

go up  
where the fire-  
spawn fly.

Lay down my bones  
in shamanic mode  
lay down my bones  
in hermetical blue  
in the gray, silvergray  
and the sky-water blue  
for I  
am turned  
again.

Cry out to the weatherwild  
hex on the door  
cry out  
to the mirrorless  
moonless  
marrow of eyes

cry out  
to the wings  
cry out to the winds  
to the shadows of flame  
the shadows of things  
to this rage  
without end

for I  
am turned  
again.

# THE KRAKEN CUP

*Douglas A. Rossman*

Storrad the Proud was a viking fierce, and a wizard of no little skill. This deadly combination permitted Storrad and his followers to terrorize the western coast of Midgard. In their shallow-bottomed dragon ships they would swoop down on unsuspecting coastal villages, carry off everything worth taking, and—as they departed—put the village to the torch.

Carried away by their easy successes, and rather frustrated by how little gold and silver they had seized, Storrad set his sights on bigger prey—Hlesoy, the legendary island stronghold of the giant Aegir, who with his mermaid wife, Ran, ruled the sea and gathered the treasures from all ships that sank beneath the waves. In this task they were assisted by their nine daughters and the other merfolk. Most sea raiders steered far away from Hlesoy, wisely choosing not to challenge Aegir and merfolk, but Storrad had great faith in his abilities as a wizard and strategist . . . and an even greater hunger for the treasures of Hlesoy.

Thus it was that one morning Storrad's three dragon ships came sailing toward a strange fog bank that rested upon the sea off the coast of Alfheim. As the ships breasted the rolling swells, the men soon noticed the heads of giant women breaking the surface of the water, their long green hair floating out beside them. Curiosity about the strangers who had invaded their part of the sea had drawn Aegir's daughters to the ships.

This curiosity was just what Storrad had been counting on, and had alerted his men to expect. So the warriors kept their weapons out of sight, smiled and called out to the mermaids, and waved bright necklaces and other jewelry that might warm a woman's heart. Delighted by their visitor's friendliness and apparent offer of gifts, the mermaids threw caution to the winds, swam right up to the ships, and grasped the gunwales with one hand while reaching for the trinkets with the other. Alas for them, the ships' hulls had been magicked by Storrad, and the mermaids were trapped—stuck fast to the gunwales!

Storrad's little fleet and its captives were able to sail right up to Hlesoy and anchor in the shallows along its rocky shore, for the fog bank had lifted the moment the mermaids were captured. Leaving some warriors to guard the ships and the captives still attached to them, Storrad led the rest of his band into Aegir's rocky hall. Storrad's eyes grew round and his greedy heart beat faster at the sight of that hall, whose walls were covered with so much gleaming gold that it needed no other source of illumination.

Aegir and Ran had known of the raider's coming, for word travels swiftly in the sea, but—fearing for their daughters' safety—there seemed to be nothing they could do to defend themselves or their realm. Aegir remained seated on his throne while Ran reclined in a nearby pool of water

connected to sea. She had tried to swim out to comfort her daughters, but Storrad had magically sealed off the water-gate so Ran was forced to bide her time. Storrad, it seemed, firmly held the upper hand.

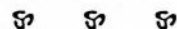
While Storrad shouted directions—and Aegir and Ran glumly watched—the raiders scurried about gathering up all the gold, silver, and jewelry they could find. And there was much, for the sea takes its toll. The men were just beginning to rip the gold plating down from the walls when Storrad's eyes fell upon a strange-looking drinking cup sitting in a wall recess beside Aegir's throne. The large cup seemed to be fashioned from a single piece of jadelike stone that glowed with a soft green light. The handle was shaped like a squid's tentacle and wrapped around the body of the cup. Storrad picked up the cup and examined it curiously.

"Well, what do we have here?" he mused thoughtfully.

Aegir spoke for the first time. "It's called the Kraken Cup, and I'd leave it here if I were you. It's much too dangerous to be kept anywhere other than Hlesoy."

"Oh, really?" said Storrad, now thoroughly intrigued. "Why don't you just tell me about it. We have all the time in the world."

"As you wish," replied Aegir.



A great Kraken, a squid as large as a small island, had taken up residence off the coast not many leagues from Hlesoy. Travelling beneath the waves it would swallow whole schools of fish at a single gulp. But that was not enough to quell its enormous appetite, so often the Kraken would float at the surface, its smooth, leathery back resembling nothing so much as a huge treeless skerry. When some unwary air breather approached—a seal, a whale, or a fisherman—the Kraken would plunge powerfully backward toward the bottom of the sea, its sudden departure from the surface creating a huge whirlpool that sucked its prey downward, too, until the great tentacles wrapped around the victim and stuffed it into the Kraken's mouth.

Now "kill to live" is a rule of the sea, so I could hardly blame the Kraken for trying to survive. Still, its presence in these waters was a threat to the lives and livelihood of my merfolk and our friends the sea elves, so I sent word by seagull to my grandson Heimdall . . . who, as you may have heard, knows a thing or two about magic, and is a handy fellow to have around when trouble comes calling.

Well, as soon as the gull had delivered its message, Heimdall galloped across the Rainbow Bridge and didn't stop riding until he had reached Riddo, the sea-elf village on the coast opposite Hlesoy. Leaving his faithful steed, Gulltopp, in the care of the elves, Heimdall went down to the water's edge, unrolled a seal skin he'd carried behind

his saddle, and changed himself into a seal. Yes, I did say a seal. You needn't look so surprised . . . his nine mothers being mermaids, he can do that, you know.

At any rate, Heimdall swam over to Hlesoy as fast as his flippers would carry him, not stopping until he had popped out of that pool over there and shed his seal skin. I led him right up the top of Hlesoy's highest hill and pointed in the direction where the Kraken had last been seen. Large as the beast was, it was much too distant for me to see, but far-sighted Heimdall spotted it at once. I could tell by the look on his face and the way he let out his breath that he was terribly unhappy about what he was looking at.

"I had no idea that the creature was so large, grandfather. I can see why you want to get rid of it . . . he'll eat you out of house and home in no time." Heimdall cupped his chin in one hand and was silent for a time. "I can't imagine how I could attack the Kraken from the outside, but if I could just get him to swallow something . . ."

"How do you expect to do that, my boy, and live to tell the story? Even if you could carry something close to him in your seal form, you could never hope to swim away fast enough to escape from his whirlpool and tentacles."

"True enough, grandfather, but if one of your orc-whale friends would agree to help, I just might be able to do it."

Well, that's just the way it turned out. Whales really are quite intelligent, you know, and far too many of them had fallen victim to the Kraken's bottomless appetite, so I had no trouble persuading one of the great black-and-white orc-whales to accompany Heimdall when he paddled off in a little sealhide coracle to approach the Kraken. Heimdall and the whale didn't speak aloud as you and I do, but they talked mind to mind in pictures. Anyway, when they had come as close to the squid's head as they dared, Heimdall unwrapped a large green stone he'd been carrying in his tunic, wedged it firmly in the framework of the coracle, and chanted a series of powerful bind runes over it. Immediately the stone began to glow and throb and give off the strongest odor of ripe fish you've ever smelled. That odor really caught the Kraken's attention and he began his backward dive.

Heimdall leapt into the water,

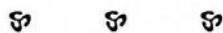
grabbed the orc-whale's dorsal fin, and they left the area as fast as the whale could swim. They were caught by the far edge of the whirlpool, and it was touch-and-go for a moment or two, but orc-whales are powerful swimmers and they managed to escape the pull of the diving Kraken.

What happened to the Kraken? Well, the coracle with the green stone was swept round and round the whirlpool until his tentacles embraced the little boat and stuffed it into his mouth. Then the strangest thing happened. Once the Kraken swallowed that green stone, he couldn't stop swallowing! From the tip of the tentacle he had used to stuff the coracle into his mouth right on back to his diving fins, he swallowed himself up. The sea rushed in to fill up all that space, and just for a short time there was a far larger whirlpool than any the Kraken had created in life. Then all was calm, as if the Kraken had never existed.

A few days later one of my merfolk popped out of the pool carrying this cup, which he had found on the sea



bottom where the Kraken had disappeared. Heimdall examined the cup carefully, declared it to be a fusion of the Kraken with the green stone he had swallowed, and said that I should keep it as a remembrance. He also warned that in some strange way the Kraken lives on embodied in the cup, so that no one should ever drink from it . . . and no one ever has.



"No one ever has, eh? Well I guess I'll just have to be the first," declared Storrard boldly. "Have one of your servants fetch that mead for which your hall is so famous."

Aegir sighed, "I really wouldn't do that if I were you. Still, if you insist . . ."

"I do insist," snapped Storrard impatiently.

Aegir signalled to one of his servants, and soon the man returned with a keg of mead and poured some of its golden contents into the Kraken Cup. After muttering a runic charm to offset any poison that might have been present in the cup or added to the mead, Storrard raised the cup to his lips. But, to his horror, no sooner had his lips touched the rim than the cup seemed to grow larger and take on a life of its own. The tentacle tip writhed free from the cup and wrapped itself around Storrard's neck. He had time to utter only one gurgling scream before he was pulled headfirst into the mouth of the cup and swallowed.

As Storrard's boots disappeared from sight, and the Kraken Cup shrank back to its normal size, Aegir mildly remarked "Tsk, tsk, tsk. I did try to warn him."

Then the sea lord's expression hardened. "As for the rest of you, I think you'll find that your leader's magic perished with him and my daughters are no longer your hostages. So you had best begone . . . at once."

The leaderless vikings remained where they were standing in a dazed, horrified silence. Aegir rose to his full fifteen-foot height, pointed to the entrance way, and belted: "I said, BEGONE!"

That outburst broke the spell, and the vikings fell over each other in their rush to vacate the hall and get to their ships. Aegir followed them to the shore where the vikings were desperately trying to maneuver their dragon ships around for departure. The prevailing winds offered little help, so Aegir took out a triple-knotted wind cord a sea-elf wizard had given him and untied the first knot. Immediately a brisk wind began to blow seaward, and the dragon ships set sail.

The vikings were beginning to congratulate themselves on their good luck when Aegir loosed the second knot. The wind began to blow much harder, hurling the ships westward across the surface of the sea. Then, just as the ships were silhouetted against the horizon, Aegir undid the final knot and they were struck by a fierce tempest with gale-force winds, towering waves, and sea spouts. When the storm died down, there were no ships to be seen.

Aegir waded into the sea to embrace Ran and their daughters. "If any of the vikings survived that storm," he muttered, "sooner or later they'll drift ashore on one of

those little islands out there. When they have to survive on whatever fish they can catch and comb the strand for driftwood to burn, then—perhaps—they will learn to value the real treasures of the sea."

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## EUROPA

by John Grey

Europa on the sea-shore frolics with her maidens, rejoicing in all the things she's never felt, when the great white bull appears, snorting like an Olympian god but also as a man, its giant bulbous eyes refracting her beauty in a shameless mirror and, with a grin playful as the splashing waters, she climbs upon his back, her wilful hands seeking out his strength in that relentless mound of muscle as her quidnunc followers giddily warn and encourage with the same shallow breaths, and then he bounds away, plunges into the sea as Europa screams the fear of those who believe wrongly that they have conquered the animals, for this raging ruminant is Zeus and her apple-eyed wiles shrink to nothing as the ambrosia sweat seeps through her soft pink skin, stirs into the salt of the ocean, boils up a mix potent as the stars, and they travel to Crete, he bellowing like a crude savior, she gripping the hard flesh of his neck, and he spills her on that island's sand like a pocketful of coins, leaps upon her in a thousand shapes of thrusting sex, pries open the locked fears of her virgin body, grunting the beast end of his power in her witless ears until she rolls over on that strange beach, panting like one who has received a holy spirit unexpectedly in a rush through the loins, and she stays with him on that island, plays consort to his devouring needs for as long as her beauty satisfies, bears three sons, Minos, Sarpedon and Rhadamanthus, marries the island's reigning king and, though Zeus never again metamorphosises into a bull, she spies any number of those smoldering creatures in the Cretan fields, blows them peasant kisses while keeping her royal distance.

# GOD OF THE DRAGGING FEET

*by Sue Nevill*

## I

"...the goddess Thetis of the silver feet went onward to Olympus, to bring back to her son the glorious armour."

*The Iliad of Homer*  
*Translated by Richmond Lattimore*

God of the dragging feet, Hephaistos works on the weariless bronze for Achilles' shield.

His shrunken legs move lightly under him. His golden women intelligent and strong, do not remind him of his brazen mother who cast him out. He created them gentle.

Renowned Hephaistos hammers bounty into a five-fold shield: a pride of tilled land, the dancing floor of Knossos.

Smith of the strong arms, he works for the love of the metal, forgets the ingratitude of other gods, their constant laughter.

Here he has breathed his earth and universe. Its figures speak and move. The tireless sun runs its courses, moon waxes into fullness.

Content, he cleans his tools, sets the bellows back, wipes his massive neck and hairy chest. All is in order. His golden women precede him to the door. He leaves the visions of his willing heart, melted into bronze and silver, cooling in the dark.

## II

"Aphrodite...loves ruinous Ares because he is handsome, and goes sound on his feet, while I am misshaped from birth..."

*The Odyssey of Homer*  
*Translated by Richmond Lattimore*

His own dear bed fouled by a girl; beautiful indeed, but intemperate.

Heartsore and turbulent with sorrows, He hammers out a golden cobweb, strands to grip and hold the liars fast, but painlessly. He knows pain well, would not wish it for them.

What had he to hope for in this marriage? Aphrodite, beauty above all, and he— whose mother grasped his heel in horror, threw him down to Thetis' care. Perhaps he should ignore the insult. Cannot. This is not fair.

Subtle Hephaistos, cursing Helios, who brought the news, spins his lines from roof beams and from posts; takes a deep breath, waits for the lovers to lie down. This time the slow one will overtake the swift, though he is lame.

# MOON MARKS

by Sue Nevill

turn in the night to face the window

you have not dreamt the light

this is the mark the moon  
full and burning  
makes on your sheets

mad moon

searing ice  
into the brains of those  
who sleep bareheaded

turn

women have died for skin this pale  
and men have killed for it  
strings of grave light  
pulling them down  
bowstrings of light  
singing

*I am the history of witches  
the first excuse  
for dance*

*open the window  
it is large enough  
to climb through  
kiss my ivory fingernail and swear  
you have forgotten gravity*

*drape yourself in my shocked silence  
deaf to everything except  
the quiet collisions  
of owls  
of hearts*

mad moon

freezing the slow maples

*open  
the window*

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## Editorial

Hello again, and welcome to *The Mythic Circle 19*. Another fine story issue, we believe; a brew of fantasy and folktale with a dash of surrealism. Our illustrators have done their usual splendid job (we are particularly fond of the comic crocodile motoring an unusual craft through *The Thunderslammers*), and Sarah Beach has given us an evocative glimpse of a mermaid for our cover. We are grateful to all our contributors, and we hope you enjoy what they have given us.

We hope, also, that you take the time to give us your Letters of Comment. As you will see, we didn't have many for this issue! As you read the magazine, jot down your comments and send them in. Our authors do appreciate them.

We are writing this in October, but as these things go, the magazine probably won't be in the mail before spring. So our best wishes to each of you for a happy Easter.

Tina Cooper and C.I.S. Lowentrout

## Letters Of Comment

Dear Editors--

*The Mythic Circle 17* has some really interesting material. I can't say I was entranced by most of the fiction, but Richard Goldstein's Islamic adventure tale "The Ruby" was well thought out. No sword-and-sorcery in the true sense here, but the flavor of occult mystery. There is in my mind a reminiscence of George Meredith's 19th Century story of The Shaving of Shagpat (remember the Ballantine 1969 Adult Fantasy Classics series of Lin Carter). And even a touch of William Beckford's 1787 hellish novel of *Vathek* (same series as above)! The feeling of 'labyrinth' is here; watch your step, one escape from a difficult situation can lead to disaster. *Kismet* is in the air, as befits the story's structure and Arabic atmosphere.

"Saucepan Tales by Cellar-Light" by MacGregor Card seems to follow next in complex structure. The Buddha-of-the-Bellman is intriguing enough, but requires a very slow leisurely reading, even re-reading, to get its "plot." Don't rush the tale and let your mind wander over its details. You

will then get some true enjoyment as a reader.

The poem "The Person from Porlock" by Paul E. Zimmer is my choice for Best Poem. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is a worthy inspiration for imagery and tone. Read in small doses; take two hours at least!

Thomas M. Egan  
Woodside, N.Y.

*Thank you, Thomas Egan. It's always helpful to have a scholarly perspective on the pieces we publish. Joe Christopher-Thomas Egan included a note asking you to write to him regarding the progress of your Tolkien-related bibliography.*

TC

Dear Editors--

Just some brief comments about issue number eighteen. "Learning to Leave Tracks," by Richard Goldstein, struck me as a professional-level story. Despite a few awkward locutions ("The car slid through the heat, shiny as if wet with sweat, a sweaty new Buick."), the author in general displays extraordinary control of his style, his characters and his story. If he's a neophyte, my bet is we'll be hearing more of him soon.

The same seems true of "Old Gnarled Grizzlebat was an Ogre." While this story didn't have quite the subtlety of "Learning to Leave Tracks," it was a powerful mix of myth and horror, achieving a strong impact almost by indirection. Someone who can create a three-dimensional, believable ogre is a talented guy.

I liked the poems by Destiny Kinal, too. She interacts with myth in an original and powerful way, and her metaphors are the true coin of poetry ("creatures squeak alarm like malignant hinges.") I'd like to see more of her work, but I haven't seen her name before; I hope she submits again to *The Mythic Circle*.

Most of the illustrations were great, too--where do you find these people? The only ones I had doubts about were the ones accompanying "How the Raccoon Got Its Mask." I found those illustrations a little wooden. Were they sent as a package with the story? Perhaps so, since you have two authors. The story itself is enjoyable if a bit slight.

Anyway, thanks for the issue and for all your hard work. I'll look forward to seeing the next one!

Katharine Carey  
Grants Pass, Oregon

*Thank you for the detailed critiques (with examples, even. Examples are nice.) We thought "Learning to Leave Tracks" and "Old Gnarled Grizzlebat was an Ogre" were very strong stories, and I believe that both those authors are successfully placing material elsewhere now. Sometimes talent will out.--*

TC

Dear Editors--

The nitpicker strikes again! Line 14 of "Skadi" should read "He unfroze the *ice* of her eyrie white,". Putting "face" for "ice" doesn't fit the alliterative structure, so I noticed it right away. And, from my LOC, the "forces" (rather than "farces") that govern the universe. Freya preserve us!

Erin Lale  
Sonoma, California

*Oooooops. Maybe the latter was a Freudian slip? In Sonoma, forces operate; in Los Angeles, farces often do. Sorry!--TC*

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The Twenty-Seventh Annual  
Mythopoeic Conference  
**THE INKLINGS & NATURE**

**Celebrating the Works of J.R.R.  
Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles  
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**Star Guest of Honor: Doris T. Myers, Ph.D.**

**Artist Guest of Honor: Ted Nasmith**

**Friday, July 26, 1996 to Monday,  
July 29, 1996 at the University of  
Colorado, Boulder**

This is our first Rocky Mountain Mythcon and very special events are planned, including a *Poetry Workshop* by Professor Michael R. Collings. There will be a special exhibit of items from the extensive Tolkien collections of Gary Hunnewell and Bruce Leonard. Of course, all the usual madness will ensue... (*duck!*)

If you're interested in presenting a paper, please send your proposal to Dr. Douglas Burger; University of Colorado; Department of English, Campus Box 226; Boulder, CO 80309. *Please see the last page of this issue for more details.*



# Once Upon A Prince

*David Sandner*

Once upon a prince lived a handsome. . .no, no, no—you know what I mean. Anyway, this prince and a beautiful princess were to be married and live happily ever after, but that would make for an incredibly boring story. Fortunately, a wicked warlock lived nearby who also thought it would be grand to marry a beautiful princess. The warlock stole the princess away and took her to his castle and locked her in his tower until she would consent to marry him. The prince went immediately to his fairy godmother who lived on the edge of town in a giant hollowed out tomato.

He found her out back, wearing a one-piece, sunning herself in a large carved-out zucchini lawn chair. The prince, sighing often, told his troubles to the fairy.

Yes, your princess can be saved," she said, setting aside her silver sun reflector and getting up from her chair. Nothing to worry your handsome little head about."

She searched about her cabinets, finally taking down a corked, green vial. She uncorked it and a foul-smelling smoke poured forth.

Phew! Quickly, take this magic potion. Drink it, and you become invisible."

He held his nose and drank the potion and his body faded from sight. He removed his princely clothing, his ruffled shirt, pantaloons, silver rings and belt, and his princely red and silver cape, and became completely invisible.

"Drinking that stuff was the hard part," his godmother said. "From here on in, it's easy. Just follow a few simple rules. Don't make any noise on your way out of town or you'll scare everybody. Don't cross the river at the ford—use the bridge, or the touch of water will wash the potion away. Don't go into the warlock's castle through the front door, he'll be watching even for invisible things—use the servant's entrance. And be careful."

The prince, happy at the thought of saving his beautiful bride, thanked the fairy godmother profusely and hummed as he headed out of town.

"Have a good morning," he said as he passed some tradesmen.

"Good morning, good morning," he said to everyone.

The townspeople on the street began to mutter and look about for ghosts, but the prince took no notice at all, and even broke into song. Worse, he was a lousy singer. The people took up sticks and threw stones to drive the disembodied voice from their town. Swinging their sticks, they chased the prince, pelting him with rocks whenever he cried out in pain.

The prince, to escape the mob, took the shortest way into the forest, crossing at the ford, where the magic promptly washed away. The naked, visible prince climbed

out of the river on the other side. The townspeople hooted and laughed, some still throwing stones. Little boys mooned him and the younger women blushed, as custom decrees, and were quite impressed by the handsome prince.

The prince, embarrassed (and bare assed), angrily decided to finish his quest, come what may. He walked straight through the forest to the warlock's castle and, to regain a little princely dignity, strode through the front door. The warlock saw him enter and, in between sips of after dinner brandy, turned him into a giant toad.

The prince hopped back to his fairy godmother who, having heard the gossip of the prince's troubles at the ford, was expecting him.

"I can't change you back," she said, "but if you want to save your princess still, I will tell you a secret magic word that you can say only once. This word will bring the warlock's castle crashing down on top of him, The tower will remain standing, and you go release your princess. Whatever you do don't say the word before you reach the warlock's castle."

She whispered in his ear, "The word is alakazam."

The prince left immediately for the castle, repeating words that sounded like the magic word in order to remember it. He was very careful not to make any noise on his way out of town, he used the bridge instead of the ford, but he forgot the magic word while passing through the forest.

"Sound's like," he said, "all want ham? Or allah's ashram? No, no, it's alakazam, of course."

The forest shook and the trees from the castle to the town fell to the ground. The prince dejectedly returned to his fairy godmother who, living in the edge of town, had seen the forest fall and was expecting him.

"Take this diamond sword," she said, "and with it you can defeat the warlock. Whatever you do, don't let this out of your hand!"

The prince headed triumphantly back to the castle. He was so happy that as he hopped over fallen trees and saw some daisies, he decided to stop and pick them for his soon-to-be released princess. He put the sword down and the yellow dwarf leapt out from behind a mysterious cabbage and ran off with it.

"Take this magic water to the castle," said the fairy godmother when he returned to her home, "and splash it over the warlock. And whatever you do. . ."

The vial slipped from the prince's webbed fingers and broke on the ground.

"Right," said the fairy, "don't drop it. O.K., let's try it this way." She went inside and began to rummage in her magic box. "I'm nearly out of stuff that you haven't lost or broken or used up. Ah, all right, take this magic wishing

ring. You have one wish. Be specific. Whatever you do—no, no, nevermind, you just handle this on your own.”

The prince took the ring and put it on. The fairy watched nervously.

“I wish,” said the prince, “I was at the castle, no, no, the warlock’s castle, in the tower. Yes.”

The prince disappeared and reappeared locked in the warlock’s tower with his princess.

“At least we’re together,” he said,

“But you’re a toad,” she said. The warlock laughed when he looked in on the princess and saw his new prisoner.

Meanwhile, the fairy godmother made her own way over the fallen forest and to the warlock’s castle.

“Murray,” the fairy godmother called and the warlock appeared at the balcony of the tower.

“Damn it, Helen, you know not to call me that.”

“Murray, I know he’s stupid, this prince, but he’s my godson, you know? Give him a break. And let the princess out, she wouldn’t marry you if you were all there was, Murray. Look at yourself in the mirror—you’re a thousand years old. Yeech. So how about it?”

“Never,” said the warlock, “as long as I stand on two legs.”

“O.K.,” the fairy godmother said, and turned him into a goat. She then freed the beautiful princess and the handsome toad and spirited them back to her tomato home.

“Oh, but he’s a toad,” the princess said, and burst into tears. The fairy godmother sighed.

“Whatever you do, lass,” she said, “don’t kiss him.”

And what the princess did then let the fairy godmother know the prince and the princess were a perfect match.

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# THE THREE CROWNED FLAME

*David Sparenberg*

In the great hearth of Reb Levi’s kitchen, there once lived a three crowned flame of exquisite beauty. Her name was Havah and she was covered with scintillating freckles from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Her hair was red and her eyes were radiant blue. For countless hours, the other flames sang of her rapturous charms. Deep into the night, the big fire crackled and hissed, praising such subtle yet energetic dancing.

Now Reb Levi had for years been a student of the ancient, mystical Kabbalah and possessed a distinct respect for living forms. He held it his chief responsibility on earth to preserve lives, especially those gracious entities who brought warmth and light to others.

So it was that one afternoon, while standing before his kitchen hearth, contemplating the mystery of the element of fire, Levi saw this unique, dancing flame. Bending over and moving his face nearer to the burning logs, he said, “How like a maiden, carefreely playing among crisp autumn leaves, is this one.”

Upon those words, he turned to his housekeeper, Zelda, and instructed her that from that day forward the hearth fire was to be kept burning. Under no circumstances should it be allowed to die out! Nor were the logs to be haphazardly tossed into the fire. From then on, they would be placed in one at a time, in sets of three—one, then a second beside it, and the third on top.

After that, Reb Levi passed many hours before the kitchen hearth, watching the three crowned flame as she danced up each new pyramid of logs and renewed her claim

to life.

On a stark winter morning, however, Reb Levi drove out of the village and traveled to visit his ailing rebbe, the learned Rabbi Zalman. Levi’s house was left in the charge of his housekeeper, Zelda.

Now Zelda was a good natured but simple woman, with a plump body and apple colored cheeks. Yankel, the butcher’s apprentice, was her sweetheart and he regularly visited her in Reb Levi’s kitchen.

On the same winter’s day that Levi drove off for the home of his teacher, Yankel completed his butcher’s apprenticeship. Being qualified to start his own kosher meat business, Yankel now resolved to make Zelda his bride. He went to Reb Levi’s house and told her, “Zelda, I think it’s time I spoke to your father.”

Zelda was speechless. Standing in the doorway, she kept gaping like a fish. In fact, for a long time the two simple people went on staring at one another in embarrassed silence.

Finally, Zelda threw her hands up over her head. “Why am I standing?” she cried. “A bride-to-be should be making preparations. Quick, Yankel, I must go home and await your arrival!” And she tossed off her apron and made haste to lock up Reb Levi’s doors.

Late that night, there was a harrowing blizzard. The wind blew over the land and threw about gigantic quantities of snow. As the storm continued, snow blew down the chimney of Reb Levi’s kitchen. As the snow increased, the

fire died.

When Levi returned home the following day, he felt his heart constrict with pain as he discovered his hearthplace buried beneath a solid, white mound.

Falling to his knees and digging among the snow and ashes, he searched until he found a ball of fire, the size of a small chicken's egg. Chill and motionless within the ball was the enchanted flame he had loved and cared for.

"Merciful Heaven!" he cried. And Reb Levi cupped his hands around the ice ball and began to chant prayer after prayer and psalm after psalm, until he melted the ice away with the warmth of his body and soul. The water ran out between his fingers and he opened his hands, surprised to find that the exquisite flame stood shining palely between his palms. Slowly she lifted her head and her radiant blue eyes looked into his.

"Havah," Reb Levi whispered.

Hardly had he spoken her name when the three crowned flame leaped from his palms onto the floor. Twirling and spinning with glowing delight, she danced from room to room, her brilliance and stature increasing as she went.

At length, in the study of Reb Levi; before the scrolls of Torah, tomes of the Talmud, and the venerable texts of

sages and saints; Havah's fiery dance came to a lovely repose.

As the last shed sparks of motion spun away into the ambient shadows, a wondrous quiet possessed the room, and there, before Levi's eyes, stood a beautiful young woman. Her hair was red and her eyes were blue.

It was this same exquisite beauty who became Reb Levi's bride in the spring of the year.

Among the village people, rumor had it that the new bride was a relative of the learned Rabbi Zalman, or that she had come from beyond the fabled River Sambatyion, on whose farthest bank the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel dwell in perfect righteousness and peace.

Reb Levi, however, was often seen moving his lips close to his wife's freckled cheek and saying, "Havah, you are a gift from Heaven."

And such is so. When the kindling of *hitlahavout*, the burning ecstasy, is intimately joined with a cultivated mind and with the vital flame of life in a personal and altogether lively way, life's limitations are abated, and we are truly blessed with a great love that transcends but does not abandon ordinary experience.

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