

# New Fabulists



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# Editorial

## BEHIND THE CURTAINS OF WORLD SF&F

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GUY HASSON

Over the last year and a half I've been talking to creators in the SF&F world from all over the world for a podcast called Geekdom Empowers.

In trying to highlight creators who are usually not highlighted in the media, I came across vastly different individuals. Each had his/her/their own story and went down their own path. But there were a lot of similarities for authors from across the world.

I'd like to share some of the patterns I've been able to spot. There is, after all, a lot of food for thought here.

### A WESTERN INVENTION

Speaking with Chinese and African SF&F creators (author Gu Shi comes to mind), one thing keeps popping up again and again. It's the thought that science fiction is a Western thing. That science fiction, as it's perceived by the Western world, is a Western invention. It's not that it doesn't exist in the East or Africa. It's that it's perceived differently and that the stories are different. In some places it's even perceived as part of regular storytelling. In some places, science fiction, fantasy, and folklore blend into each other.



*Guy Hasson is an Israeli author and filmmaker. Six of his books have been published, including *Secret Thoughts*. He is currently working on the *Lost in Dreams* universe, which follows a girl who is lost in dreams from birth to death. The first book in the series, *The Forgotten Girl*, comes out September 2022. The podcast (English)*

*follows her life in the Dream between the events of the books is coming out with daily episodes and is already towards the end of its second season. It is called The Squashbuckler Diaries Podcast. In his other podcast Geekdom Empowers Guy interviews geek fans and creators who are often not highlighted.*

European creators said the same thing but phrased it differently. It's not that science fiction is a Western thing, rather that it's an American/British thing.

When speaking about this to an audience at ICon2022 in Tel Aviv, a teenager in the audience couldn't grapple with the idea that science fiction could be different from what he knew. I tried to explain how SF can change according to the lore of a specific people. But I was unsuccessful. In the end, I sent him to read a few books.

I think the same journey the teenager will now go on is a journey we should all take. Discovering the world's cultures while the world's cultures discover how to be unique and not be local copies of American SF are both endless voyages of exploration.

## CAN WE HAVE LOCAL SUPERHEROES?

I interviewed Jarrel De Matas from the Caribbean Science Fiction Network, in which he highlights only SF&F creators from the Caribbean. He talked about how in one book about superheroes, the characters ask themselves whether there could actually be superheroes from the Caribbean.

Of course, why wouldn't there be, right? But that attitude is prevalent everywhere that is outside the US, UK, Australia and Canada. This process takes place in every country separately. I've seen it begin in Israel more than 20 years ago. Can we have local heroes or are we just copying what the Americans are doing with local names? Is it ridiculous when we do it? Will people accept it? If the story is truly local, will it ever be translatable?

## **THE PUBLISHERS' EASY SOLUTION**

Let's talk about the mainstream SF&F publishers.

Publishers and readers in smaller countries know that someone did the job for them. Someone went through a huge slush pile of a country with more than 300 million people, took out the best of the best (supposedly), and of those only the best-sellers will be translated by publishers in smaller countries.

That mentality, which has great financial justification, means that even a great local SF&F author can't compete because they didn't go through the huge slush pile and because they haven't proven themselves as a writer of bestsellers on that scale. And so they are discarded by both publishers and the readers.

## **HOW SMALL PUBLISHERS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE**

Now let's talk about small publishers.

I talked to editor and publisher Elana Lozano from Crononauta, a small publisher in Spain, which only publishes female and non-binary SF&F authors. She described her belief in how big changes can't come from the big publishers. Big changes have to come from small and brave publishers. One reader at a time the small publishers change opinions, break new ground, publish books and stories that the big publishers can't take a risk on. And very soon, the lines have moved and what had previously been unacceptable is now taken for granted.

## **THE ECONOMIC BARRIER**

I spoke to Nigerian author Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki before he was a Nebula Award winner and multiple Hugo Award finalist. He talked about the economic barrier around Nigeria. How big companies refuse to transfer money to Nigeria, how

banks try to talk magazines out of paying authors in Nigeria because they believe the country is full of scams.

He talked about how without e-mail it was previously impossible for Nigerian authors to be published in the big SF&F magazines because the regular snail mail simply didn't work in Nigeria.

After the interview, he self-published his *Africa Risen* anthology on Amazon, and Amazon refused to pay him after books were sold.

It is easy to think that we live in one big global village now. That opportunity is equal around the world as long as you have the Internet. But that simply is not true. Not yet. Economic barriers from centuries ago still exist today.

## **WE DON'T HAVE TO TRANSLATE INTO ENGLISH**

When speaking to Italian author and publisher Francesco Verso, I learned about his journey of hunting down world SF authors across the world who have never been translated outside their own countries. There are gems that easily disappear into history.

He finds as many as he can and then publishes them, translated into Italian and Chinese.

He says that books don't have to be translated into English to be known. And he is right.

## **THE SUCCESS STORIES**

There are also many stories of success that weren't possible even ten years ago, as the US and UK are slowly opening up to more international stories.

A lot of the authors I interviewed are getting published regularly in US magazines. More and more of them are win-

ning prizes. Pakistani author Usman T. Malik won the British Fantasy Award and the Bram Stoker Award right out of the gate. He tells the story of how it was up to him and a handful of others to create an SF&F community in Pakistan.

The founders of Kugali began as a podcast that wanted to cover Pan African SF&F creators of all kinds and ended up building a Pan African comics and animation company that now signed a deal with Disney.

The internet helped skyrocket the career of artist and writer Juni Ba when he first published his art online. In the first half hour his art began to be hailed around the world.

And there are so many stories as well.

It's a long journey and many aspects of it are invisible to most people. As each country goes through the discovery of its authors' unique voices, the creators and publishers there often believe that they are the first and only to go through it.

The truth is that this process of self-discovery is happening across the world in hundreds of different communities, and its stages are almost always the same.

Guy Hasson  
January 2023

## With Love in Their Hearts

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ROBERT JESCHONEK



*Robert Jeschonek is the USA Today bestselling, envelope-pushing author of the Starbarian Saga and Battlenaut science fiction series. He also edits the Decadium series of scifi anthologies that includes Space: 1975. His stories have appeared in Clarkesworld, Galaxy's Edge, Escape Pod, StarShipSofa, Pulphouse, and many other publications. He has written official Doctor Who and Star*

"I love you!" Hissing the words through the blood in my mouth, I lunge at my opponent. And I *mean* those words with all my heart – I *have* to – even as I swipe my dagger across his chest.

As he dances back out of reach, a line of red opens up where I cut him. His dirty, bearded face clouds... then quickly clears. "I love you *more*!" He smiles as he leaps at me with both fists forward, aiming them like a battering ram at my face.

Beaming with all the affection I can muster, all the true sweet regard for my friendly fellow man, I spin around out of his way and tag him again with the dagger, plugging the blade deep in his left kidney.

Howling, he stumbles into the thick-trunked oak that was just at my back. He takes it headfirst and bounces off, weaving drunkenly in the mud.

"Friend warrior." This is how I finish him, all sweetness and light. Without the *slightest* shred of darkness in my heart. "You are like unto the finest flower in the brightest sunbeam on the loveliest day in all the year." Darting to one side, I duck down and recover the sword I dropped earlier in this battle – dearest Eros. "God bless you for bringing such joy to my life."

With that, I swing the sword up, then down and through his neck with a perfect, practiced stroke.

So good am I at this that not a *trace* of hatred or savage satisfaction punctuates the moment when his head separates from his shoulders and plops into the muck.

Breathing hard, I scan my surroundings. I see the bodies of the three men I've killed, sprawled in various bloody contortions... and the body of Vicka, my partner on the road until now, whom they killed before I could kill them first.

*That* is what love can accomplish. Its power is arrayed around me for all to behold.

Moving swiftly lest another patrol comes my way too soon, I secure my beaten black body armor, then retrieve and put on my battered helmet with the old red-white-and-blue banner etched into the hard plastic. I retrieve my motorbike too... but the front tire has been slashed, and it won't start. I guess I can't complain; it's over a century old, and I've gotten a lot of use out of it until now.

"Go with God, fair machine." I drop it in the muck, grab my dagger from the dead man's kidney, and set off at a brisk jog through the woods. The autumn sun is closing in on the horizon, and I need to make my destination by nightfall.

*Everything* is riding on the completion of my mission. All my people down in Burytown are counting on me to succeed.

Though it is hard to imagine I can succeed this time. The killing of men and women has always come easy to me. It is that very inclination that could make this new mission such a challenge.

Heart pounding, I run through the mud, brush, and leaves, ever up along the steep contour of the mountainside. This part of what was once known as the state of Pennsylvania is full of such mountains – the *Alleghenies*, as we call them yet today. They have been my home for all five and twenty years of my life, and navigating them is second nature to me.

Reading the wind and the angle of the sun, I know I'm not far from my goal. In spite of the best efforts of my attackers, I

*Trek fiction and has scripted comics for DC, AHOY, and others. He won an International Book Award, a Scribe Award for Best Original Novel, and the grand prize in Pocket Books' Strange New Worlds contest. His online presences: Author Site: [www.bobscribe.com](http://www.bobscribe.com) Publishing Site: [www.blastoffbooks.net](http://www.blastoffbooks.net) Podcast: [anchor.fm/introverted-exhibitionist](http://anchor.fm/introverted-exhibitionist) Newsletter: [newsletter.blastoffbooks.net](mailto:newsletter.blastoffbooks.net)*

will reach my destination, though what happens after that, I cannot say.

Finally, I burst from the woods and find myself at the edge of the old road. I also find myself face to face with two men in camouflage body armor, wielding six-guns.

Slowly, I take off the helmet. "Greetings to you both."

"Hail and well met, good stranger!" The one doing the talking has the biggest, friendliest smile... and the steadiest grip on his revolver. "State your name and purpose, that we may love you all the better!"

Instinctively, I meet his gaze with the most genuine grin I can muster. "I am Sir Gardner Schell of Burytown," I tell them. "I have come to meet my bride."

Expected as I am, the sentinels holster their guns and lead me through the barricades blocking the road. On the other side, my destination awaits – a place I've only visited a handful of times, though Burytown lies but seven miles to the west of it.

The building looks for all the world like an old ocean liner (the kind I've seen only in photos), complete with decks, portholes, and a pair of big smokestacks on the roof, angled toward the stern. It is as if, by some miracle, a seagoing vessel has been stranded in the heights of a mountain range, along the curve of a once-great highway that has seen better days.

*GRAND VIEW SHIP HOTEL.* That's the old name of it, painted in big black letters on the side of the ship facing the road. *SEE 3 STATES AND 7 COUNTIES.* That's painted on the prow. Armor plating has been added all around, but those words out of history remain.

The *real* name, the one it's known by now, is not painted anywhere. But ask anyone within fifty miles of here if they know of Kendall's Keep, and they will point you right to it. Everyone who uses this stretch of road – known in olden times as the Highway of Lincoln – must pay a toll to Kendall's men to pass this point.

"What took you so long?" Lord Rubicon Kendall strides out of the keep in a white sea captain's uniform, looking hale and hearty and overly friendly. A sword hangs at either hip, plus a long rifle at his back, and rightly so; his clan is at war. "You were expected this *morning*, good sir knight."

"If not for the *second* ambush, I most certainly would have been here sooner. And Vicka, my late retainer, as well." I point at the path that I traveled up the slope. "The *Loved Ones* grow ever bolder, my Lord."

Rubicon grins through his neatly trimmed ebony mustache and goatee. "It is a delight we have in common, yes? Your people down in Burytown have been *especially* showered with their affections, have they not?"

"Such a blessing." I say it stiffly, though I manage a smile. The siege of Burytown is my whole reason for being here. An alliance with Rubicon's clan would give us the punch we need to break the siege and lay our friends the Loved Ones to rest for good.

Though such an alliance does not come without a price.

"I am in your hands, my Lord." I bow my head and spread my arms. "Assuming our pact yet stands."

"It does. My Lady Kendall, God rest her soul, had people in Burytown. I am only too happy to offer you this chance." He lays a hand on my shoulder. "*If* you are ready for the challenge, Sir Gardner."

"I would not be here if I were not."

"Well said." Rubicon nods sagely, peering into my eyes with the focus of a hawk. "And would you accept the guidance of an advisor in this quest of yours? He was of much help when *I* was in your shoes."

"Thank you, my Lord, but that won't be necessary."

Rubicon cocks his head to one side, looking amused. "May he provide a *benediction*, at least?"

Before I can answer, an old man rises on the main deck on the second level of the ship/keep and clears his throat. "Let us

pray," he calls down to us. Like Rubicon, he wears a uniform, though the pieces don't go together well: white cap, black jacket, red ascot, lemon trousers.

Confidentially, Rubicon leans over and whispers to me. "Bon Cloister up there will perform the ceremony, you know. *If* there is one."

"In the century since the Great Collapse," says Cloister, "only *love* has sustained we few survivors. As this young knight stands on the precipice of the greatest struggle of all – holy wedlock – we pray that he may turn to *another* face of love and do what we all know he *must* do to succeed."

"Amen." Grinning, Rubicon smacks me on the back.

"Times a million," says Cloister as he digs out a pipe and lights it with a hellaciously long furnace match.

"Here we are." Rubicon leads me past armed guards into the keep, then down a short hallway. "Have a seat in the Coral Room, Sir Gardner."

We enter a room with turquoise walls and red-rimmed portholes. A polished wooden bar occupies most of one side, with a black-cushioned elbow-rest and pink-upholstered barstools with backs. Dusty glasses and bottles line shelves behind the bar, glinting in the last flickers of daylight slipping in from the windows in the dining room next-door.

I sit on a long red bench against the opposite wall. A knight must never sit with his back to the door, as I have learned the hard way.

Just then, I hear footsteps – hard shoes descending a staircase.

"Here she comes." Rubicon smiles and bounces on the balls of his feet. "Good luck to you." He winks and whispers that last.

My heart beats fast as the footsteps approach down the hallway. I have fought a thousand battles, but this is new ground for me.

"Sir Gardner." Rubicon steps aside and gestures at the doorway. "I introduce my daughter, Listy Kendall."

I rise as she enters the room. Never in my life have I seen anyone so *beautiful*.

Listy curtsies. "Sir Gardner." She is in her early 20s, with all the firmness of youth in her pale, porcelain skin. Loose, dark curls frame an oval face with lively eyes, delicate nose, and full red lips. I can see from the fall of her long, creamy gown that her body is perfectly sculpted, bust and hips swelling pleasingly above and below a slender waist.

I manage a bow, but words fail me. Entranced, I can but stare as she watches and waits, smiling.

Rubicon raises an eyebrow and gestures at the bar. "Perhaps you might like a drink, Sir Gardner?"

His question barely registers. I am spellbound.

"My father has pledged my hand to you, good knight," says Listy. "It might do us well to converse upon this betrothal, don't you think?"

Her voice, as soft and flowing as the song of a meadowlark, freezes me further. I am drawn to her, mesmerized as I have never been before – yet locked down as if shackled and gagged. A man of action I have always been, but now I am turned to stone.

And none of it makes any sense to me.

"Ha. I wondered if this might happen." Rubicon walks over and squeezes my shoulder. "Perhaps some time with Bon Cloister might not be a bad idea after all, sir knight."

Fresh air does me some good. As I stand at the railing of the keep's main deck and watch the sun set, my wits slowly return to me.

Without invitation, Bon Cloister shuffles over to stand beside me, lighting a fresh pipeful of tobacco. Up close, I see how withered he is, how ancient in his shabby hodge-podge uniform.

"What is the Story of Love, Sir Gardner?" He puffs twice on the pipe, then exhales sweet cherry-smelling smoke from his nose. "Tell me how love as we know it came to be."

Everyone knows this story, but I humor him. I'm embarrassed about what happened in the Coral Room and eager to make things right.

"One of the plagues of the Great Collapse in the 21st Century was *The Commandment*," I tell him. "Scientists unleashed a contagion to rewrite human DNA and bring about peace on Earth."

"How so?"

"People became physically unable to harm others out of hatred or anger. This was in fulfillment of Jesus Christ's commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself."

"Indeed." Smoke from Cloister's pipe drifts out over the vast landscape sprawling beyond the mountain. The setting sun casts blazing light over the acres of trees in their red, gold, and orange autumn finery. "And how did that work out when the other plagues struck, and civilization *collapsed*?"

"It made it nearly impossible to fight for survival."

Cloister smiles. "And so we learned to fight – to *kill* if need be – the only way we could. With *love* in our hearts." He pulls the pipe from his mouth. "And we got very *good* at it, didn't we? The love-that-kills?"

I nod.

"*But!*" Cloister jabs the pipe stem at me. "What happens when we get so good at it, we forget what it's like to feel the *love-that-cherishes*? For some, especially the more... *accomplished* warriors, like yourself... this can sometimes lead to profound... *disharmonies*."

"The love-that-cherishes?" I scowl.

"Caring for someone so much that we don't want to damage or murder them," says Cloister. "Feeling an attraction so *real* and *profound* that we want to join with the other person in a multitude of ways."

The song of the katydids buzzing in the trees makes more sense to me than what he's saying. "Is that even possible?" I ask.

Cloister narrows his eyes. "Do you want it to be?"

I think of my people in Burytown, who are depending on me. I think also of that beautiful girl in the Coral Room, and the way she seemed to glow when I gazed at her.

"Yes." I whisper the word. "But how?"

"Righteous discipline." Cloister clenches his right hand. "And self-control. You must reach deep within yourself and change the love-that-kills to the love-that-cherishes... but only for this one person, your bride. For all others, especially those who threaten kith or kin..." He unclenches his hand and draws the edge of it across his throat like the blade of a knife.

Frustrated, I close my eyes and clench my teeth. I feel like going over the rail and running off into the night with Eros in hand, ready to love all comers. That, at least, would not be like the great unknown I now face.

"So many feelings..." I grip the rail hard. "What if I can't *master* them, Bon?"

"Then your bargain with Lord Kendall will never be consummated." Cloister puts the pipe back in his mouth and puffs on it. "For neither he nor Listy herself shall brook a union where there is no *true* affection."

"Damn." I toss my head as if I'm trying to wake myself from a terrible dream. "I don't even know where to start."

"There are some mental drills that might help." Cloister pats me on the back. "Perhaps we can get you ready for tomorrow morning."

"What's happening tomorrow morning?"

"Your first date," says Cloister. "Also, if all goes well, your marriage proposal."

I wake, as always, before dawn, springing to full alertness with all the force of old habits. Sleeping too soundly or late can get you killed in the field, after all.

I wash up in a basin of tepid water in my room, then dry and dress. Looking out the window, I see it's still dark outside... but won't be for long. I am early for this morning's meeting, which is just how I like to be.

In this, Listy Kendall and I have something in common. When I arrive on the main deck, she is waiting there already, setting up an easel and palette of paints by the light of an oil lamp.

"Good morning," she says, waving a brush in my direction. "I trust you slept well, Sir Gardner?"

My heart races, and words catch in my throat. She looks as lovely as she did when we first met, in the Coral Room... and I feel just as frozen, just as shackled by conflicting emotions.

But then I run one of the exercises Cloister taught me, repeating these words in my head: *Kindness is not always hatred. Hatred is not always kindness.*

Something about that simple repetition weakens the bonds just enough for me to speak. "Yes, I did sleep well." It isn't much, but I consider it a victory.

"Glad to hear it." She strokes a rich red base on the canvas as the sky begins to brighten. "You don't mind if I paint, do you? It's going to be such a lovely autumn morning."

"Not at all." I can barely force out the words. The way her lacy white blouse clings to her breasts, and her black britches hug the curves of her hips and bottom, I have trouble focusing on the conversation at hand.

"So, Sir Gardner." Listy swirls in white with the red, stirring it into a deep pink color. "What hobbies do you have?"

*C-Love, not K-Love.* That's another exercise Cloister taught me. *C-Love, not K-Love, as in the love-that-cherishes, not the love-that-kills.* "Well..." I fight for focus. "I sharpen my blades in my spare time. And train younger knights in battlefield techniques."

"Sounds more like work to me." Listy tips her head and gives me a funny look out of the corner of her eye. "Do you ever court *maidens*, I wonder?"

I feel myself blush. *C-Love, not K-Love. C-Love, not K-Love.* "I, uh... no, I..." In spite of the mantra, my brain locks up, and my voice trails off.

"Oh, look." Listy pauses in dabbing at the canvas and gazes out at the scenery, mouth open in wonder. "Come here, Sir Gardner."

I step up beside her, following her gaze with my own. The sky, by now, is fairly bright, so the vast gulf below is awash in pre-dawn light – but it appears not at all as it did the evening before. Everywhere I look, instead of swaths of colorful trees and distant green fields, I see an expanse of mist blanketing everything.

"I love when it's like this." Her voice is low and soft. "My grandfather used to say it was like an ocean of cloud out there. He half-expected to see a dolphin jump out of it, he said." She bumps my arm with her elbow. "Not that he was biased, living in a ship on the mountain and all."

"Three states, seven counties." Lost in the view, I get my voice back. "It's as if they've disappeared."

"They're still out there. They always are." Her elbow nudges my arm again. "You just can't see them."

Staring into that milky abyss, I let my imagination run away with me – something I rarely do. "It's more like Heaven than an ocean," I say, though I've only ever seen photos of oceans or paintings of Heaven.

When a bird pops out of the mist nearby, it startles me back to reality. I become fully aware of Listy's body next to mine, her elbow against my arm... and that triggers the kind of reaction I had before.

Even as it happens, I hate myself for it. Burytown is in dire need; am I so damaged that I can't at least *bluff* my way through the one chance I have to save it?

Yes, apparently.

Stumbling back from the railing, I knock over a chair and almost fall. Listy turns, a look of pity on her face that somehow makes it all the worse.

"S-sorry..." All my life, love has been a weapon. Feeling it has always been a pretext, a preamble to some kind or other of bloodbath. Thinking of it now not as a means to murder feels wrong... *confusing*.

Yet it's there... a *whisper* of that *other* love that Cloister talked about. And the more I feel it, *the more I don't know what to do with it*.

Listy seems to have no such difficulty – unless, of course, she isn't feeling C-Love toward me in the first place. She seems perfectly comfortable in all our interactions, even as I find myself intensely off-balance.

I'm sweating as if I'm in a fight, and my belly's full of butterflies. I wish I'd never come here, opening myself up to all this confusion – even if staying home would have meant certain death without the alliance I'd hoped to find.

Time is running out for that home of mine... though just how quickly, I only now discover.

The door to the deck flies open, and a dark-skinned woman stalks through, heaving for breath. She is a woman I know, a messenger from Burytown called Polly Sullivan.

"Sir Gardner!" She gasps out the words. "I bring word of Burytown! Its downfall is *imminent*. This very day, your precious *home* shall fall to the wolves at its doorstep."

I slide Eros down into his scabbard with the scrape of metal against metal. I do the same for the rest of my blades, slipping them into their various sheaths with familiar, practiced ease.

Standing in the middle of my room, I take a deep breath and release it. Everything is in its place again, and the world makes sense. My course is clear and straight, and my heart is filled with so much love for those who threaten my home.

Nodding to myself, I snatch my helmet from a hook on the wall, then storm out of the room and down the stairs. Lord Kendall, Bon Cloister, and Listy wait at the bottom, between me and the exit.

"Ho, sir knight." Rubicon raises both hands as if to hold me back. "We have heard with deep regret the terrible news from Burytown."

"Save your regret for the *Loved Ones*," I tell him. "For I go now to shower them with my deepest affection."

"Of course," says Rubicon. "You have concluded your business with us in full, then? Shall I signal my man-at-arms to rally the forces we have pledged you?"

I spare a glance at Listy, who bears a troubled look on her face. There is a pull deep within me, a gravity catching at my heart – but other powers overwhelm it.

"Good sir, the people of Burytown shall humbly welcome any and all forces pledged to act in their interest. But it is not true that our business is concluded." I bow my head. "I have yet to fulfill the terms of our pact."

"And *will* you?" asks Rubicon.

I feel Listy's frown upon me as I speak. "If Burytown's state is as dire as Polly Sullivan reports, I cannot promise anything. My own future might be exceedingly brief."

"Then, regrettably, I cannot offer aid," says Rubicon.

"Father!" snaps Listy.

Rubicon slashes his hand through the air. "We risk *much*, sending so large a force away from our own battlements. We risk this very *keep* and all who *depend* on it. We cannot – *will* not – take that risk without a pact."

"But *I* am the *currency* in this pact, am I not?" says Listy. "Have I no say in this..."

Rubicon cuts her off. "The pact is *everything*. In this world, *bargains* are how we *survive*." He shakes his head at Listy, then me. "Let me ask you this, Sir Gardner. Is there no possibility of forging a love-that-cherishes between the two of you?"

"I can perform a ceremony here on the spot," says Cloister. "A bond of wedlock so hastily conceived shall be no less legitimate."

I look at each of them in turn, considering. Again, when my eyes meet hers, I feel that pull, like the current of a river... but

then that *other* force rises up and blots it out. K-Love wins out, as well it should. My people *need* me.

"It is not fair to the people of Burytown to linger one moment more as their home falls to invaders," I say. "And it is not fair to *you* to take your hand in wedlock if I might make of you a widow before this day is done." I bow to Listy. "As much as I might wish it could be otherwise."

"But you are *more* likely to live another day with Lord Kendall's forces at your back," says Cloister.

"And what kind of man would I be if I married this woman to save my own neck?" Impulsively, I reach for Listy's hand and kiss it. "That does not sound to me like anything *close* to a love-that-cherishes."

I let go of her hand... yet my next words are intended only for *her* ears. "Farewell. Perhaps we shall meet again in that heavenly ocean of mist."

With that, I square my shoulders, push past Lord Kendall, and march outside into the late morning sunlight. Polly, who's been waiting, kickstarts her motorbike and revs it loudly as I don my helmet and climb on behind her.

Then, in a cloud of dust and gravel, we spin around and fly down the highway away from Kendall's Keep.

It surprises me how much I think of Listy as we ride down the mountain. The memory of kissing her hand stays with me, as does the memory of gazing into the mist by her side with her elbow resting against my arm.

But when the time comes to banish her from my thoughts, I do. The field of battle, as I understand all too well, is no place for thoughts of C-Love... only K.

Polly and I dismount and stow the bike a mile back from Burytown, then travel the rest on foot. The sounds of the fight reach us as we hurry through the woods – the clash and clang of steel, the scattered blasts of pistols and rifles, the screams of the wounded and dying.

Then the fight itself reaches us, too. Within sight of the rooftops of town, we are set upon by a trio of Loved Ones, soaked in gore and whipped into a frenzy.

"I *love* you!" A red-bearded warrior leads the ambush, swinging a blood-smeared axe overhead. "I will *show* you *how* much!"

Adrenaline burns in my bloodstream as I slip Eros from his scabbard and stand ready to meet the charge. "Come then, brother, and let us see who has the *most* love to *give*!"

They attack us like men possessed, half-crazed with K-Love stoked to extreme levels by relentless bloodletting on the field of battle. But Polly and I are possessed by a love that's as strong or stronger and untainted by corrupt motives. Our unwavering brand of love, born of devotion to home and clan, can carry the day against even the longest odds.

Though even as loving as we are, the odds we now face are long indeed. After ending the first three fighters with great love and swordsmanship, Polly and I push closer to the heart of the battle – just in time to see a horde of Loved Ones break through the line of defenders at the edge of Burytown.

People we know go down fighting as the invaders pile on. Every one of our noble warriors smiles with no less lovingkindness even as blades, bullets, and war hammers put them to rout.

It is now that I think of Listy once more, for I realize I shall never see her again. With the perimeter breached and our forces so clearly outnumbered, Burytown has not long to live.

Smoke fills the air as flaming arrows set fire to rooftops. Men and women on horseback and motorbikes tear through gaps in the line, escorted by slaving hounds. It is the end of the world, my world, and all the smiles and proclamations of love make it all the more hellish.

Doomed as our home may be, Polly and I charge into the fray with smiles and swords flashing.

*K-Love, not C-Love. K-Love, not C-Love.* Eros swirls and whizzes in my good right hand, slipping through one throat

after another. In my good left hand, a dagger jabs and slashes, cutting faces, hearts, and guts like the fang of a dragon.

No mercy is shown, not a whit... though even as my blades sow mayhem, I feel only deep-down love for every soul I maim or kill.

I am, in these moments, perfection – my focus diamond-hard, my killing exquisite, my love unblemished. Dancing from one fighter to the next, leaving geysers of blood in my wake, I am like a holy angel, beaming and unstoppable.

But for every man or woman who falls before me, another three or four or more pile in. For every blow or cut that I deflect, another flurry rains down on me.

I swear I will fight to the last, but the outcome is set in stone now. The end is near.

Polly and I fight back to back, swords and daggers in constant motion – until suddenly, she is gone. Turning in my murderous gyre, I see her dragged under the bloodthirsty tide, and I move to save her.

But at that moment, someone gets in a lucky shot across my back with a crowbar, and I drop. Keeping hold of my blades, I twist, blindly sweeping Eros in a futile swath that catches nothing.

When I hit the ground, the horde closes in around me. *Love you love you love you*, chant dozens of voices overflowing with eager and deeply sincere affection.

I see the crowbar and other bludgeoning weapons hoisted overhead, ready to crash upon me like a landslide. Holding fast to the handles of my blades, I ready myself for one final fusillade to finish the day, one last statement to cast upon the canvas of this terrible work.

"I love you!" I howl the words at the top of my lungs. *"I love you from the bottom of my heart!"*

It is then that I hear a salvo of gunshots crackling nearby. Men topple around me like rotten fruit, dropping their bludgeons.

More clamor then – a thunder of footfalls, a clatter of blades. More gunshots and the twanging of bowstrings, the sizzle and *thunk* of arrows. More men and women fall, and the rest erupt in panic.

Seizing the opportunity, I leap to my feet and pick up where I left off, slashing and stabbing in every direction. As Loved Ones fumble and scatter, I clear them like chaff.

A giant of a man, bald as a pumpkin and bedecked in blood, refuses to panic and swats the helmet right off my head. I answer with a knife through his windpipe... just as a sword thrusts through his heart from behind.

He topples as both blades withdraw – and I see whose sword joined mine in stopping the menace.

It was *hers*. "Good Sir Gardner." None other than *Listy Kendall* grins back at me from the visor of a white helmet. "Fancy meeting you here." Laughing, she wipes the blood from her sword against the hip of her white body armor.

My heart hammers in my chest at the sight of her. I am so caught up in her beauty and the shock of seeing her that I forget to lose the power of speech. "You *came*?" Looking around, I see men and women wearing the coat of arms of Kendall's Keep (in patches or tattoos) plowing through the invaders of Burytown. "But what of the *pact*?"

Listy narrows her eyes and lifts her chin. "Wedded or no, I will *never* stand idly by so long as there is something I can do to save good folk like the people of Burytown."

In that instant, I get a shiver, a frisson of electric joy. I want nothing more than to wrap her in my arms and never let go.

Because she *came*. Because she's *fighting* on behalf of my people for no other reason than because it's *right*. Because she's so *beautiful* and *thoughtful* and *capable* and *confident*, and I *want* her with every fiber of my being.

Is *this* what Cloister was talking about? The love-that-cherishes? *An attraction so real and profound that we want to join with the other person in a multitude of ways?*

"I suppose the pact is *moot*, then? Since Burytown got the help it needed without the two of us submitting to wedlock?" As Listy says it, a bruiser roars forth, and she dispatches him with a flick of her sword.

"Actually, I've been thinking." Lifting Listy's visor, I lean in and kiss her gently on the lips. "Perhaps we might discuss *another* pact?"

Her eyes lock with mine, and she kisses me back – not gently. "Perhaps."

Then, whirling, she takes up the fight again, swinging her sword with all the nimble grace with which she paints an ocean of mist on a canvas.

Smiling, I fell an attacker of my own, dropping him dead with a heart full of love – but for *once*, it is *not* the love-that-kills.

## A Lady of Ganymede, a Sparrow of Io

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DAFYDD McKIMM

The Lady waits for the Duke in a body as fragile as sugar glass, resting her head against the cool marble of the colonnade that circles the Hall of the Nobles of Io. She watches the sparrows as they flirt and twitter between the shade and the sun, like socialites at a debutante ball, or starships popping in and out of visible space at the great port of Ganymede, so long ago and moons away that it seems now like nothing more than some childish fancy.

The body was a gift, made especially for her. The first time the Duke placed her inside its delicate flesh, he led her with sinister tenderness – *Gently now. Gently* – to the garden and bade her to sit, to wait for him a moment while he retrieved something from the house. As he disappeared through the doors of the manor, the Lady's breath caught in her throat: the small side door to the gardens appeared to have been left unlocked. Like a bird who found its cage suddenly flung open, the Lady sprang towards the garden door, but the bones of that fragile body shattered under nothing more than the vigour of her movements and left her lying there, twitching like a crushed insect at the foot of the flower beds. The pounding of burst blood vessels and, louder even than that, the roaring laughter of the Duke filling her ears.



*Dafydd McKimm is a speculative fiction writer producing mainly short and flash-length stories. His work has appeared in publications such as Deep Magic, Daily Science Fiction, Flash Fiction Online, The Best of British Fantasy, The Best of British Science Fiction, and elsewhere. He was born and grew up in Wales but now lives in Taipei, Taiwan. You can find him online at [www.dafyddmckimm.com](http://www.dafyddmckimm.com).*

The Lady inhabits many bodies. The sugar-glass body is for travel, a failsafe against her escape. The body she dons as the Duke's chief consort – a showpiece he wears on his arm at formal events – has features so exaggerated that her spine strains and her hips throb and her skinny thighs tremble under their weight. As the Duke's etiquette coach, she occupies a basic demonstration dummy, plain and stripped of any distracting features, its skin coarse and worn and seldom repaired, so different from the skin she grew up in, as soft to the touch as the dresses her mother wore to full-Jupiter balls. The skin that, orphaned and desperate, stripped of everything by revolution and war, sold a copy of its neural network to a brain broker, condemning her, this version of her at least, to be forever imprisoned in bodies not her own.

With difficulty, for the muscles of the sugar-glass body are weak, the Lady holds out a hand to the sparrows. One hops into her open palm and bobs its head as if to say *I'm listening*.

She recalls a story, read by her governess, of a princess whose cruel husband forced her to work in the palace butchery. So she befriended a starling, taught it to speak, then sent it across the sea to her brother who came with his armies to wreak vengeance upon his sister's captor.

Something resembling hope kindles within the Lady; if she tells the bird her sorrows, will it take her message to a rescuer, some distant Ionian relative with the power to set her free? With much effort, she lifts the bird to her lips and whispers her misery to its bobbing head. She tells it about the Duke, how he made his fortune from the war just as her family lost theirs, how he'd bought a title from a Jovian noble who valued a full belly more than his peerage and the Lady because he needed someone willing – or unable to refuse – to teach him the proper airs and graces, and how it wasn't long before he discovered other uses for her, too.

Her lips tremble. No, she must tell it *everything*. She tells the bird about the other bodies, the ones she doesn't like to think about – the fox body, the hind body, the boar body. How the Duke likes his game with a streak of humanity. How, with a flick of the wand he keeps at his belt, he unspools her from her human vessel and grafts her onto his quarry. She shudders to remember the horrible sounds she has made, the maddening grip of panic, the terror of the animal brain as it decides whether to flee or fight; the howling of the Duke's hounds, the flash of their teeth, the warmth of her own blood and the creeping cold as life seeps from gaping wounds.

Footsteps approach. From the sound of his stride, the Lady knows the Duke is angry, and when the Duke is angry, he likes to hunt. She must release the sparrow now, but fear freezes her fingers.

"They dare to toy with me," the Duke rages as he comes near. "Humiliate me because my blood is not blue." He spits onto the marble. "Nobility! We'll see how noble you are." He turns his eyes on the Lady. "We'll see how *you* like to be toyed with." His mouth glistens with anticipation. "Come," he says, reaching to take her arm.

The Lady starts as if waking from a terrible dream: She has no royal brother to save her from across the sea, no vengeful army that will come to her aid. She has only herself and the things she has learnt from her suffering – the cunning of a fox, the quickness of a hind, the daring of a boar – and the sparrow clutched in her hand.

"Wait," she says. The Duke stays his arm for a moment, looming over her like a guillotine.

Like a firmly pushed garden door, her fingers open; the sparrow darts out, and then up, and as the Duke lifts his hands, the Lady lunges.

Her legs shatter; her paper-thin lungs tear open; her wasted muscles scream, but her hands close around the wand hanging at the Duke's belt. And with a series of motions that break each of her pale fingers, she tears her mind from the sugar-glass body and hurls it towards the sparrow, flying now higher and higher to join its flock.

And as the rush of air fills her ears, the Duke's roars echo through the colonnade, grow fainter, and fall silent.

## Connoisseurs of the Eccentric

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JETSE DE VRIES

*Salvador Dalí took his pet ocelot to a New York restaurant, where a woman protested that wild animals were being allowed in. Dalí replied it was only a cat he'd painted in op-art style. The woman looked closer: "Now I can see it's a cat," she said, "At first, I thought it was an ocelot."*

*Seated near the swimming pool in the artist's retreat in Port Lligat, a BBC interviewer said that he had "heard that Dalí was unkind to animals. Was that true?"*

*"Dalí cruel to ze animal?" The artist exclaimed, "Nevair!" After which he picked up his pet ocelot and hurled it into the swimming pool. – Eccentric anecdotes*

I see her arriving in her private vacuum zeppelin, flying over the rewilded mountains of the Nagasaki peninsula, while I'm tending the extreme bonsai wine garden on top of my farmscraper. Expertly manoeuvring through the photovoltaic city forest, the zep berths at the telescopic docking station. It gives me time to change from my gardening attire into something more formal.

In a way, it's fitting; my hyperdense pinot noir à la bonsaïe was how she found me in the first place, almost two decades ago. Back then, I proudly showed her my grotto garden, but she quickly decided that she liked my ecological acumen better than my micro bonsai specimen. Today, for the second time only, she comes unannounced. Of course, as long-time business partners, we have our scheduled meetings, most of which we do lately



*Jetse de Vries is a technical specialist for a propulsion company and travels the world for this, albeit it less frequently nowadays because of the time that co-editing Interzone and his writing is taking up. Other publications include Nemonymous, TEL : Stories, the Journal of Pulse-Pounding Narratives, and DeathGrip: Exit Laughing, which makes him a sort of late-labelled, experimental pulpster with a wicked sense of humour,*

*drenched in stylistic  
excess. And all he  
really wants to do is  
write SF... His website  
is at eclipticplane.  
blogspot.com*

through her Entangled Particle Instant Transmission-link – one of the many patents that helped make her a fortune. Crazy things happen when she comes out of the blue. I try to prepare for the inevitable, but even 'the power of light and shadow' of my vintage Icho complemented with a pair of original Peron & Peron's is no match for the way Afri Kamari makes an off-the-shelf, demure business suit look like *haute couture*. Above ebony cheekbones, deep brown eyes that see straight through you. Under a head of long, thick, fine curls is a brain that never shifts from top gear. Inside a very conservative skirtsuit lies an animated sensuality that puts any anime girl to shame.

I've talked with her thousands of times via vidcon and – recently – EPIT-link; but when I see her in the flesh, I'm both entranced and edgy. I open my special cabinet and start uncorking my Takashima pinot noir – still the most exclusive wine in the world – to celebrate her extremely rare personal visit. She takes her time to smell, taste and enjoy it. *Not bad for a beer aficionado*, part of me thinks, while another part wishes she would cut to the chase. Neither needs to wait long.

"Superb," she says, "the *Delirium Nocturnum* of wine."

"Which you didn't find special enough to sell to the aliens," I remind her.

"It's phenomenal craftsmanship, second to none, but not quite ... *eccentric* enough."

"Well, you are the true *connoisseur*." I try to hide my frustration behind my half-full glass in vain. "The best of the world."

"The best of *this* world." Her eyes shine like crazy diamonds. "It's time to expand the market."

"You don't need me for the mad part of your schemes. Am I not the orderly yin to your chaotic yang?"

"I do. You can deliver a quintessential part of this project."

The moment I've most feared and longed for in my life. "What is it?"

Her amused smile broadens. "Your soul."

The aliens are still alien. After twenty years, nobody knows what they look like. Nobody knows where they came from. Nobody even knows how many there are. Yet, out of the gray they came.

Of all places, the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence ended when it received a clear, unencrypted message from the Moon, about the only place where SETI wasn't looking. The aliens declined to say who they were and where they came from, as that was 'irrelevant'. They said they came in peace, looking for trade. They declared the Moon off-limits while the rest of our solar system was open 'to explore as you see fit'. The trade items they were looking for were something else. They weren't interested in our science & technology or art & history or culture & biology in general. They didn't want to tell us if our most cherished theories were correct, because they didn't want to 'contaminate your unique approach with alien influences.'

No: they were looking for the 'most spectacular failures' and the 'most imaginative, yet unsuccessful extrapolations' in any area of interest. The weirder it was, the more wonderful. As one punter put it, "They want the crazy. Are they crank addicts looking for the cracks of reality?" A more poetic one phrased it as, "Give me your outcasts, your mavericks, your isolated crackpots yearning to breathe free, the weird refuse of your teeming planet. Send these, the quirky ones, convention-lost to us, as we raise our lights beside the interstellar door."

Some were against this, stating that we should 'keep our Mad Hatter in our Wonderland', while others couldn't wait to take the aliens up on their offer. The barter: advanced technologies unknown to current Earth science.

That bait – if it *was* a bait – worked; at the first monthly 'Weird-to-Wisdom' exchange, thousands upon thousands of models of 'eccentricity' were offered. The aliens, though, only took a very limited number of them. Each Earth trader was given a unique, quantum-encrypted link where either an ac-

ceptance or rejection of their offer was given. As the vast majority of them were getting rejections, an outcry of 'we're being suckered' ran around the world. Until the new technologies of the accepted trades were introduced ...

*William Archibald Spooner had a habit of muddling up words, switching consonants, vowels or morphemes. Apocryphal or not, the following 'spoonerisms' are attributed to him: "The Lord is a shoving leopard." "Let us raise our glasses to the queer old Dean." "Go and shake a tower." "A well-boiled icicle."– Eccentric anecdotes*

The guest cabin of her private zep is remarkably Spartan, although the futon in it is first class. I'm watching the world go by as I try to figure out what the hell she's planning, landscapes gliding by; the spectacular – now far less polluting – Shanghai conglomeration, the majestic Karst Mountains, the lush Nam Ha jungle.

Asking outright will only make her laugh. Maybe if I take a surprise turn during our talks (I almost said small talk, but she never talks 'small'). She mostly does business throughout the day, and does heavy workouts in the evenings. Yet, I see her at every meal. She's always a little hurried at breakfast and lunch but relaxes considerably during dinner. That's when I have the most illuminating talks with her. "Why do they go through the trouble of doing trade, anyway? Had I been in their place, I'd just copy every Google cache and sort out the interesting things later," I wonder.

"Nobody knows. We can only make uneducated assumptions. A few random guesses; they don't have the capacity – at least not here – to sort through all the clutter, so they let us do that job. They can't physically get to our internet caches, as the information technologies are too divergent. They really don't want to contaminate our 'unique' thinking with cold alien logic, Mr. Spock. And maybe–"

Amused, I can't help but interrupt, "I've never heard you use that word before."

"Not in public. But *maybe* the whole trade procedure is the *point*. Not our eccentric – yet possibly worthless – goods, not their beads-and-mirror barter, but to let this function as a catalyst; we stop deteriorating the biosphere and develop ourselves sustainably."

"Why would that be to *their* advantage?" Gaia (and I) know it has been to our advantage.

"When the next mission arrives, we may finally have something worthwhile for them."

It's food for thought: a mental midnight snack as she retreats to her cabin.

At night, we cross the Bay of Bengal – lots of light turbulence – and the southern point of India. Now, we're flying across the Indian Ocean, heading for Somalia. I do some business, but my heart isn't in it. I keep wondering why she's taking me on this wild ride, but can't figure out how to ask her. Also, I can't help but watch our recovering world, as I was instrumental in important parts of its recuperation. I decide to write down my thoughts about what has happened since the aliens announced themselves – a concentrated narrative about two decades of great change. Which is in my blood; after all, my extremely limited pinot noir is 'twenty years of pruning, twenty months of maturing (in bonsai casks), for twenty minutes of intense delight'.

Dinner is an exquisite trip around the world (her nominal pay is ■1, but she doesn't cut back on food): vegetable sushi nori, basque chicken Yassa, and Belgian mini bonbons. Yet, I take the conversation to off-world matters. "Another paradox; why is the Moon off-limits, and the rest of the solar system not?"

"Bait-and-switch? Still, then you'd expect they'd give us a little help in getting out there."

"Well, I can sympathize with being left in the dark."

"Patience, my dear friend. I will reveal all. Don't spoil the surprise."

"OK. But the aliens *did* give us blueprints that eventually led to space industry technologies: the material of this vacuum zeppelin's skin that you used for the space elevator's ribbon, for example."

"Takashima-san, the aliens didn't give us the semi-chaotically doped carbon nanotube technology. We developed it ourselves in Libreville."

"But you announced it as 'another breakthrough from the aliens'."

"A white lie. In the last ten years, the aliens have been doing less and less trade, which suited me fine, as I was getting tired of coming up with ever crazier eccentricity schemes." She rolls her eyes in a rare sign of fatigue.

"Less trade? How would you know? They never tell which deals are accepted or not."

"I have my contacts, and as far as we can determine, the number of deals has been in decline from the very beginning. It roughly follows a half-life curve."

"Like that of nuclear decay?"

"Yes."

"Meaning, they have nothing more to trade?"

"Or nothing more that they *wish* to trade. Or they have milked us for what we're worth, and are about to move on. Or ..."

I take a sip from the superb jasmine leaf tea to fill the sudden silence. "Or they have bandwidth limitations."

When the aliens opened for business, Afri Kamari didn't just jump the shark: she kicked her heels and spurred it on with all her might. While most traders followed established rules, she – controversially – assumed that the old rules didn't apply, and if any new rules existed, she'd find out by pushing them. Hard.

There was the lawsuit with Oxford University about her 'stealing the character of William Archibald Spooner and misrep-

resenting historical facts'. Where Oxford University offered up the 'true' historical character, Afri took spoonerism a couple of steps further, inventing an isolated, rather incestuous, hyper-linguistic tribe that gets 'infected' by a mix of spoonerism, malapropism, phonetic shifts and reversals, and neologisms. That tribe of fiction spoke a language that evolved so fast that nobody could meaningfully communicate with them, even in the internet age. Afri won the bid and the lawsuit. The aliens preferred her version, and they accepted bids from every person and entity that could aim a radio antenna at the Moon. Afri set up her bidding company (plus radio antenna) on São Tomé and Príncipe: an isolated jurisdiction. Probably not coincidentally close to Gabon, the country of her forebears, where she soon set up the Free International University of Libreville (converting the old Omar Bongo University) and the Mid-African Technology Centre in Port-Gentil. The former soon began to decipher, understand and work out the implications (or reverse-engineer the science) of the alien blueprints she acquired; the latter began to produce actual technologies from them. It turned both cities into boomtowns and led to the quick construction of new infrastructure: the 10-kilometre Libreville to Denis double-bridge and the 40-kilometre Port-Gentil to Gongoué double-bridge connecting both cities through the new combined coastal highway/TGV line. An infrastructure that came in very handy when Afritechnologies, Inc. started building the base station of the space elevator just south of Kobékobe, a village that has grown out to encompass the skyhook's base.

*Erik Satie's one-room apartment was a crowded affair: apart from four pianos—two on top of each other (with pedals interconnected)—it also contained his collection of over a hundred umbrellas and his twelve grey velvet suits, of which he wore one until it wore out before using the next.*

*"Before writing a work I walk around it several times, accompanied by myself," he said, and when critics told him he wrote music with no form he immediately composed 'Trois*

*Morceaus en Forme de Poire' ('three pear-shaped pieces'). Instead of musician, he initially called himself a 'gymnopedist', later a 'phonometrician'. He only ate food that was white. – Eccentric anecdotes*

The next morning, I awake to the sight of the Congo jungle. Through breakfast it becomes clear that we are heading to the long, sharply reflecting ribbon in the sky. I don't like this, not one bit.

"Afri, you are not going to take me off-planet. I am a man of the Earth," I say, filling my voice with steely resolve.

She barely notices. "Takashima-san, off-planet is only the first step. A tedious one, though." Slowly noticing my dismayed silence, she adds, "Don't worry, you'll like it, eventually. And it's safer than crossing the street in Nagasaki."

"I have a business to run."

"So do I; we'll share the EPIT-link, which I've more than doubled for the occasion."

"I have to take care of my micro-bonsai."

"Which one of your assistants is surely already doing. Listen. I don't intend to keep you away forever. If all goes well, you should be back in a couple of weeks."

"In one piece?"

"Quite probably in more than one piece."

In the afternoon, we disembark at Kobékobe and immediately board the waiting space elevator car. "Enjoy the sight from the zep," she'd said, "as you won't have time to enjoy it from the ground."

Up we go, slowly, majestically. It's four days to the orbital rendezvous station, four more days to meditate, to contemplate the living kōan that is Afri Kamari.

*How can we recognize the alien in the other when we can't see the alien in ourselves?* I think. Modern Zen master Koho Watanabe would surely laugh.

As expected, life in the space elevator is minimalistic when each kilogram counts. Which is probably why Afri keeps the cabins in her zep so spare; no big lifestyle switchover.

I don't do quite as much work as I intend – I keep trying to figure out what her 'surprise' is. The view is too enticing, as well, and meditating in lesser gravity is rather addictive. It compensates for the artificial taste of space food, which has all the essential ingredients to survive, but very little to enjoy. Of course, my standards may be somewhat above average. The Tao of Oversight: the more I see of the planet that I helped return to maximum biodiversity, the more basic and bland the nourishment becomes.

*The world rewilds as the acolyte ascends into asceticism.*

While I am unexpectedly enjoying the trip up the beanstalk, I don't look forward to the encapsulated trip to Phobos. At least, that's what I suppose we are going to, since Afri still hasn't told me. I already tried to ask, but she twirled around it like a tantalizing tango dancer in the heat of the moment.

She is highly preoccupied during the vertical journey. "Connectivity and bandwidth are superb now, so I need to do as much as possible before we leave orbit. I recommend you do the same. Our linkage will be limited in space."

So, I should work, but am strangely unmotivated. Also, my assistants seem to do a fine job keeping things running smoothly. Is this how a holiday feels? A relaxed feeling while you contemplate the meaning of life? As a Zen follower, I am such a failure ...

While I rest, she drives herself to exhaustion. Our exchanges – I don't have the heart to confront her when she looks so fatigued – are short and formal. "Time enough to talk out there," she says. The Earth dwindles and the sky darkens as we gradually rise during a full moon. Strange thoughts cross my mind. I am a man of the earth. Yet–

–in orbit, I yearn–

–but the point of departure–

–is not to return–

And Afri floats in front of me.

"Enjoying yourself? I told you so."

"This must be the proverbial calm before the storm."

"Not by a long shot. More like a tiny tempest in a sea of tea."

The world changed – as it does – but in a direction few suspected. Big countries, universities and megacorporations got only a very small slice of the alien pie. Most trade opportunities were taken up by small entrepreneurs, creative communities, and imaginative people around the globe. Enclaves in the Amazon basin – unearthing stories of odd Medicine Elders and quixotic Great Spirits – received efficient solar bio-electric cells; Australian Aboriginal communities recalling Creation Time narratives of bizarre *muramura* and peculiar *mangorangs* received ambient temperature superconductors; Sub-Saharan indigenes depicting mesmerising Fêtes des Masques and the mystic rhythms of idiosyncratic drummers received high capacity batteries; East-Asian ethnic groups evoking absurd rituals and impetuous folk dancers received broad-ranged, typhoon-resistant windmills.

All these isolated groups then started co-operating and sharing knowledge, quickly leading to a worldwide 'archipelago' of self-supporting, off-the-grid, self-sustainable energy 'micro-plants'. 'Apart together' – I was one of the coordinators – they continued to trade successfully with the aliens, leading to increased food production, better health and more wealth. As a benevolent side effect, population growth decreased while biodiversity was on the rise. Many problems remained, but they seemed to become tractable.

Miss Kamari wasn't sitting idly, either. As the eccentricity bidding intensified, dominoing a world-wide cultural renaissance of the outcast in every form and shape, Afri kept riding the idiosyncratic tide. One of her infamous triumphs was the

unearthing of the long-lost manuscript of *Tina in Thintime*, by Carole Edwina Edwina.

In the piece, Tina falls into Weirdland – a reality remarkably like ours – through the Hobbit Rail. She meets strange figures like the Entropic Mole, the One-Way-Street Kid and the Heat Death Union. Tina is dismayed that nobody can go *paxador*, *knao*, *aropia*, *elinct*, *usuru*, or *squoth* in time. She feels trapped in a claustrophobic continuum but eventually escapes via the Singular Technology.

And the world evolved – as it must – paradoxically to a place with increased interconnectedness that didn't lead to more homogeneity, but instead to more variety where diverse opinions and approaches are encouraged rather than repressed.

Also, as life on Earth gradually improved, humanity began looking very seriously at space exploration.

*Bobby Fischer was an unprecedented chess prodigy who rose through the ranks like a meteor, despite several unusual demands – partly inspired by his membership of the Worldwide Church of God (which he later denounced) – like refusing to play on the Sabbath, replacing round-robin with knockout matches and not playing for cameras.*

*In 1973, as defending champion, Fischer made several principal demands for the 1975 World Championship Match, asserting that not counting draws would be 'an accurate test of who is the world's best player'. As FIDE – the World Chess Federation – eventually did not agree, Fischer decided to not defend his title.*

*At the 1986 World Championship Garry Kasparov barely beat Anatoli Karpov, claiming he lost a 3-point lead because one of his seconds sold his opening preparations to the Karpov team.*

*In 1996 Bobby Fischer announced a variant of chess called Fischer Random Chess intended to allow players to contest*

*games based on their understanding of chess rather than their ability to memorize opening variations, which Fischer disdained. "Now chess is completely dead. It is all just memorization and pre-arrangement. It's a terrible game now. Very uncreative."*

*In May 11, 1997, IBM's specially designed Deep Blue chess computer beat world champion Garry Kasparov in a six-game match. In December 2006, chess program Deep Fritz – running on a normal PC – beat world champion Vladimir Kramnik. – Eccentric Anecdotes*

A sea of tea, indeed: the spacecraft we're boarding is called the T-pod. It's T-shaped; a long body of connected living quarters, test labs and cargo modules with a thick crossbar containing the engine room in the middle with the MPDT booster, then botanical floors, gyms and the swivelling ion thrusters at the ends. The MPDT booster and ion thrusters are good old NASA tech, Afri ensures me, while the power on board comes from a fusion generator.

"A fusion generator?" I wonder, "hasn't ITER been struggling with that for decades?"

"This is the prototype of a radically different version."

"A prototype?"

"Don't look so worried, we have solar battery backups."

"Your company developed fusion, as well?"

"No, we got this from the Amazon-Mekong-Uluru cooperative in exchange for cargo space for their Mars colony."

"I thought we only had a base on Phobos?" I'm really getting out of my depth. "I'm sorry, but I'm so behind on space developments."

"I understand. You have to keep up with so many Earth side projects already. But, yes, officially we only have a base on Phobos. Nevertheless, several co-ops and space start-ups are already staking out properties on Mars, which they first provide with equipment – such as we are transporting now, paying for the trip – and raw materials such as volatiles and rare

metals, which will be transported from the Asteroid Belt. After that, the actual settlers will follow."

Our initial speed is low, but our acceleration is constant. With the new fusion power source and us being close to Mars opposition, the trip to Phobos should only take two weeks. Two weeks of decreasing bandwidth. Two weeks of increasing insight? If only Afri would reveal it.

Life in space develops a different routine. Connection with the world-wide web will dwindle from one hour per day to a mere two minutes per day on Phobos, with the delay increasing to four minutes. Several hours in the centrifugal gym, more hours of meditation, and lots of time to catch up on my reading. The strange distraction of the front camera's view of the Aurora Spaciis – a green ghost invoked by the interaction of our superconducting coil's magnetic field and the Sun's high-energy particles – is a psychedelic partner to the shield protecting this Faraday Cage vessel's inhabitants from hard radiation. I suppose Major Tom would have approved of this plasma flowing from a cask. Dinner becomes a fading fad: nutritionists have found that seven small meals a day are healthier on average than three big ones. So, in space, one has seven snack sessions, and those snacks don't even *look* appetizing. And drinks in globes don't entice a wine aficionado, either. It calls for imagination in space.

As a result, I've turned some of these snack sessions into 3-D chess matches with Afri, using the food and drinks as set pieces. If one of your pieces is taken, you can consume it. One could lose on purpose if hungry, but it rarely happens. Our snack matches are excellent catch-up sessions, even if sometimes I find out more than I might want to.

"Apart from supporting the upcoming Mars colonization efforts, what have your people been doing on Phobos?"

"We've been shooting at rocks. Extremely hard."

Silence. A silence long enough that it eventually begins to worry Kamrani. "Are you upset, Takashima-san?"

I have rarely been so appalled. "In this day and age, you are developing space weapons?"

She bursts out laughing so hard that the exhalations propel her back ever so slightly in the zero-G environment. Her mini-tornadoes wreak havoc on our 3-D chess pieces. Catching herself and her breath, she says, "This has nothing to do with weapons. This is about launching interstellar probes."

*Albert Einstein picked up discarded cigarette butts from the street after his doctor forbade him to buy tobacco for his pipe. He lectured his 8-year-old nephew for two hours about the Newtonian properties of soap bubbles. He only went out sailing on windless days, 'for the challenge'.*

*At a young age, Kurt Gödel was called 'Herr Warum' (Mr. Why) because of his insatiable curiosity.*

*In June 1936, Moritz Schlick, chairman of the Vienna Circle, was assassinated by a pro-nazi student. This triggered a severe nervous crisis in Gödel, making him paranoid with an extreme fear of being poisoned.*

*Gödel almost botched up his U.S. citizenship exam in 1947 when he was explaining that an inconsistency in the U.S. constitution could allow a Nazi-like regime. Phillip Forman – the examiner – understood Gödel's background, cut him off and moved the hearing to a routine conclusion.*

*His fear of being poisoned was such that he only ate food that his wife, Adele, had tasted for him. When Adele was hospitalized in late 1977, she could not taste his food anymore, and Gödel refused to eat, eventually starving himself to death.*

*Gödel and Einstein became close personal friends when both were lecturing at Princeton. On one occasion, Einstein admitted that 'his own work no longer meant much', and that the main reason he stayed at Princeton was 'to have the privilege of walking home with Gödel'. As a present for Einstein's 70th Birthday, Gödel presented him with a paradoxical solu-*

*tion to General Relativity's field equations that allowed time travel.* – Eccentric Anecdotes

Moonfall at Phobos: the touchdown is tender like a mother's kiss, the disembarkment swift and efficient. It feels good to have gravity pulling at you, even if only at micro levels. All the people look happy, despite the fact that they must be subsisting on an absolute minimum of luxuries. *Maybe imagination in space equals living the dream?*

The Mars Moon – or would asteroid be a better approximation? – is slowly hollowed out by its Earth occupants. Walking through its plasma-torched corridors feels like zoning in a hall of glass. The slowly spreading nano-insulation can't quite keep up with the expansion through the body of the ancient god of fear, making the ambient temperature chilly, with every breath appearing as white condensation. *It's full of clouds in my house.* We arrive in a room where the fog is intentional with a 3-D projection of our nearby stellar environment. At least, the green arrow originating from our solar system is pointing to what must be Alpha Centauri. *This is preposterous.* I say as much to Afri. "Aren't you getting way ahead of yourself? We're only slowly getting our affairs in order on Earth. We've barely started to explore the solar system, and you already want to cross interstellar distances? It's madness."

"I don't see why eight billion people can't do three different things at the same time. Actually, we're doing many more things at the same time. Didn't we build up the space elevators while recycling the Pacific Garbage Patch? Didn't we combine longevity with near-zero population growth? Don't we try to make everybody smart, rich and healthy?"

It's true. But I have trouble enough multi-tasking while focussing on Gaia's health alone to be paying much attention to space pioneering. Trust Afri to bring me up to speed; she's bringing in a shiny object barely big enough to be seen by the naked eye.

"Here's our *pièce de résistance*: a quantum computer in a buckyball substrate, embedded in a complex carbon nanotube polyhedron."

"Why the fancy packaging? To avoid decoherence?"

"No, we tackled the decoherence degradation through hyper-aggressive entanglement enforcers. The packaging makes this baby close to indestructible."

In my mind, slowly, some pieces fall into place. "You aim to shoot this over interstellar gulfs?" My brain has trouble keeping up. "But the acceleration will be *immense*."

"Yes, about a billion G."

"It will rip the material apart."

"Not quite. An old-fashioned handgun with a steel bullet already delivers 6 million G. Our carbon nanotubes *laugh* at a billion G."

"How does it stop? I see no braking engine in there."

"No, only some steering thrusters. It stops by drilling itself into a large body."

"Like the Moon?"

"Indeed."

"Even if it can take the mind-bending G-forces, how can it survive the radiation at close to light speeds?"

"A magnetic field and the packaging. We've hired CERN to bombard a number of prototypes. They passed the expected equivalent of a twenty light-year accumulation."

The conclusion becomes inescapable: "Don't tell me you're ready to launch the first one."

She smiles the smile that launched a thousand technologies. "Of course we are. That's why you're here. We want you along for the ride ..."

Physically? She cannot mean physically; this ageing body cries at 5G, let alone a billion. And the probe is about a millimetre across. What did she say back in Nagasaki? *Only your soul*? But then she must have developed ...

She remains silent, and waves for me to follow.

Next, we're in another room of scientific marvels, yet another Pandora's cave in this underground maze. Comfortable seats and wired helmets sit between quantum computer stacks. Afri pats my shoulder. "Our whole nervous system needs to be scanned first – the seats have sensors – and then our minds."

"Our?" Not unexpected, but still surprising.

"I postponed my scan so we could do it together."

"But ... a complete body-and-brain scan that can be translated to software? We're decades away from that."

"It's alien technology. One of the final gifts. We've kept it out of the public eye until we're sure it works. Now, our copies will cross the interstellar gulf."

"Why me?" I raise my eyes to a heaven I don't believe in. "I'm about as far from the exploration type as you can get."

"Exactly," she says, "we need balance. The insatiably curious explorer to absorb the new, and the patient, experienced administrator to decide which info to send back. After all, we do have bandwidth limitations."

"And if our copies find intelligent life?"

"Then the fun *really* begins."

## Blossoms

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GUSTAVO BONDONI



*Gustavo Bondoni was born in Argentina, which, he believes, makes him one of the few – if not the only – Argentinean fiction writers writing primarily in English. He moved to the US at the age of three because his father worked for a multinational company that bounced him around the world every three years. Miami, Zurich, Cincinnati. He only made it back to Buenos Aires at the age of twelve, by which time he was not quite an American kid, not quite a European kid,*

The children pushed and shoved, each trying to get the best view of the blossoms. The largest of the lot, impervious to all attacks, pressed their noses to the thick transparent viewport. Others, too small for physical competition, stood off to one side, using another transparent section of hull to watch the show.

The children had decreed, using some logic Sarah was unable to understand, that the central viewport was the only one worth watching from. But, as far as she could see, any disadvantages were more than offset by the fact that the two or three small children stationed away from the coveted spots were much more comfortable, munching contentedly on sandwiches made of sucrose jelly and the ancient staple of the spaceways, peanut butter. Sarah smiled when she realized that little Wingle, seven years old and still as chubby as a newborn, was among the latter group.

Suddenly, as if by some telepathic consensus, or just because they seemed to know what was coming, the writhing mass of children calmed. Even the last couple of 'hey, stop pushing' were delivered in nearly inaudible whispers.

Sarah shook her head sadly. There had been a time, decades before, when the blossoming was something that human children were forced to observe in order to teach them about the nature of the universe, the nature of power, and the nature of wisdom. One of the galaxy's deepest on-going tragedies.

But this wasn't decades ago. Just twenty minutes before, her boss had reminded her of that very fact.

"Just tell them what they're seeing," he'd said. "don't worry them with moral issues."

"But the moral issues are the reason the Imperium sends the children of its top officials all the way out here. Interstellar passage to the borderlands isn't cheap, you know," Sarah had replied. She knew it would end the same way it always did, but she had to try.

"I think the parents just do it to get the brats out of the house."

"No, they don't. They do it because it's the law. The government is paying for the trip."

"Yes, but the parents can choose any of the other ships out there. And if the snot-nosed kids come back whining about boring old history lessons, they will choose another ship for their next child. So, how about making an effort to make it fun?"

"Fun? It's one of the saddest things humanity has ever encountered."

"It's also the most profitable trip we make. Every Blossoming keeps this ship running until the next one. We can't afford to lose customers. Now get out there and do the job I'm paying you to do." That, testily delivered, had ended the discussion.

She knew what she had to say, and knew what she had to avoid. *Make it fun*, she thought, sadly.

But he was also right about one thing: it was the job she was being paid, and paid extremely well, to do, and no one had forced her to accept it. Sarah would do her part. She resolved, for the millionth time, to quit right after this blossoming.

She clicked on her mic and gestured for the nannybots to stay silent. "Good afternoon, children," she said, "you are about to see one of the most important things that happen in the galaxy."

*and definitely not Argentinean! His fiction spans the range from science fiction to mainstream stories, passing through sword & sorcery and magic realism along the way, and it has been published in fourteen countries and seven languages to date.*

Some of the children turned back to look at her but most kept their gazes firmly fixed on the space outside the viewport. They'd heard the story a million times anyway.

But, she would do her job. "To the right side of the port, you can see the Freliz fleet, although right now, they're just tiny points of light." She knew that as she spoke, implants in the children's optical nerves linked to the ship's computer would mark the position of the fleet with a red square. If they so wished, the children would be able to zoom in and have a closer look at the Freliz's wedge-shaped cruisers.

"The formation on the left belongs to the Hon-Kanneh. You can see their battle stations with the naked eye." As far as humanity had been able to ascertain, the Hon-Kanneh seemed to prefer fortified space stations the size of small moons to fast-moving attack ships. There had never been any way to know more. The first human explorers to approach had been unceremoniously blown out of the sky without ever discovering what was going on or being able to establish contact. In those days, human military technology was nowhere near the capability of either fleet. It still wasn't, but centuries of observation had led to the conclusion that despite their might, neither Freliz nor Hon-Kanneh would ever be a threat. For starters, neither race had developed interstellar travel.

"The Freliz originated on a planet orbiting Hammersmith 402, a relatively small main-sequence yellow star, while the Hon-Kanneh are deemed to have evolved on the largest moon of a gas planet in the Hammersmith 201 system. It's the only place in the galaxy where two intelligent, space-faring races share a binary system."

She paused to let their implants show them the two stars, despite it being unnecessary in the extreme as they were by far the two brightest points of light visible from the viewport. There were always a few really dense kids in the crowd.

"Every twelve-and-a-half years, the orbits of their stars and the outer planets of each system pass as close to each other as

they ever get, and the cometary clouds in each system mix together. It is at this time that they launch their expeditionary fleets, which are those before you."

Another pause as the children focused on the fleets again. "Each fleet holds millions of intelligent, sentient beings, and every twelve years they meet in the deep, cold, empty wastes between their systems." She eyed the position of the two fleets, and calculated that the show was about to start. "We don't know what they call these meetings, but we call them the blossomings."

As if on cue, a perfect sphere of yellow light ignited in the midst of the Freliz formation, a truly beautiful blossom of fire. The children oohed and aahed, forgetting their snacks for a moment. In short succession, a number of other spheres blinked into existence near the first. Sarah went on with her explanation.

"The war between these two races has been ongoing ever since humanity first encountered them centuries ago. Xenologists believe that the war started when one of the species, unaware that the other star had inhabited planets, attempted to colonize the other system. They were probably beaten back and massacred. Ever since, they have been hammering at each other, neither side able to get a decisive advantage, nor willing to risk the consequences of not preparing a fleet. The years between blossomings are spent breeding yet another generation of soldiers, building yet another fleet."

Looking at the children, Sarah thought, *and human children, once brought here to learn the consequences of narrow-mindedness, now view this as the galaxy's number one spectator sport and social event, a sign that your parents are important enough for you to be sent out here.* But she said nothing, just looking at the children's reflection in the viewport, trying to judge their expressions to see whether any of them understood the magnitude of the tragedy they were watching. Most of them were still rapt, but they'd also begun absent-

mindedly nibbling on their food. Not much troubling their pre-adolescent minds, then.

Suddenly, a much larger ball of flame and escaping gasses filled the vacuum on the left. The children jumped, exclaiming and pointing at it with glee. One of the Hon-Kanneh battle stations had finally succumbed to the fire from countless tiny wedge-shaped ships. This marked the second stage of the blossoming: the big fires.

The children might not have been able to appreciate the tragedy, but they had no trouble at all with beauty. They watched in fascinated silence as the huge fleets hammered each other with blades of unimaginable energy. They pointed as the large fireballs bloomed, mingled and occasionally combined with the smaller ones that denoted the death of a Freliz craft and all hands. But, except for the occasional exclamation, or pointing out a particularly colorful explosion to a companion, they spent the next few hours in silence. These children, daughters and sons of the best and brightest, were accustomed to standing patiently, but this time they actually enjoyed it.

Soon enough, the blossoms became fewer and eventually stopped altogether. From the tags on her monitor, it became apparent that a handful of Freliz craft had survived the encounter. Maybe a hundred thousand sentients still alive after a battle of millions. They pressed toward the Hon-Kanneh home world.

It was no longer worth watching, though. It would take the wedges weeks to reach the outer limits of the system, and even then, they would be destroyed by automated defenses that made the battle stations look like slingshots. There wouldn't be enough of a show to make it worth watching.

She turned to the children once again. "Any questions?"

None were forthcoming and the children, herded by their nannybots, walked off into the cabin area. She scanned their faces to see if what they'd seen had sunk in at all, but nothing

indicated that it had. The faces were flushed with exhilaration, and the word that she heard most often as they walked by was 'pretty'. Her heart sank as she watched an entire cadre of the Imperium's future leadership walk away from an experience that should have changed them forever without any sign of being richer for it.

Soon only her favorite, little Wingle, remained, staring out of the viewport. His nannybot tugged gently at his sleeve, but he seemed embarrassed to turn. When he finally did, Sarah saw that his face was wet, marked by tears, and his eyes were rimmed with violent red.

Sarah shooed the nannybot back and knelt beside him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He nodded silently, eyes wide. Finally, he allowed himself to speak, barely more than a whisper, "Are they all dead? All those people in the ships?"

She wanted to tell him that no, they were fine, that it was all a game. That the ships were a simulation for their benefit. But she knew that doing that would be to do the boy a disservice. "Yes."

"Why don't we stop it?"

"We can't. They have more ships, more power, and they won't talk to us."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I think they're afraid of us. Afraid of everyone who isn't one of them."

He nodded as if that was logical. What were they teaching these kids?

"My daddy is a senator. I'm going to tell him about this. He'll stop it."

With that resolve, the child took the nannybot's proffered hand and walked towards his cabin.

Sarah called to him. "Wingle," she said, "I'm proud of you."

He looked at her strangely, not understanding, but finally smiled and went on.

She looked after him and decided, once more, that maybe she wouldn't quit after all. Maybe it was important that these children see this. Some of them wouldn't get it, now or ever.

But even one boy like Wingle, destined to wield power on a galactic scale, could change things. And she wanted to be there to put them on the right path.

She went back toward her room. She'd be asleep for the next twelve years or so, but she didn't mind. There was a reason she did what she did, and it wasn't the money.

## Neon and the Snake

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ADRIANA ALARCO DE ZADRA

"Beware of snakes!" tells me a boy named Neon who walks along a path in the middle of the eucalyptus forest. A fertile valley with terraces and fields can be seen in the bushes. The plateau is surrounded by mountains that hide their peaks under peregrine clouds. It has just rained and the road is muddy. He smiles at the sight of my scrambled and wavy hair. With my feminine curiosity, I observe him with benevolence.

"My name is Neon. My 'daddy' says that it is because my mother when she gave birth was under the neon light that was brought to town the day I was born."

I hear it, funny. I choose a stick from the bush and also make myself a cane with my knife, as I see Neon does.

"Here I am, always, you know, because this shrub does my goats good, and when they have eaten all the leaves from below, I cut off the branches from above and drop them; then they gobble everything up. Then, I take them to the river to quench their thirst but I don't let them drink much. The river, you know, is treacherous. Sometimes it rises so high that it can take them away from you and sometimes it drops so low that just a trickle arrives, but there is always water and it never dries up completely. The river is good because it brings water."

Of course, water is indispensable for life. That's why I discover up the hill, the town with its adobe houses, surrounded by floripondios and aloes that go up the slope near the river.



*Adriana Alarco de Zadra was born in Lima, Perú, in 1937. During her life she has travelled a lot for studies and for her husband's work. She has published six books for adults, works on geography and literature, eleven booklets for children and one science fiction ebook. She won prizes for children dramas, worked as a teacher, secretary and translator and presided the Ricardo Palma Foundation in Lima for ten years. Now as a*

*widow she lives in Italy  
near her daughters and  
grandchildren, paints  
with oil colors and  
writes stories.*

"Since the arrival of those machines that make so much noise, the goats are frightened. The truth is that I liked it better before when there was no one anywhere because it was so quiet and so beautiful, and everything you can see around was mine. But now, I can't go down there because they shout at me and scare me with those funny noises. There, they arrive like birds and they don't like me approaching with the goats, because they are moving stones, and the clearing once killed a goat because of the tremendous rock that fell from the top.

It's dangerous. Neon seems like an intrepid boy, but he should be more responsible. He must not approach our Camp.

"On the other hand, I'm not so poor because now I have shoes. Why are you looking at my feet? Don't you believe me? I don't wear them every day, but I do have shoes even though I don't wear them, so they don't get dirty or break. I only put on my shoes and other trousers when 'daddy' takes me to the village. If they see me like this, they will say that I am the son of no one, well...

"My old man is so angry at you all that he hits me when he drinks aguardiente, but deep down, he is good and takes me to the village at night to make me a man and buys me half a glass of beer, pork rinds and tamales of corn."

I repeat in my thoughts that it is very dangerous to approach the Landing Camp. He must look for other occupations.

"What do I do all day? Well, you see, as I said before, there are snakes around here and you have to be careful. 'Daddy' hunts them, you know? With a stick with two points, carefully. Then, he takes out the poison and sells it to the apothecary. Many of these serpents have already been frightened by so many strangers and the machines that thunder. Once, he almost killed a snake but it escaped. I didn't scream, though I was afraid when he whistled at me, with his tongue sharp enough outside to sting me. The truth, the truth, is that I think he recognized me, that he knew that I was me and that's why nothing else stung me."

I suppose that the snakes of the area recognize the natives and bite only the people they don't like. We'll have to see how they know who's who.

"How do snakes recognize me? Don't you know that snakes are just born out of one's hair? That each snake is a hair? Don't laugh, because I didn't believe either until I saw that damned snake looking at me as if she knew who I was. I've already done the test once, because they grow in water.

"One day, in a puddle left by the river, I put a handful of hair that I pulled out of my head, so that I could make a baby and some snake would be born. I went to see and look at you! One afternoon, I passed by there and what do I find? A snake in the puddle that had grown out of my hair! From this hair of mine, from me! It was a Neon snake, like me... that's what I called it."

Somewhere, I'm going to find a serpent who has the amazing name of Neon. It probably is not one of our own people. It must be of another species like this Neon boy.

"That's why I say he didn't bite me that time, because he surely recognized me, that it was I who gave him life and didn't want to bite me. But, I'm leaving now. If the goats get away, I have to sweat then to bring them back. Good-bye, and beware of snakes because they bite even their own relatives!"

I said goodbye to Neon and poured one of my curly viper hairs into the first puddle of rainwater I found. After a while, I saw a small snake sticking its head out of the shore. *Is it my daughter?* I wonder. *Surely, if what Neon says is true,* I answer myself. But it's better if I don't touch her or get close to her or screw up with the stick, because, as the boy says, they even bite their relatives!

Back at the Intergalactic Exploration Base, I relate my experience. As much as I try to convince them, no one believes that there is a snake out there, in the puddle of rainwater, that was born this morning from me. It's a disappointment that they think I'm still too small. Although it is true that snakes are

born of hair, I do not explain how this Andean boy, so simple and pure, has guessed our mythical idiosyncrasy. Reflecting on the fact of leaving part of my essence on this planet so far away, I am invaded by the intimate satisfaction of having generated a copy of myself. Even if my companions doubt it, my facsimile, my offspring will develop in this distant and enduring world.

Then, happy to have procreated for the first time, I go in front of the mirror to contemplate myself and I comb with fruition my entangled and serpentine Medusa hair.

## He Who Picks the Bones

---

FRANK W. HAUBOLD

*For J. G. Ballard*

*Bapom, pom, pom...*

Muted pounding pierced the darkness in Morten's consciousness. He tried to ignore it but something in his mind had already taken up the rhythm and amplified the drumbeats to an angry hammering.

*Tatom, tom, tom, tatom...*

"Not again!" Morten yelled and tried to cover his ears.

It was only when he felt his palms against his ears that he finally came to and open his eyes. The familiar surroundings calmed him somewhat, though he couldn't explain why his hands were no longer restrained.

*And what was with the light?*

A single, faint emergency light bathed the walls in a green glow. Morten raised his head, listening, and peered at the surveillance camera. It wasn't moving. Even the camera's red diode of an eye had stopped squinting at him.

*How could it be? Some disaster?*

Still, Morten couldn't imagine a disaster big enough for him to be left unattended. Something like that would be dangerous, and it had something to do with the drums in his head. For the moment, they were silenced but it meant nothing more than a momentary pause.



*Frank W. Haubold was born in Frankenberg (Saxonia) in 1955. After taking his A levels and military service he studied computer science and biophysics in Dresden and Berlin. Since 1989 he writes novels, tales and short stories in various genres. He has published numerous books and contributions to anthologies and magazine in Germany and abroad. As the first writer at all he won the German*

*Science Fiction Award (Deutscher Science Fiction Preis) in both the novel and the short story categories in the same year in 2008. He also won the renowned Kurz Laßwitz Preis in 2012. His latest book is the mystery thriller Dämonenstadt (Atlantis).*

He sat up and loosened the restraints that were wrapped around his ankles. If this was all some new trick the whitecoats were playing, then it was time to put an end to it. But there were still no footsteps to be heard in the hallway.

Carefully, he slid out of the bed and nearly fell to the floor. His knees were wobbly. He must have been asleep for a very long time. He stumbled clumsily to the door and slowly leaned against it. It swung open so easily that he almost lost his balance.

But he hadn't won yet. The deciding obstacle remained to be the shatterproof glass door that separated the closed section from the rest of the building. It was considered insurmountable because it could only be opened from the office outward. No matter what had happened here, it was certain that no one would do him that favor. Carefully, Morten slinked down the half-dark hall toward the exit and realized with surprise that the door already stood wide open.

*He was free!*

But his elation was soon mixed with a sinking feeling that worsened as he noticed that in neither the stairwell nor the adjoining sections of the clinic was there a sound to be heard. Still, the absence of sound was merely the most palpable part of the indescribable sense of abandonment that filled the building.

*How long had he been unconscious?*

Morten didn't know. The medication had wiped his sense of time. How often he had awoken with the feeling of having slept for several days when in reality only a few hours had passed. Maybe this time it was the other way around. Even if that were the case, where were the others? Not that he missed them, but they couldn't have just vanished into thin air.

He pushed the elevator call button and jumped back in shock as the doors slid open with a hum, revealing a rectangle of light. As his eyes adjusted to the light a little, he noticed something on the floor of the elevator. It was a brown leather loafer.

*Somebody sure must have been in a hurry*, thought Morten, and in the same moment knew he wouldn't get into the elevator. Not for any price. The ownerless shoe, however, was not the only reason for the aversion he felt for the tirelessly humming stainless steel monster that was so readily offering its services. Against all reason, he was almost certain that this thing had an agenda that had little or nothing to do with its actual function.

*Ridiculous. I have to get out of here and call Dr. Ferguson. The rest will take care of itself.*

Dr. Rachel Ferguson was a psychiatrist and the only person who took his talk about the drums seriously after his arrest. Before that, they x-rayed his head, electronically cut his brain into slices, and made countless encephalograms without ever finding anything unusual. He had to fill out dozens of questionnaires full of questions which, under other circumstances, would have earned the one asking them a row of broken teeth. No, Morten had never felt the desire to sleep with his little sister or even his mother. No, he didn't hate his father. And no, he didn't get an erection when he saw little girls on the monkey bars on a playground. He didn't know what had happened to the people in the photos they kept putting in front of him. Or did he? It was all connected to the drumming in his head, but there was nothing about that in the pre-printed questionnaire...

As Morten reached the reception area, for a second he thought he heard the drumming again. But the sound was different, less rhythmic. A muted drone that rose and fell again. It was true that Sinfield was on the coast, but he hadn't realized that the sea was so close that you could hear the surf from the clinic. The monotonous *Cha-Boom* that filled the reception area made him uneasy. It sounded like a threat. Unsettled, he headed for the nearest payphone before it occurred to him that he didn't have any change. After a sudden inspiration, he walked over to the abandoned information counter and let his

gaze wander across the receptionists' desks. He helped himself to a few quarters from an invitingly open cash register but resisted the temptation to fill his pockets with bills. Morten didn't want to steal anything. He just desperately needed to make a phone call...

He hurriedly shoved the coins into the slot and dialled Rachel Ferguson's number. It was ringing. His heart was pounding as he pressed the receiver to his ear, but Rachel wasn't answering. After the fifth or sixth ring, he heard a metallic click.

*The answering machine*, he thought to himself, disappointed, and winced as a muffled sound persisted from the earpiece. Albeit hushed and somewhat distorted by the long transmission over the phone lines, it was unmistakably rising and falling like the sound of languidly rolling waves on the shore...

Morten let the receiver fall and walked slowly like a tired old man to the exit.

Outside the building, he could not only hear the sea but smell and taste it as well. The air was moist and smelled like seaweed and fish that wasn't quite fresh anymore. A wall of dark clouds hung over the city and draped the streets and houses in gray twilight. The parking lot in front of the clinic was empty, the reserved and visitor spaces alike. Only a red, rust-eaten Pontiac Firebird with bald, cracked tires waited patiently for the return of its owner. It had New Mexico plates and a long cross-country drive behind it. Who did it belong to? Lost in thought, Morten started to cross the street but jumped back at the last second as a taxi with dimmed headlights suddenly sped past him. He hadn't heard it coming. Startled, he watched it drive off, but the dirty yellow sedan hadn't slowed down at all and had soon vanished from sight.

*I must have been mistaken*, thought Morten with shaking knees, trying to suppress the fear that had overtaken him at the sight of the taxi. Not because he had nearly been hit, but rather because the seat behind the steering wheel had been empty...

Of course, he knew that taxis don't make rounds without their drivers. But weren't it just as improbable that the employees and patients of a renowned clinic would literally disappear overnight? And what about the other inhabitants of the city? In spite of the fact that it was quickly getting dark, he couldn't see light coming from any of the buildings near him. The streets and sidewalks lay empty before him.

It had started to rain and Morten pulled up the collar of his jacket. Only then did he become aware that he was still wearing hospital clothes. In the confusion, he hadn't even thought about finding something less conspicuous to wear. The roar of the sea had become louder. A gust of wind threw cold rain at him in waves that drenched his cotton clothes. Morten was freezing. It was time to look for shelter.

A flickering light, like that of a broken neon sign, piqued his interest. He hurried out and was soon standing in front of an unremarkable building at the corner of two streets with the words "Seaside Palace Hotel" in glowing, sickly green letters above the door. The glass door was unlocked and from inside the building, a faint light was shining into the foyer.

"Is someone there?" Morten called and groped for a light switch in vain. No one answered, just the distant sound of the surf. Carefully, he crossed the hall and called out again. No answer. The door to the room with the light shining from it was cracked open and bore the tantalizing word "bar."

*Why not*, thought Morten, ignoring the drumbeats that melded themselves with the ever-present sound of the sea.

"Hey Buddy!" a none-too-shy sounding male voice greeted Morten as he entered the room. Blinded, he closed his eyes. The beam of a flashlight stayed pointed at his face as someone gave him a good whack across the back of the neck, knocking him forward.

"Whacha runnin' for buddy?" asked the voice, amused. The drumming in Morten's head was quickly getting louder.

"You lookin' for trouble?"

He still couldn't see his opponent. It was only when someone jammed a fist in Morten's stomach from right in front of him that he understood that there were at least three of them.

"Get out of here, get lost!" groaned Morten when he caught his breath and listened to the thud of the punches that were threatening to break open his skull.

*Tatom, tom, tom, tatom...*

The men laughed and then it was all over. The next blow shattered Morten's perception like a brick thrown through a windowpane and hurled him into a different world: Blackbirds dove from the sky, cawing hoarsely and pecked at his eyes. Instinctively, Morten threw up his arms, swinging them around him, but the beasts came at him from all sides and tore bloody ribbons out of the skin on his arms. Sometimes he succeeded in grabbing one of his attackers and throwing it to the ground. Delirious with pain and rage he would spring to his feet, then pounce on the twitching body and savor the sound of its bone crunching beneath his weight.

*Tatom, tom, tom, tatom...*

The rhythm of the drums grew faster and pulled Morten along with it, dancing like some mad dervish on the crumpled bodies of the dead wretches. His arms, though shredded to the bone, snatched wildly at his attackers surrounding him in a cloud of blood and black feathers.

"Yeessss!!!" howled the blood-soaked skeleton with a voice that no longer sounded remotely human, and finally collapsed only after the drums fell silent.

Breathing heavily, Morten knelt on the ground, unable to open his eyes. A wave of nausea swelled within Morten at the sickly-sweet smell of blood. He had to get out of there before he threw up. Nervously trying to keep from looking at the bodies of the dead men, Morten stumbled out of the room. Only after the door clicked shut behind him did he exhale.

In the hotel men's room, he stuffed his blood-smeared clothes into the trash and tried to wash himself off. He hadn't

meant to go into any of the hotel rooms, but now he desperately needed clean clothes. Barefoot, he climbed the stairs and found most of the rooms unlocked. The drums in his head were silent, so there was no one else there. Hurriedly, he looked through the suitcase and dresser until he came to the room of a man who was his size. *Had been his size?* Morten didn't know. He was exhausted and barely in command of his senses. He had just enough strength left to drag the suitcase into an unused room and bolt the door. He then fell onto the large, soft bed and immediately fell to sleep.

That night Morten dreamt of the sea.

He stood on the edge of a cliff and watched the waves crash against the rock tossing water up to his feet and shower him with white foam.

"Mor-ten," tolled a voice that seemed to call to him from the depths of the sea. "Come. It is time!" Frightened, he wanted to retreat but his legs refused to comply.

"Where were you, Morten?" hissed the waves, sprinkling him with foam like spoiled children. "We looked for you everywhere."

"Why?" He whispered, terrified, as an enormous wave rose before him like a dark wall.

"We wait for you," the sea droned with the air of a promise, "for you are he, who picks the bones." Morten thought about that while the foamy whitecaps folded at his feet, and the roar of the sea ceased for an instant. And suddenly, he understood where he would find the inhabitants of Sinfield, along with those of every city everywhere. The sea had beckoned them all to itself. As the wave took him in its midnight blue arms, he was ready. He surrendered to the sea and let it carry him, listening to its voice...

Morten woke with a smile on his face. Good-humored, he showered and carefully chose his attire. Only as he went into the bar once more, did his facial expression darken a little and he find himself fighting feelings of nausea. But he found what

he was looking for: a sawed-off shotgun and a .45 magnum with three extra clips.

In the kitchen, he fried some eggs, brewed some coffee and ate with a surprisingly good appetite. Then he went to the door and stood in the morning light. He could hear the sea and a shore wind blowing the wispy cirrus clouds westward. It was going to be a beautiful day. Morten examined his weapon and waited. When a red sports car approached, he smiled and admired the bright shine of the paint job and the chrome rims. It was a 73 Firebird with New Mexico plates. The car stopped right in front of him and waited with the motor running until he got in the passenger's side. "Sympathy for the Devil" by the Stones was on the radio and Morten drummed along with his fingers on the dashboard. Then the 8-cylinder motor growled and tossed the passenger back into the cushion of his seat.

Near a junkyard he heard the drums for the first time and shot three bums who were too drunk to answer the call of the sea. Half an hour later, he missed the refrain of Donovan's "Atlantis" because he had to deal with a pale-faced girl who was about to shoot another dose of dreams into her veins. Annoyed, Morten wiped the blood off his face and decided to only use the shotgun in emergencies. A crippled veteran blessed Morten as he walked with the loaded weapon into the old man's room, which stunk of urine and confusion. Morten smiled courteously and fired three shots into the crying man's face. For lunch, he made up for the slice of sticky individually wrapped gas station pizza with an ice-cold beer and the first cigarette he'd smoked in years. It made him a little dizzy, so he stretched out sleepily in the car seat and listened to Neil Young's "Heart of Gold" till the Pontiac started to move again. Like an eager bloodhound, the red car prowled the streets and brought Morten to the shadiest, bleakest, and saddest parts of town. By the afternoon he was running low on ammunition but fortunately, the drums in his head remained silent. The town was dead. As the firebird once again sped toward the

edge of town, Morten opened another beer and turned the radio all the way up. "Sky Pilot" blared from the speakers and Morten, a little flat and a little choked up, sang the refrain: *You never, never, never reach the sky...* He hadn't planned to do that, but what the hell? He was going straight uphill past randomly parked cars toward eagle's rock, the highest point in the surrounding area. The road got narrower, and sometimes the Pontiac had to ram a few of the cars out of their jumble into the ditch. Having steadily lost speed with each collision, the car eventually rolled unhurriedly to a halt at the top of the cliff, offering an impressive view of St. Georges Bay.

All of a sudden the radio went dead and the agitated churning of the sea drowned out the sound of the motor.

"Mor-ten," sang the waves before they stormed into the cliff with an impish mischievousness. "Mor-ten, it is time!"

"It is time!" screeched the gulls that swarmed over the bay and dove like an arrow at their unseen prey.

"We're waiting," called the sea with its dark, alluring voice, "for him who picks the bones." One last time the firebird's motor roared, the rear tires squealing against the pavement as the car flew at the drop-off like a bat out of Hell. "I'm coming!" Morten cheered as the Pontiac broke through the wooden fence, sailed a few more yards, almost level, and then in a long elegant arch, fell toward the sea.

"I'm coming!" Morten whispered once more as an invisible hand tore him from his seat and flung him against the windshield. It was only in the seconds before the impact that Morten saw what had drawn the gulls into the bay by the hundreds and opened his mouth in one last breathless scream.

## Variant Readings

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### FRANK ROGER



*Frank Roger was born in 1957 in Ghent, Belgium. His first story appeared in 1975. By now he has a few hundred short stories to his credit, published in more than 40 languages. Apart from fiction, he also produces collages and visual art in a surrealist and satirical tradition.*

I discovered the Variant Readings bookstore on one of my long Saturday afternoon walks through the city center. I love browsing through old and used books, and whenever I stumble onto a shop I haven't yet visited, I just cannot walk past. I like adding stuff to my ever-growing collection, and I often need birthday presents for book lovers, so I have sufficient excuses for spending too much time in bookstores.

Especially when I saw the sign reading "rare and special editions" there was no stopping me. I went in and the shopkeeper, a middle-aged man wearing a faded Wishbone Ash T-shirt, greeted me politely.

"Can I help you?" he asked. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Tell me what you have," I said.

"Rare and special editions over here, alternate editions at the back and down the stairs. Feel free to look around. Take your time."

I wanted to ask him what alternate editions were, but as he had returned his attention to his laptop screen I didn't bother. No doubt I would find out by myself. I glanced at the titles of the books spread out on tables and propped up on shelves bending under their heavy loads. Dusty hardcovers and faded paperbacks, old best sellers, some signed first editions, novels, non-fiction, poetry collections, travel guides, anthologies, a bit

of everything. This looked like what a standard used books place offered, and was of little interest to me.

I went to the back, indeed labeled 'Alternate editions', and picked up a few paperbacks at random. I still didn't get what made them 'alternate'. They were titles you could find in any bookstore. I leafed through a worn copy of *Dubliners*, a story collection by James Joyce, and couldn't spot anything that made it different from what I recalled. It wasn't until I read the blurb on the back cover that I started to grasp what I had in my hands.

"Finally back in print, this story collection is the only work of fiction by a promising Irish writer who tragically died too young", it read. Joyce's only work of fiction? It started to dawn on me. Did this book come from a place where James Joyce had somehow died after publishing his *Dubliners*? Some alternate world? Where he had never had the chance to write *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? Had this alternate reality been denied the pleasures of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*? Was there no statue of James Joyce in that universe's version of Dublin, as this writer had never come to fulfill his potential, producing merely a collection of short stories?

Did the shopkeeper of this place somehow have access to different realities, where he picked up what he called 'alternate editions' of well-known works? That sounded pretty incredible, but there was no other explanation for this special copy of Joyce, unless it was some elaborate hoax, a fake book produced to score a specific effect? But in that case it wouldn't be offered at the modest price that was scribbled on the first page.

And what about the rest of what was on display here? Were all the books in this section from alternate realities? If so, the hoax theory had to be ruled out. No one would produce fake books in such massive quantities, and sell them at regular prices, that did not make sense. I would have to check more

books, pick out a number at random and try to find what made them different from the versions in 'my' reality.

On a shelf labeled 'classic American fiction' I noticed a few dozen titles by J.D. Salinger, all unknown to me, apart from *The Catcher in the Rye*. I picked up a book titled *The End of the Age of Innocence*, saw Salinger touted as a New York Times Best-Seller List author. I opened the book, and found opposite the title page a list of 'other works by the same author', about thirty-five of them, without exception works I had never heard of that certainly didn't exist in my universe.

These books had to come from an alternate reality where Salinger had kept writing and publishing successfully, instead of withdrawing from the literary world as he had in my world. This was quite incredible. I put the book back on the shelf and allowed my thoughts to roam freely.

This discovery had profound philosophical consequences. I could hardly imagine that if there were indeed alternate universes, the differences would be limited to books. There would undoubtedly be differences in all aspects of life. Would such an alternate universe be recognizable, or would the differences be minor ones? And was there only one other universe, or more? An endless variety perhaps? Was everything possible then, had everything imaginable happened somewhere? The very idea boggled the mind.

So why hadn't I heard about this remarkable shop earlier? Certainly other people must have stumbled onto it, identified the true nature of its stocks and spread the news. But they hadn't. Maybe I would find out. Perhaps I should buy some typical stuff here as evidence of what I had just discovered. But what? The selection of material was overwhelming. What should I take?

I picked up *The Bottle-Weary Warrior*, an autobiographical novel by Charles Bukowski about his life after he managed to quit drinking and filled his days with poetry, music, art, and relentless efforts to combat alcohol's evil lure. Would this one do?

I also spotted a massive five-volume set titled *Collected Poems* by Jim Morrison, an omnibus edition of all his poetry, spanning the period from his leaving The Doors, disenchanted as he was with the music industry, until his death at age eighty-five. Now this would make a convincing piece of evidence, but it was too heavy to carry along.

In the art books section I picked up a superb hardcover edition of Vincent van Gogh's work. I leafed through it and was surprised to see mainly abstract art. The book's introduction briefly sketched the artist's life, from his promising beginnings in impressionism through his highly successful career as a pioneering force in abstract art. Here again, history had followed a different course, yielding spectacular results. It was clear now that any writer or artist could be represented here with work from a universe where things had worked out in an unexpected way. This bookstore was a treasure trove, I could spend ages here going through piles of books and marveling at the alternate paths they showcased.

I was still looking around for material that would qualify as perfect evidence for the existence of alternate realities, neither too expensive nor too heavy, as I saw my own name on the cover of a tiny paperback. My heart leaped up – surely this was a mistake? Or a remarkable coincidence?

With trembling hands I picked up the book and read out the title aloud. *The Short-Lived Immortal* by Daniel Collins. I just couldn't believe it. I read the opening lines and recognized them right away. This was indeed the short novel that I wrote in my younger days, when I still had literary aspirations. I had submitted it to countless publishers, but had never found a home for it. It had remained an unpublished manuscript, gathering dust in a drawer. I had tried my hand at writing again, but never finished anything and soon abandoned all hopes to be a published writer. I turned my attention to other endeavors, without ever looking back to those early writings.

But here I held it in my hands, my novel, published in paperback. So there was an alternate universe where I was a published writer, where I had perhaps other works in print. This was quite incredible. It was a dream come true. It might well rekindle my ambitions. I hadn't felt so good in a long time.

I threw a glance at my watch. It was getting late. I had spent a lot more time here than I should have and had better head back home now. Well, which books would I buy so as to have some evidence for the news I would be happy to spread?

I chose my own novel and the Van Gogh art book, went over to the counter and noticed the shopkeeper now wore a Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt. That was strange. Had he changed T-shirts while I was looking around the store? I paid and left, and went home with my treasures.

The following day I talked to a friend on the phone about that weird art book I had found, featuring Van Gogh's abstract art.

"What's so strange about that?" he asked. I didn't pursue the matter, told him it was a special edition and changed the subject. After our conversation I checked the internet – I realized I should have done that right away. Wikipedia and other sources listed a biography for Van Gogh that corresponded with the one in the art book's introduction. I also found confirmation for the alternate careers of James Joyce and Jim Morrison.

Only the information on Bukowski was different – did that mean the book I had seen came from yet another alternate reality?

Anyway, it was obvious that I was no longer in my 'home universe'. While browsing in that store, I must have crossed over to an alternate world. Perhaps Variant Readings was at the crossroads between universes, thus allowing the shopkeeper to buy material from a variety of places?

It would explain his change of T-shirt, as well as the fact that no one had spread the news of that bizarre shop. It didn't

explain everything, however. Where was the alternate version of myself in this universe? Had I somehow replaced him? Was he still around and was I bound to run into him? Or did the laws of nature prevent that, and had he moved on at the same moment I had arrived? It was clear I had only scratched the surface of this alternate reality phenomenon. What else would be different apart from those books? Would this world have surprises in store for me?

But I didn't worry for too long. The most important thing now was the fact that I was finally what I always wanted to be: a published writer. I needn't have bought that used copy of *The Short-Lived Immortal*, as I found my own author's copy on the shelves in my study, as well as a few other novels and story collections of mine. I would really have to take a good look at those.

And then I would tackle new writing projects.

I decided never to set foot in the Variant Readings again. And never even to go to that part of town anymore.

On the one hand I was tempted to discover more about the place and unravel its mystery as the crossroads between the universes. On the other hand I was afraid to be thrown back into my old universe where I was an unpublished writer, a fate I was happy to have escaped.

I realized there might be alternate universes where I was a hugely successful writer, but as I had no control over the crossover mechanism, I wasn't prepared to take risks and preferred staying in 'my new home universe'. I was sure I would quickly adapt to my new life, and as my local alter ego showed no signs of turning up, I thankfully took his place.

And I kept writing. My publisher already expressed an interest and wanted to see a few sample chapters, even in first draft. I had work to do.

And so I happily wrote, convinced I was heading for a bright future. Until one day I found a manila envelope in my mailbox.

It didn't have a name or address on it – that meant the postman hadn't delivered it. Someone else must have.

I opened the envelope and found it contained a book and a folded sheet of paper with some words scribbled on it. I quickly read them:

*Look at this book I found. I guess you know where I picked it up. If you don't want this to be autobiographical, then get the hell out of here. I want my life back. And I'll make sure your death will pass unnoticed. I'll be happy to take over.*

The note was signed D.C.

Had my alter ego finally showed up? Where had he been all this time? Why this sudden reappearance? There were obviously things going on beyond my understanding.

The book was a novel titled *The Hunted Man*, by Daniel Collins. A future work of mine? I read the blurb on the back cover and almost dropped the book. The story of a man hunted by his alter ego, until one of them got killed – but it was never discovered which one. This could not be a coincidence. If this was a true story, I had better be the one who survived the clash. But no doubt my alter ego harbored the same ambition. So what were my options?

There were two possibilities. Either I complied, in which case I would have to go down to the Variant Readings bookstore and hope to find a way back home – or at least out of this place. Or I stayed where I was, in which case I would have to deal with a hostile alter ego bent on getting rid of me. And eager to reclaim his rightful place.

Frankly, I liked neither of these options. But did I have a choice? Would the laws of the universe allow both of us to stay in the same world? I had no idea how my alter ego had returned, but I understood that one of us had to go, and probably the sooner the better before things went haywire.

I realized that the place I occupied was not mine. I was an intruder here, I had no right to refuse my alter ego's reclaiming his territory. I was truly sorry that this wonderful story had

to stop here, but I felt it was my duty to take a step back. It had been too good to be true to start with.

Resigned, I went back to the Variant Readings and went in without really paying attention to the books, as my mind was focused on other matters. I picked up a few titles at random (*Godot's Arrival* by Samuel Beckett looked like an interesting one), just hoping that by spending some time down here I might cross back over to my own world. Fifteen minutes later I left again, convinced I was back home.

It quickly dawned on me that something must have gone wrong. When I arrived home, I saw traces of someone else's presence. Had I ended up in yet another alternate universe, where my alter ego was still around? In that case I had no right to be here and I had better leave the premises before I ran into the 'real' Daniel Collins. An encounter might lead to unforeseen results, and probably unpleasant ones.

In my (or 'his') study I found a small shelf with author's copies of books that I (he) had written and published in this world. I picked up one titled *No Laurels To Rest On*, a satirical thriller. For a moment I was tempted to switch on my (his) computer and do some writing, perhaps continuing a story that my alter ego had already started. It would be the most remarkable collaboration in the history of literature. But I refrained from doing so – tampering with such events might have dire consequences.

So I left and hung around in a nearby park for a while, considering my options. I decided the best thing I could do was make another attempt to cross over, hopefully with more success, and take it from there.

I hurried back to the Variant Readings, but to my utter surprise the place was closed. This was impossible! I had been here a few hours ago! I looked through the grimy windows – the shop must have been closed for a long time, and probably wouldn't reopen anytime soon. Now this was bad news. It

meant that I was stuck here in a world where I didn't belong. Was this how the laws of the universe prevented people from crossing over too often? Had I already caused too many ripples in the great pond, and was I now forced to solve my problem otherwise? I had no idea what the mechanics behind this system of alternate universes were. All that I knew for sure now was that I should never have set foot in that damned bookstore.

The thing was, there was no room here for the two of us. I had understood that very well in the previous universe where my alter ego had menaced to eliminate me. No doubt he was in some predicament similar to mine now. Probably he had no other choice. Nor had I in this universe.

It was clear to me now. My only possible course of action was to take my alter ego's place. I would have to hunt him down and remove him.

Maybe I should write him a note, allow him the option to make way for me if he saw an opportunity.

So yes, *The Hunted Man* would turn autobiographical indeed. But this time the hunter would be me.

# Our Daily Bread

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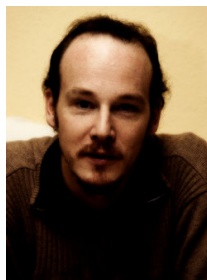
SVEN KLOEPPING

Translated by Michael K. Iwoleit

## Chili con carne

If he wasn't so useful as a driver I might be tempted to shut his mouth for good. It's disgusting nonetheless to see how this mouth, the jaws gaping all the way, is fed with one spoon after the other and gobbles the meat pulp like mousse au chocolat without wasting too much time on chewing. The flavor of his dish is not very appetizing and cuts its way across the edge of the plate and the table, settles in my nose, runs through my windpipe and into my stomach that is about to erupt. I couldn't stop it but I can't avert my eyes either because the others watch me Argus-eyed. His noisy eating doesn't bother anyone but me, a white fast-food Yankee – although I don't even appear like a transient, more like someone who is on the run. Meanwhile the gluttony of the man opposite is climaxing in a huge burp.

At the poker table: cheers that seem a little bizarre in an atmosphere that must have strayed into the Cervezeria where the Mexicans prefer to lounge on bar stools and plastic chairs, spend their time with card-playing and drinking and bluntly gaping at the bar, where the beer itself would be glad to be drunk to better endure this boredom. Otherwise there's a dead silence such as it sometimes occurs in the UN Security Council



*Sven Klöpping, born in 1979, writes poems and science fiction stories since his childhood. He has published numerous short stories in national and international magazines and anthologies and was a frequent editorial helper and contributor of InterNova's mother magazine Nova. Apart from that he contributed poetry to German*

*magazines such as Federwelt and Kult. He edited the anthologie Bullet in 2014, with stories set in his own fictional universe MegaFusion. Some of his tales were collected in his books MegaFusion (2001) and Menschgrenzen (2010).*

while elsewhere the napalm bombs go up, down and up again, humans are turned into ash and a minute of silence is devoted to the fallen troops, especially the own ones.

Calm without the hope of a storm pervades the bar and there seems to be a trace of feigned condolence in the eyes of the Mexicans who constantly look over at us. Otherwise they just drink and keep quiet – their best ways to forget themselves. Talkativeness is definitely not on the menu here, especially not in presence of a fast-food Yankee and much less if this Yankee is unwilling to pay at least five rounds as he usually does in Hollywood. There's no TV set that might have distracted the well-nourished Latino cowboys. Even the clamorous mob of bikers that might show up any minute, reduce everything to rubble, empty out the whole beer supply and violate every single woman around is constantly ignored – which is an indication that the beer is running short anyway because there are enough women and the buildings looks like it is insured.

Meanwhile José, the man opposite, does his best to catch up with his countrymen in terms of corpulence. He shoves the calories with relish towards his esophagus and seems not to be interested in his surroundings. Over the last four hours as my life was in his hands and almost got wasted – while overhauling he did not only topple beer bottles but almost the whole truck – I didn't witness him any other way. The whole time he was chewing on some food supplies that he pulled like a magician out of bags, compartments and boxes.

Of course I could have got out and fled from my budding paranoia – but wasn't this what I was doing anyway?

Before I had met José yesterday I had been standing somewhat west of Mexicali at a graveled rural road, my fear behind and the sun ahead of me, halfheartedly hitchhiking toward Tijuana, and was close to giving up. About three dozen selfish pricks had left me standing which was all the more annoying since there were only 150 kilometers left to the border where I

would be welcomed in a heavily armed manner to protect me, as was claimed, from dangerous immigrants from the south. God bless America!

Of course I felt a little queasy in this lonely cotton plantations. I felt like an outlaw, thirsty, sweaty and homeless. Never before had I been so misplaced as in this country. Most of the car drivers seemed to think the same since they usually drove by without even noticing me (or not wanting to notice me). At best they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes and some even tried to provoke me, abused their horns or swerved into my direction but didn't stop and floored their cars with a laugh.

I would have been back in San Francisco long since if I hadn't left my money in a scrap heap of a Beetle whose driver would not turn round to bring it back to me.

Dusk was already falling and I was about to search for a place to sleep in the wild as I heard the noise of a solitary car engine behind me that chuffed along the road. It clattered and spluttered as if the engine had been fed with the wrong kind of gas and seemed close to conk out, break down or betray its owner in some other way.

I turned towards the road and my apprehensions were confirmed. A transporter from the thirties, with grilled radiator and two-part rounded windshields that looked like two sad eyes, was approaching me. The windshields were dirty and almost made it impossible to look into the car interior. I could only recognize the contours of the driver, a broad-shouldered male figure that casually sat behind the wheel and did not seem to be aware that his jalopy was hardly in a running condition.

The car was approaching me leisurely while its eyes got ever larger, sadder and smudgier. At first I didn't intend to stop this moving spare parts depot. It would probably grunt, creak and fall apart when I got on. Exhaust fumes clouded the air behind it like the breath of a dying dragon that had just enough strength left to curse its surroundings and all that crept and fled in it.

I don't remember why I extended my thumb. I was probably afraid to spend the night alone in this wasteland. He would drive on anyway, I thought, but the car got ever slower which, considering the state of the vehicle, didn't necessarily indicate the intentions of the driver to take me along. It might just as well have been the premonitions of a sudden death. The car hissed and whistled and screeched to a halt a few yards further down the road.

You may imagine that I was more than a little surprised as José pushed the door open, received me with a bottle of Corona and even managed to get the van moving again.

Maybe it's José's "dish" and the way he devours it that causes a certain aversion and a subliminal aggression in me.

My stomach is commanded by that chemical process that spirally spreads over neural pathways and the rib cage almost up to my neck, sending SOS calls to the cerebellum. Beads of sweat form on my brow but it's hardly noted in the poorly ventilated joint.

José is almost finished, scratching the rest of the billowing stuff from his plate, oblivious of my disgust or ignoring it, chewing the pulp back and forth with relish as if time has no meaning, as if there wasn't any trampers longing to go home – as if nothing existed but his repulsive muck that trickles in threads from the corners of his mouth.

Thoughts that I wanted to forget long ago cut their way via my association cortex into my mind. José's way of eating, his smacking and the way his greedy eyes devour everything before it's even in his mouth – I had to be suffering from Alzheimer's if this sight wouldn't remind me of the incidents that had brought me to Central America months ago. Incredible – even the motivity of his right hand as it hold the spoon resembles that of my former friend.

As I suppress the urge to vomit that overtakes me without warning José notices any glance in his direction.

When I give him my attention even for just the fraction of a second he cracks an ironic, complacent smile that makes my blood run cold. Not because of that smile but because I suddenly see Pete instead of the Mexican sitting in front of me and have to listen how he constantly repeats this one sentence, his litany of mental destabilization while he is turned on by my anxiety. After all he *knew* that I'm allergic to it. He should have known! The thought alone almost drives me mad. I can't stand it, have to get somewhere, to the bathroom, outside – but away from this table!

Joë stops for a short period and, as if he's a telepath, grins broadly and charming like a corn harvester while disgorging a smattering of English words with half-full mouth: "You ..." The meat keeps him from speaking fluently so he gulps everything at once and manages to complete his question: "You too?"

He arches his bushy eyebrows, points at the chili and grins. I decisively shake the head. Gracias, I've already eaten. I have no demand for a second hot meal. Next time maybe. He shrugs and goes for his helpless prey again, obviously without remembering that I've made a very different statement about my feeling of hunger in the car. He seems not give a fuck how I feel and it doesn't surprise me with such a blunt guy like him. The other Mexicans avert their eyes and continue to do nothing after listening to our attempt of a conversation for five seconds.

Thinking of Pete has got me completely confused. To get rid of it at all costs I peer into the mustachioed visage of my opposite one more time. It doesn't resemble the face of my former friend to the slightest degree. I try to convince myself that his cheeks are much fatter, his lips more rubbery – but I still don't feel any relief. What I need now is some kind of distraction, opium for the self that has lost itself somewhere between Miami and Disney town where much better shops and addicts are to be found. But instead of being relieved and entertained I repeatedly witness how José is joyfully pushing his leftovers

back and forth, as if showing off, pressing them with his tongue between his teeth so that I can follow everything live and in color.

And then *he* turns up again, Pete, my former best friend, looking up from his plate, a curtain of hippie-like long hair over his savaged features, spilling out of his full mouth: "It's not enough for us ..."

Cold shivers down my back, bear witness to my suppressed fear. I don't want to be reminded! But my memory is like an old wound that you've got used to and that bursts open when you happen to bump into something, causing an eruption of pain that you thought you had overcome long ago.

### **Steak with roast potatoes**

It should have been late summer according to the calendar: a sunny Californian late summer, permeated with the scent of ripe grapes. Calendars, however, are sometimes mistaken and so the city which around this time of the year would usually be bathed in a shimmering light, its streets turned by streams of tourists into a kind of open air theater, was now, stiffened from the cold, in the grip of an impossible weather. There was no trace of a summer, no matter how hard I looked. The cloud cover wasn't penetrated by a single beam of light. Frozen up puddles and ice-covered windshields of Pontiac cabriolets seemed a little surreal. It smelled of autumn and winter, not of wine grapes which would no be harvested this year, spoiled by the frost. They served port wine and import wines in the restaurants instead.

I shivered up and down the foggy, windy streets of San Francisco but didn't find a way out. My trembling body was wrapped in all kinds of winter sweaters, scarfs and cotton socks that I could get hold off. They hadn't been needed for such a long time that moths had nested in some of them.

The legendary tourist crowds that would otherwise squash through the streets in cars, buses and old-fashioned streetcars had failed to appear and I couldn't blame them. If still some foreigners would show up in defiance of all logic they were almost indistinguishable from the frustrated locals. They wore warm padded jackets, usually hat or woolen caps too, and on each of their faces was a clear expression of what they thought about the snowfall.

Thus, I at least wasn't alone with my frustration but one of many disappointed fellows who, like in protest marched across the sidewalks, pretending that all was fine. They smiled. They talked: "It will be all right. We will deal with it. We Americans have dealt with far more difficult things than that." I didn't get anything out of their positive thinking, however, and gave vent to my anger by kicking cans over the curbside or ranted at little children who crossed my path with their sleds.

After half an eternity of carefully avoiding to slip or being knocked over I finally climbed the stairs up to the Red Peppers where my friend was waiting for me.

Not that Pete's invitation had bothered me, quite the contrary. I was looking forward to chat with him since we had hardly met for some weeks.

The business, family, his girlfriend, appointments – there was always something. At first I didn't have any explanation why he always asked me for dinner each time he wanted to see me. It was not unpleasant in any way. After all, Pete was still my best friend and I was glad for any opportunity to chat with him about old and new times. But of course we could have gone to a cinema or a bar, simply to see something else than the reddish interior of the Red Peppers.

And there was something strange that made me increasingly despise such meetings. Pete didn't bother with me at all during dinner. It was really disconcerting that he was completely occupied with eating and reordering and I felt almost

useless in his presence, like a deaf-mute priest in a confessional box. I didn't exist for him anymore and if he cared to say something it was usually a question like how I liked the food, which kind of dessert I wanted to order, if I could recommend a good restaurant in Chinatown and so on.

Well, I am a far too good-natured person to simply look away when my friends have problems. It was obvious that something was wrong with Pete. I usually approach the concerned persons directly in such cases to find out what they suffer from and to help as best as I can. Helping others is kind of a self therapy for me that you don't try on yourself but on others – almost without a risk. I had such a reputation of a hobby psychiatrist among my friends and acquaintances that I was consulted without being asked, even regarding trifles.

My advantage was that I wasn't even required to check after such a "session" whether the person in question had actually put my proposals into practice. Such an approach might be contrary to the ethical standards of medicine – if there is any such thing at all – it was, however, not contrary to my own thinking which was still pretty sound at that time. Pete's case, however, was on an altogether different level, compared with the usual everyday worries. I didn't have the slightest idea what was going on in his head and was unable to make head or tail of his sudden reluctance that at times aggravated into a real aversion against me. I had already advised him to consult a professional who might provide better help than me. Peter, however, had been rather sensitive to that proposal which made me assume that he preferred the support of a good friend instead of being "abused" by one of those "mind eaters", as he used to call the psychoanalysts.

I was shivering as I tore the bar's entrance door open. After a short cursory look around the seating area I discovered him at a small side table, apart from the sparse visitor traffic, completely immersed in himself and his plate. In this corner, rela-

tively shielded by screens, he was just eagerly chopping up his first or third pork filet – he didn't care how many exactly – as I joined him.

A slight nod towards me was his only hint of a welcome before he covetously lunged at the still untouched young vegetables. I decided to pretend that I could handle the situation, consulted the menu and made it seem like I was picking something, although I always ordered the same meal in the Red Peppers that Pete, however, could never remember.

"You shouldn't eat so much", I said casually as if the words had just dropped out of my mouth.

He looked up, obviously struggling with himself whether he should put his oar in it but decided against it and kept on snacking.

The next minutes I watched him shredding rather than chopping his filet and devouring huge chunks of it without caring much for the feelings of other people who were eating. As he did his plate was getting empty while the air was getting stale and I somehow tried to squeeze in between as if it all wasn't my business.

Pete had never been a gourmet. The amount of greed, however, with which he stuffed the portions into his mouth was not completely new to me but in this intensity and crudity it reminded me of a medieval tavern where the gents used to empty their stomachs more or less frequently, depending on their capacity, to make room for the next course. When Pete had cleared his plate of everything edible he would notify me shortly how delectably it had tasted before he ordered a fresh ration that was just waiting to be served to this ravenous regular.

The waiter interrupted any further thought. I order steak with roast potatoes as I had done the last few times. Then I pondered what, in Odin's name, had caused my friend to put his lowest instincts on display in such a way. No doubt, it was a libidinous compulsion that had seized hold of my friend. It

was as if he had been ordered to incessantly assimilate food so not to starve to death or suffer something even worse.

Was it a rare disease or was a simple midlife crisis to be blamed for his abnormal behavior? Had he overworked his mind and his body during his stockbroker career in such a way that he had finally become a victim of the trading floor? He who had always hold his health in high esteem and who never let anybody or anything convince him of the American fast food dream? The waiter brought the interim check, my steak and let us know that we were always gladly welcome in this house. Sic!

The days passed and the cold went. Instead the heat struck which was with around 100 °F almost even worse. Outside half-clad, sweaty figures squeezed past each other across the pavement, streaming towards the hopelessly crowded beach that willingly absorbed them after all the time and made them gradually forget the late Californian winter. Hoteliers, ice-cream vendors, travel agencies – they all were delighted and profited in the name of possibly record-breaking top temperatures.

Only I was sitting in my attic apartment and enjoyed every motion I wasn't forced to complete.

During one of my dates with Pete – that became more frequent and increasingly unpleasant now as the Red Peppers was more busy and thus less tolerant towards my friend's Lucullan escapades than during the customer free winter season – he looked at me right in the middle of his gluttony with strangely sparkling eyes which expressed a determination I had never noticed in him before. There was selfishness and aggression in his eyes which for the first time frightened me somehow. He stopped eating for a moment, sloppily cleaned his mouth with a napkin and uttered those words that were filled with more foreboding than I had thought at that time and only later indelibly burned into my memory.

"It's not enough for us," he whispered, looked all around and stuffed the next jacket potato unpeeled into his mouth. I was tempted to ask "Us?" but kept my mouth shut, not sure if I even wanted to hear his answer.

From this moment on I had no doubt that Pete was in need of help. Maybe he suffered from a split personality, schizophrenia or whatever it might be called. At least I haven't had an explanation until then why and how his character had changed so much – this one sentence made it clear. Like a puzzle that assembled without my assistance an overall image of my friend's state of mind emerged. I couldn't assess in this stage what he really suffered from, otherwise I would have taken other measures to help him.

But I couldn't explain it: he was obsessed with hunger but didn't try to hide it like a bulimia patient, instead acted it out in public. His personal circumstances hadn't changed much. He had a well-paid job and he never had a lack of women. It would probably take a good headshrinker to find out what was wrong with him and even thinking of such a treatment – that according to the Freudian association had a success rate of 1:500 – made me almost despair.

### **A candy bar (interlude)**

José has pushed the last bite of his meal towards his esophagus and makes the chair back squeak as he gets up.

At the bar he holds out a few dollars to the sluggish bar-keeper whose eyes flash briefly, then leaves the pint with me in tow and enters the so-called parking lot where a few vans stand about. They are mostly from Mexico and what they have in common with their owners is the way they carelessly wait in the blazing midday heat for something to happen.

What I see here makes the whole of Mexico seem lazy and destructive to me and almost turns me misanthropic. Even the

highways seem to transport rushed people with no other intention but to hurl them over the banks to their death if they dare to negotiate a corner too fast. Day and night, wind and fire, humans and animals are permeated with a tangible infamy that is hard to describe.

If the Indians are to be believed, this is the late revenge of that legendary original people that once ruled South and Central America before the "returned gods" came sailing with the galleons over the edge of the world and let the Aztec high civilization collapse into drunken bodies and drug trade. Each year countless people die on the – still not yet completely finished – Panamericana what may be seen, depending on your perspective, as tragic or as a timeless tribute to Pachamama.

Since the highway is the only continuous route through South America, it's significantly more frequented than the muddy potholes in the hinterland. It's interesting how the Mexicans deal with this fact. While Americans or Germans would have worked themselves almost to death to divert traffic to secondary routes, jump-started new cities in the semi-desert for the sole purpose of traffic optimization and thrown whole ecosystems out of balance in doing so, the Mexican has simply built a few highway rest stops with a guaranteed customer base and waits for the next beer while drinking beer and even takes in tip for waiting.

José awkwardly produces a candy bar from his pants pocket, bites into it and offers it to me. I decline with thanks.

## A leg

He didn't hear from Pete again for three and a half months before he suddenly phoned.

His voice sounded fragile and exhausted as if he suffered from chronic bronchitis. He asked feebly if I would visit him and asked again repeatedly as I had trouble to understand him.

Yes, he would ask me to dinner. To dinner. No, not into the Red Peppers this time but into his new apartment in the north. I could come today if I felt like it. I said that basically I could come but proceeded to ask what has been wrong with him recently, that I haven't heard from him for quite some time. He told me that his business wasn't going to well, the prices fluctuated and he was afraid that he would soon be fired.

I expressed my sympathy and agreed to visit him this day so that he could tell me everything calmly. I was hardly finished when I heard the busy sign. My promise made me wonder myself. Didn't I know already what was going on with my friend?

So I set off by early evening. I only marginally knew my way around the north, so it took me a while to reach my destination. After an hour I had finally found the correct stretch of road, not a very pleasant quarter with just a few new or renovated houses. I parked my Ford in a guarded underground garage for three dollars an hour. I vainly searched for an elevator in the house and my apprehensions were confirmed in the staircase. Water trickled from the ceiling. The plaster had not been renewed since the founding period. The landlord seemed to have given up on his duties. There were other, more lucrative properties in the city.

You have ended up in quite a shabby quarter, I thought, took a deep breath and climbed the stairs. Breathing hard I entered the 6th floor and briefly knocked on the door on the right whose bell – as Pete had described – had been removed and which had no name. I was still staring at the spot where bare wires stuck out as I heard the door creaking and the strange voice of my friend that sounded even more rough than on the phone.

"Too many visitors," he croaked and pointed at the missing bell.

Pete wasn't Pete anymore. I was faced with a short, fat man who put out his hand and scrutinized me with alert eyes. The scruffy appearance, his voice, the strange reception – all of

that wasn't really appealing. I ignored it all with a awkward smile and kept my mouth shut. What could I have said as a visitor?

I had to resignedly realize that I – spontaneous and flexible, according to my employer – was exactly the creature of habit that you read about in trade journals, unwilling to deal with any kind of changes and prone to ignore or understate them if he can't help to face them. It has been claimed in other journals that it's a "genetic degeneration" that has spread for thousands of years and has contributed much to the current inflexibility of humanity. I can only agree to that. It's true that we cover ever longer distances in ever shorter time but in our heads the facts of everyday life pile up like stacks of documents and proven patterns of behavior join into lines like in a post office so that our messy nature is left behind and gets stuck in the thick traffic of civilized life.

Seen from this angle I was stuck at the highway junction of my prejudices while Pete was wandering along a lonely country road on a planet far removed from all material reality – a world where burgers grew on trees and fried chickens flapped into your mouth.

I mechanically followed the inviting gesture of my friend that guided me into his parlor like I was a lackey whose king had just granted him an audience. Moments later I was standing in the dining room that from one point of view didn't look like a dining room at all, from another point of view, however, looked exactly like you would expect a dining room to look. The floor was completely covered with food remains, pizza boxes and formerly colorful supermarket wrappings that were waiting to be recycled. This sight and the foul stench that pervaded the room into every corner was extremely repulsive and to claim that it put me into a state of deep disgust would be a gross understatement.

I didn't remember Pete as being so messy. His domicile had always been tiptop clean before then, to such agree that I had

been ashamed to invite him into my pigpen. But now? Wherever I looked the walls were draped or plastered with greatly enlarged photos of meat, salads, fruits, all kinds of finished dishes and exotic delicacies whose names I could only guess. On the table next to the Michelin lay books such as *How to Eat the Right Way*, *Delicious Afghanistan*, *The Return of the Beef Tomatoes* (Part #5), *The Wishing-Table* – the whole bunch provided with side marker so that the best would not be forgotten but eaten.

At least I got some idea here why he hadn't got in touch with me and had been in trouble at work: who was so concerned with eating didn't have any time left for life after desert.

I was involuntarily reminded of the well-known psychologist Dr. C. Rosenkreutz's attempt to research behavioral disorders caused by greatly reduced food intake. Of course there had been some dumb asses willing to dispense with significant amounts of their usual diet for several months which many regretted very soon and in some cases even caused anomalies. The probands began to think of eating all the time. Some provided themselves with cookbooks and gourmet guidebooks so that they at least could devour images of their favorite dishes as long as they weren't allowed to feast to their heart's content. Within a few months the experiment got out of control to such a degree that some left their wives to focus on their new hobby, quit their jobs completely or at least took their whole vacation in one stretch. The only reason was that these people didn't eat enough. Pete, however, did feast to his heart's content, squandered his money, wasted it for any conceivable delicacy available on the American market and still suffered from the same symptoms as Rosenkreutz's human guinea pigs.

I pushed my thoughts to the side along with some pizza boxes to sit down. Behind me Pete almost stumbled over his own legs, just barely managed to occupy a free spot and gave

himself some solid courage by hastily shoveling a few spoonfuls of strawberry ice cream into his mouth before he addressed me.

"I've invited you today because I think you should know which danger humanity is facing."

What did he have in mind now?

"You will declare me insane ..." His talk was repeatedly interrupted by an obligatory smacking. "Well ... maybe I am. But ... hmm ... as my friend you should know something about the danger that we're not aware of as it ... hmm ... maybe seems too simple but – it's definitely there."

His fingers trembled and his composure – an insincere kind of composure as I realized now – was for a moment revealed in all its fragility so that he almost dropped the ice cream to the carpet what could just be prevented, however, by an elegant sweep of his forearm.

I noticed his near-mishap without a stir, not willing to make him assume that I was thinking what I was actually thinking in this moment, what would have seemed suspicious but only for someone who I didn't see with the same eyes as Pete. He continued as if nothing had happened.

"They want us to eat more. It's like a ... a fattening. We are like pigs and they feed us. And they do it by causing us to feed ourselves and by deciding *with what* we feed ourselves. You have no idea what I had to endure in the last few months. They ..." He abruptly lapsed into silence and seemed to seriously struggle with something. There was no other explanation for his jerky movements as if he a shivering fit or an epileptic seizure. He seemed to fight with his own split personality, nervously stroked his hair and stared blankly at an oversized meat loaf on the wall behind me.

"What is it?", I asked.

He turned towards me, completely surprised as if he didn't know whether or why I had asked. His glance would even have puzzled a half-blind, a dull, blank look like that in the Red

Peppers a few weeks ago: eyes that would have scared off an insurance agent or an unwelcome mother-in-law but not eyes that were looking at a friend.

The bright green pupils were dim, gleaming faintly. They were hiding something, I thought. Pete briefly opened his mouth, gasped for air as if struggling for his life, exhaled noisily and closed his mouth again like a fish without answering my question. His state had stabilized again only a few minutes later and he asked me to go – claiming that he wasn't feeling well and that he had to rest.

I told him that I already noticed that but that I would call in again as soon as he had put his stuff in order which, of course, did not only refer to his physical health. He showed me to the door where he wished me a nice evening and this time it was me who didn't answer.

Ignorant as I was, I actually visited him again one month later. As I stood before his door there was a different name – or rather a name at all – on the doorbell which even worked. I pushed the button and a short, somewhat stocky man opened.

"What do you want?", he asked with an Italian accent.

"Eh ... does Pete Mulligan not live here anymore?"

"No!", the Italian snorted and slammed the door.

It seemed that I had disturbed him. Something told me that I should let the matter rest, forget about Pete, leave his life to himself and conduct no further inquiries. He would surely get along somehow. After all, almost everybody gets along somehow nowadays, even the "mentally challenged" who, despite being deprived of their freedom, tease and twit their caretakers and are even rewarded for it with something that had formerly been called a fool's license before it was rechristened into "rehabilitation" by naive and humorless flower people.

But Pete was not such a fool – I tried to persuade myself – that he would expect me to witness his indisposed situation. I was secretly afraid to feel like a gawker, like the people who

place themselves behind the barriers after an accident and have a giggle over the calamity of others. On the other hand, however, the pricks of my conscience would force me to make sure that my friend was still of sound mind or at least accountable. I soothingly reasoned with myself that things were different in my case, that I had a certain responsibility as a friend – after all, there was still a chance to get him out of his mess –, which may serve as an indication that deep in my heart I was still a naive and humorless hippie myself. And so I pushed the button a second time. It took the Italian a little longer to open the door and this time he was much more aggressive.

"Who the hell do you think you are, you ... you ..."

"Please, it's a matter of urgency. I need important information from you."

"Is there a sign with 'inquiry office' at my door?" the Italian snapped, though already a little calmer. It always helps when you lay the right emphasis on the right words. In this moment I noticed two things that, I realized, I should have noticed before but had overlooked in my initial bafflement: first that his belt was open and second that I heard from his apartment the impatient sigh of a female ready to mate.

"Sorry, I didn't want to intrude ..."

"You already *have* intruded. So go ahead, *but hurry*."

I put my request forward. He asked for my name, confirmed that Pete had left his address for me and let me wait for him to write it down but then, for fuck's sake, I should piss off and never bother him again. No problem at all, I replied and half an hour later I was, with a crumpled-up slip of paper in my pocket, fuzzily scribbled on with a street name but no house number, in search of my friend, fearing the worst. According to the town map he had moved into one of the nastiest outskirts of the whole West Coast.

Either the Italian was sending me into this dangerous quarter to give me a wipe or the man was right – which might be even worse.

To get over with it as soon as possible, I set off immediately and parked the car after a two hour criss-cross drive in an alley where I thought nobody would notice, scratch or otherwise damage it. For the rest of the way I cautiously pussyfooted like a shadow along the houses until I spotted the sought street sign at a larger crossroad.

It was February and thus cold. Since even the air made it seem like it would become even more chilly any minute I was eager to swiftly check every doorbell for Pete's last name. But then I realized this course of action made little sense as he already had taken care in his previous lodging that no stranger would find him and it was to be expected that he would shut himself off from unwelcome visitors the same way here.

Regardless of whether it made sense, I still undertook the ordeal. At least I could have claimed afterwards that he had tried everything to locate Pete and would not be plagued by a bad consciousness (though by frozen hands maybe). While I paced off the surrogate dump that could better be called a junkie boulevard than a sidewalk, desperately searching for a doorbell with the name "Mulligan" on it, the moldy smell and the cold aggravated and finally enwrapped and froze me from all sides, I would have been tempted to turn back on my heels if I hadn't, at that very moment, tripped over a picture of misery that crouched, gaunt and in rags, at an exterior wall and began to cough as I hit his ribs with my toecaps.

"Hey!", the figure muttered sleepily without lifting his head.

I muttered "sorry" in a low voice, trying to avoid all trouble in this neighborhood. You never knew how many of his accomplices were hiding in dark corners of the street and would need no more than one word, one gesture to come at me.

"Never mind ..." He blinked from under his hood and added, half puzzled, half amazed: "Oh, it's you?"

The words made me dizzy – *his* voice! – but I forced me to stay calm. After all there were some doubts left. Maybe it was not my friend. Maybe this man had just one whiskey too many.

The next step took a lot of effort. I looked down and examined the shadowy silhouette that had more in common with a heap of discarded garbage than with a living human being.

Worn old crutches were laying at the wall. His clothes, which would have been too shabby even for a clothing drive, were covered with beer and street filth. At the same time I found that – fortunately, as I initially thought – his right leg was missing which made me gasp of relief inwardly. It was not that I lacked sympathy for this poor fellow but now I could be sure that it couldn't be Pete. I had known him as an athletic kind of guy who I couldn't imagine with an amputated leg.

To be sure I called his name which caused the stranger to lift the hood that had covered his face until then. The load taken off my mind immediately turned into a weight around my neck that seemed to drag me down into hell.

It simply couldn't be, but it was actually him! Accusations and self-doubts assaulted me as I had stood back while he was increasingly going mad and finally had distanced himself from everything, just as he was retreating now into his cloak, hood and a facade of schizothymic weirdness that I couldn't explain.

Why had he battered himself like that? Why hadn't I stepped in earlier? These and other futile questions encircled my mind and kept my sympathy from breaking through to him. I kneeled down in horror on the rubbish-littered pavement and desperately tried to remember when we had laughed together last.

"What has happened to your leg?", I finally asked.

"We were hungry," Pete said.

As the word "hungry" had been spoken he went back into these muscle contractions that I had already witnessed, to a lesser extent, in his living room. This time, however, they were much stronger and turned his whole body into a twitching thing that reared up against the exterior wall and squirmed like being whipped. He looked like having an epileptic seizure. I had to desperately concede that this was no longer the old

Pete who had traveled with me through Europe and spent, out of sheer world weariness and boredom, two years in an Irish hippie commune without accomplishing much.

This Pete here also had nothing in common with the person I thought I had known half a year ago. Since our last meeting, which was just a few weeks back, he had changed so thoroughly that his case history couldn't have been any more depressing. He had not just lost the fat reserves he had built up in such a short time but was downright emaciated as if he was suffering from anorexia instead of bulimia now.

"How the hell did you get so sick?", I exclaimed, examining his miserable state.

Pete managed to pull himself together somewhat, but he was still not himself rather that other personality who coldly and ambiguously retorted:

"Our craving is ... self-destructive." His hands trembled like an aspen leaf, deferring another seizure as best as he could. "Our hunger, our emotions burn us. We can't handle them. They have deteriorated to a mechanical pattern that is easy to figure out. Open your eyes, look around, realize that humanity has failed."

He accentuated his words like a fervent preacher as you see them in dozens of parks and shopping malls, always with a appropriate epistle on their lips and wagging the obligatory forefinger through the blessed radioactive air.

Even though I couldn't make any sense of his message I devoutly nodded which I wouldn't have done under different circumstance. It happened rarely that I played a sheep and even then I limited myself to its pelt. I have more trust in science and since scientists had argued that it's better to agree with a madman than to contradict him, I forgot about my sincerity for a moment and became Pete's devoted wolf in a sheep's pelt.

"I believe you," I lied on top of it, just to calm him down.

Instead of defusing the situation it only made his mouth blurt out an incomprehensible nagging and spitting. I instinct-

tively started up so that I looked down on him as he breathed fire and brimstone and words that sounded like the execrations of a fortune-teller whose monopoly of the future had been disputed.

The longer I listened to this outburst of barbarity the more I despised myself for not having acted earlier these past few months, for not saving him from a mental breakdown and handing him over to a specialist. All that was left for me to do now was to tacitly witness the tragedy and be prepared for its conclusion. Either he recovered himself or he would further deteriorate into an insane asylum which I didn't wish him no more than a gradual decline on the streets of San Francisco. His body convulsively shuddered one more time, then suddenly came to a halt, relaxed and became calm, almost rigid. Pete eyed me appraisingly.

"Say ... do you happen to have something edible with you?"

I didn't and Pete was disappointed. I suddenly became aware of another matter that had been in the back of my head the whole time and required clarification. So I asked: "What did you mean when you said that you had been hungry?"

"Eh, regarding the leg?"

"Exactly."

"As I said."

"You mean you have *eaten it up*?"

"Damn, I've been hungry. Don't you know what hunger means?"

I raised my eyelashes.

"You think that I'm lying?"

"I think you conceal the truth."

"Oh, fuck you. We know what we're talking about. We don't accept orders from some petty fool."

Pete's hands flinched and there was pure hate in his eyes. I didn't know what to do. Maybe I should have called the police but what if Pete had acted like an ordinary beggar again when they arrived?

Without a word I let my friend continue to swear and re-treated into my car, my sabbatical and the backpacking tour that has lasted three months by now, just to gain some distance ...

## **Water and death**

When I listen to José's slurping and smacking I have the feeling that this trip has been a waste of time because nothing could remind me more of Pete than someone faithfully imitating or even exaggerating his behavior, even though my Mexican driver not even remotely resembles Pete. He looks more like a Latino who is intercepted close to the border, put behind bars and at best "repatriated" (which means returned to where he is not very welcome either).

His facial expressions remind me of one of those human fatalities who at KGTV reach higher audience ratings than a daily soap. Since the Operation Gatekeeper has been initiated at the Southern Californian border in 1993, the media report on the "illegals" more frequently since their mortality rate has raised their entertainment value enormously. Six times more persons than before are shot which means that while a few less Mexicans roam the frontiers' dooryards there are some discussions about the human rights of the not-yet-shot, not the least since the immigration rate has dropped by merely 1 % which is far behind the expectations and promises of the government. Quite the contrary: the Gatekeeper program has even worsened the war-like conditions in this area. The conduct of the American border patrol has more in common with a bunch of guerrilleros than with disciplined underlings. It's not much different on the Mexican side. Miles before the demarcation street signs already warn of muggers, smugglers, border patrols and live ammunition. A warning of mortal danger would be more appropriate but does not fit in the authorities' concept.

José appears unimpressed by the forest of signs. He transits this area regularly with his van and the delivery order guarantees him free driving up to Los Angeles. Besides, he thinks that the illegals don't deserve it any better. Instead of working in Mexico and boosting the ailing economy they lead a fine life without thinking of their homeland. He has no answer to my argument that many of them provide their fathers at home with a better life. They are all lazy prosperity parasites, he claims, who have nothing better to do but to lie on the beach, to live on others and only think of themselves. I assume that he's just a little envious, but I keep it to myself.

"They may all go to hell, if you ask me," he boasts and hides the beer under his seat, in time for the border check.

It's early afternoon and there's little to be seen of illegal immigrants. It's only after sunset when both war parties clash in the hundreds that the situation becomes dangerous and Hollywood-like. Nonetheless all are on guard even during the day and scrupulously check all papers. Only we are allowed to pass all checkpoints without much fuss. José wipes his brow with a cloth, reaches under his seat and has the Corona back in his hand. "Would you like one too?", he asks me.

I decline but José keeps going. "There's also something to eat in the glove box, if you want."

Strange. He seems more relaxed than before the border check. Did he have something on board that shouldn't have been there?

"Maybe later," I say. He doesn't have to know that I prefer the next McDonald's.

"Okay."

"Could you tell me why you're smirking?"

"Smirking?"

"You try to stifle it since we're across the border. Apart from that you've been pretty nervous around these soldiers. I hope you didn't have anything to hide."

"Something to hide? What makes you think so?"

"Just a thought."

"Nonsense."

It amuses me to notice that he becomes uneasy. Maybe he thinks that I could betray him. Or that I may turn out to be a customs agent who poses as a hitchhiker and only travels with especially suspicious vans. Things like that may be customary in Latin America. In the North, however, you wouldn't even think of assigning staff to such a task. There you prefer to shoot the poor in the death strip and thus get rid of them swiftly and efficiently as it is common in a modern national economy based on demand and supply.

"The most important thing is that you reach Frisco, eh?", José replies which of course is correct, even though his vehicle sounds like it will have given up its ghost until then. In spite of that he seems to be damn proud of his baby that must be at least as old as himself.

A silent period follows that lasts until San Diego and beyond. It seems José wants to make sure that he doesn't have a fink of the Gatekeeper program on board after all. To clear this suspicion he only has to keep his mouth shut until San Clemente, the last checkpoint behind the border. I enjoy the sudden silence and delve into the just purchased San Francisco Times that at a first glance contains the usual stuff: forest fire near Stockton, spree killing of a programmer in Silicon Valley, the mayor has promised raised welfare spending, a smog warning for the day after tomorrow.

In the local section I come across a report that worries me.

### **Cannibals in California?**

A unprecedented series of murders has been provisorily ended today with the arrest of Justin McSullivan, a guitar dealer from San José who is suspected of several cases of manslaughter.

McSullivan, according to neighbors a nondescript fellow, was supposed to have brutally bludgeoned four people and

three dogs from April to September and consumed them at the scene of the crime. "We arrested him after we had received an anonymous letter that accused Mr. McSullivan as the perpetrator. The envelope also contained a videocassette that showed the accused in flagranti. Until then I wouldn't believe that a human being was capable of doing something like this but then – Jesus! – I have no words for that. A human disaster."

Stated superintendent Arthur Dorfler during his interview in the SFPD press center. The "man-eater", as the tabloid press has called him, is said to have furiously ranted during his arrest. "The apocalypse", he said, had only just began and "the others", he assured, would take care that his victims would not be the last. The local residents are worried. A waitress present at the arrest said: "How are we supposed to protect our children from these monsters? How are we going to protect ourselves?" And her husband: "Someone like this has to be put on death row."

The married couple is surely not alone with their opinion. The San Francisco Police Department has, according to the latest information, installed a special commission to investigate the McSullivan case and clear the suspicion of a possible conspiracy of cannibals. "We will give no coincidence a chance," Dorfer emphasized and pointed out that there had been a similar case in Utah where cannibals had successively lured 23 people into their rural farm community to fatten and sacrifice them in a bloody ritual. "These people are scum. We have to remove them from our midst," governor Smith demanded at his pre-election party in Los Angeles today. He added that their crackdown will require a considerable budget and hinted at a possible involvement of the FBI.

Is it possible that Pete knows something about this "sect" or is even in contact with them? The thought is not completely absurd but it upsets me insofar as it may provide an explanation

for his strange behavior. I could finally stop bothering about it but I'm still afraid of such news.

What if Pete had actually turned into such a predator? I fold the newspaper together, tuck it somewhere to the right of my seat and lean back. What good would some sleep do to me now? Too long I have refused, didn't want to stop arguing where there is nothing left to argue, tried to understand as if my mind had long ago been infected by Pete's compulsive urge for more food.

I try to close my eyes but it is my stomach instead of my lids that contracts and cautions me to calm it down. Sarcasm, that higher level of melancholy, sloshes across my diaphragm. What can't be changed may as well be laughed at. Perhaps Pete is just devouring himself or committing larceny of food by nibbling at other people – which makes me wonder, however, how he does kill them. While I ponder this question, my thoughts take on a life of their own and accompany me on a smooth transition from waking to dreaming consciousness ...

*I see the border once again. Warning signs everywhere, on top of them skulls, some still draped with sun-dried hair, spiked on the pointed pole tops, half decayed and fetid like a slaughterhouse. Attencion, estados unidos! is written on one of the signs. No further warning is required. Everybody knows and fears the US American firing squads who are authorized to run wild here at night.*

*José sits to the left of me. With horns on his head. His grin is similar to that of the other skulls, with the only difference that he is smirking, munching and swerving on the street as usual. But the more we approach the border guard, the more things calm down next to me. The driver of this car more and more slips into asceticism until his cheerful nature is completely hidden behind the mask of a dutiful motorist who had the customs procedure ahead and behind him hundreds of times.*

*He winds down the window. A face with sunglasses and turban outside asks for our papers. I speak with a perfect*

*Californian accent and so the officer relaxes. The sight of José's horns makes him suspicious and he asks us to get out, only to have a look into the load area, he claims. No problemo, José retorts and opens the door. If there really is a devil then I'm sure it's a Mexican who has somebody driving around Wall Street while he drinks beer and plays Russian roulette with passerbys.*

*Things aren't quite as amusing to the right of me. A soldier in Bedouin costume has planted himself there, a recruit at best, judged by his age, his mouth corners pulled down, heavily armed with sub-machine gun, revolver and enough ammunition for a feature-length manhunt.*

*I'm not eager to become his first victim so I better step out and join the others. I notice that José is limping but it's not because, as I initially assume, he has a clubfoot but because his right leg is completely missing. By means of a prosthesis he hobbles to the rear of his rust bucket, jerks the double door open and clears the way for the officer who looks like a terrorist. He climbs into the car and gestures to the younger one that he should be alert. I notice that José retreats a few steps, obviously a little alert himself. I hope that he has nothing to hide. My muscles contract involuntarily and I'm prepared to react immediately, to whatever may happen.*

*A storm of words emits from the car: bodies, bodies, all the barrels are full of bodies, the officer yells and storms out, dragging a woman's head along to prove it.*

*Joæ tries to run away, heedless of the bystanders who have gathered by the roadside. He tries to savor the last moments on his own, trips over the curbstone but manages to catch himself and runs like a madman towards Mexico.*

*I was only hungry, he screams, so damn hungry! Who could forbid me to still my hunger?*

*The officer does not think twice and issues a firing order. Seconds later Joæ collapses prone into the dust, hit by a burst of 9 mm bullets. His final words resonate in my waking*

*consciousness: I was only hungry, he screams, so damn hungry! Who can keep me from killing others by killing me?*

I cast up my eyes abruptly. The first thing I see is José's visage that stares at me from the side.

"Everything okay?", it asks.

Well, at least I don't see devil's horns anymore but that surely doesn't mean that everything is fine. I fib, nonetheless. Sure, todo bueno.

"Really?"

Maybe I talk too frantic. I have to forget the dream that occludes reality like a fog and only slowly dissipates.

"Yes, of course," I say.

"If you're hungry, I can stop at the burger stall over there."

My stomach is rumbling so loud that only with a very good lie I could keep my appetite a secret. Besides, José means it so well that I will be forced to agree even when it would mean to sit there and helplessly watch how he gobbles one burger after the other.

"So what?"

"Okay, why not?"

José makes a resolute turn as if he would done the same without my consent. We enter the shop through two automatic glass doors that open sidewise. He orders four kingsize burgers – extra hot – double fries, cheese sandwich and vanilla ice cream. They don't sell his favorite drink here so he has sneaked it in precautionary and is eyed irritated for not having ordered any drinks.

I stick to salad and cola. Who knows how my stomach would react if there were a serving of spare ribs or even a bloody steak on my plastic tray. I can tolerate the food photos printed on it as I don't have to eat or taste these meals but only need to calmly see over them – right onto José's half dozen cardboard boxes and then up into his face.

He says something. I thank and wonder on what twisted paths Knigge's spirit has entered this cretin. An ironic josh, I suppose, very likely caused by the climatic change or maybe he's still afraid of my true identity and tries to kiss my ass with some friendly empty phrases.

I phlegmatically poke around the ready-made salad, hold a leaf in front of my mouth and nibble off a piece – real joy of eating looks different and I actually don't feel any, only comply with a necessity to stay alive – although I'm not even sure if it's really the case. I have to distract myself, focus on the food, don't think of it anymore, above all not to think of Pete, but to eat up everything, as my mother would have asked me to, so that the weather will be fine tomorrow.

At first my plan is successful. The more I devote myself to the act of food intake and my life fades into the background, the more my plate is emptying. I only have to continue eating, then the dangerous ideas will vanish on their own. There is only me and my food – no Pete, no José, no burger stall, no plastic tray. Only me and my food. I eat myself into a kind of frenzy and lose track of what happens in me or around me until the world finally regains shape, seems to restructure itself without my intervention and everything is clear in front of me. Colors and fragments flood my senses and only after a while I notice that José has still almost his whole meal ahead of him and is observing me with raised eyebrows. The other guests, too, glance at us. What is going on here?

"You're eating with your hands."

José's answer sounds like a question or an accusation. With my hands? By no stretch of the imagination I can see myself acting in such a way but as I look down at my fingers I find them smeared all over with herb sauce and tomato leftovers. I hastily reach for the napkin. All will be fine, I try to persuade myself and see that the cutlery still lies untouched beside the plate. How could I let myself go like that?

"Do all the Yankees eat like that?", José jokes but I'm in no laughing mood.

I lift my shoulders and keep them where they can't affect anything. No word passes my lips. I feel embarrassed, sad and instinctively search for someone who I could blame for this awkward situation. There is, however, no-one who I could point a finger at and I realize that if I don't get my inner life back together I might end up like Pete one day.

If I don't want that then there must be a way to finally leave it all behind me – even if it means to confront the cause of my psychological weakness. I imagine how it would be to visit Pete one more time and to make him understand what I think of our friendship – basically that it isn't a friendship anymore and that I don't care what he does with his ruined life as long as he doesn't cross my path. It might help to put an end to it, to peacefully go separate ways and to better cope with the fact that a long-standing friendship such as ours had to end in such a miserable way. It might, however, make things even worse.

My mind refuses to consider a meeting with Pete while my feelings insist that it's the only way out of this misery that would drag me down ever more until I, too, would indulge in humanity's last cynicism and devour my own flesh and blood with Pete by my side. I sit there mutely and listen to my inner dialogue without completely coming in on one side while the other guests turn first into lawyers, then crusaders, then hangmen and cannibals who all around me impale innocent, slaughtered fellow species on their forks and stuff them with relish into their mouths.

*"Someone like this has to be put on death row,"* the man from the newspaper says and it sounds like he's sitting in my head.

After an overnight stay north of San Diego we continue our travel and after another about 600 miles the blazing native

sun is dashing in through the clear glass that makes the external world seem like a post-doomsday landscape: the colors faded, overlaid by an off-white light that, focused by the windshield, hits my retina.

Superficially the light seems to cover everything bad like a shining manifestation of what is good that, however, turns you blind if you're exposed to it for too long. I would love nothing better now than to hide myself in a dark room with a simulated Xeroderma pigmentosum and a continuous supply of absinthe until my early death that I'd like to experience in the light of the most beautiful sunrise that a human can hope to witness. The other cars reflect the sun and next to them the rest of the world fades like the face of a criminal investigator who sits behind a gleaming floor lamp while asking dangerous questions during an interrogation. Our star could have easily distracted a stranger from the fact that he's in a city, right in the middle of San Francisco's evening rush hour – but not someone like me who was born, raised and had almost gone mad in a city that knows no limits and still ends at the ocean.

The sun deploys its phantasmagoria unimpaired and the sun shields are unfortunately not able to keep me from the prospect of meeting him again. I close my eyes, exhausted by heat and sunlight, and all becomes red. The flashing cars blur into black amoebas, deform sidewise and lengthwise like air bubbles, depending on how I let my eyes move under the lids. I wish I could sleep but the coarsely veined red light that show on my lids is more disturbing than soothing which is why I risk another look out into the merciless reality where Joëe has just asked me something. I clumsily try to make it seem like I hadn't understood him.

"Where you want me to let you out," he repeats.

Better nowhere at all, I think, because there is no place in this city where I would be save of him.

If I would get out now I would be faced with the danger of crossing *his* path and what would I tell him when it would

come to that? I could run away, pack up, emigrate but even that wouldn't be a permanent solution because Pete would live on as a reminiscence in my memory, would follow me anywhere like a bubble gum sticking under my shoe that leaves indelible marks regardless how hard I try to remove it.

I turn things over in my head and think how pleasant life must have been for flâneurs who didn't have to think about the future but live for the moment as they didn't have to earn anything the nature hadn't already provided in abundance. They were kings, jugglers, jesters, buccaneers and forest fishers and still deserve highest respect for their talent to let others work for them. The industrial revolution has deprived us of these connoisseurs of the art of living, replaced them with functionality and efficiency, has turned us into disposable machines with no self-esteem who are granted seven hours of sleep and two free days a week if they are just willing to diligently and steadily work on their own destruction which is decreasingly compensated with reduced pension payments.

The world has been reigned by a nameless god since then whose Holy Scripture is a financial newspaper and whose basic principle is a parasitic imperative that has turned us into what we've basically always been: lazy predators with considerable inferiority complexes. The same imperative is behind my driver's insistence to recite my address. I fulfill my duty in a frustrated manner, feeling like a schoolchild who is unexpectedly called to the blackboard, state my neighborhood, street, house number and add: "Would be kind if you could take me there."

"No problema, Amigo. You have lost your money – José takes you home. You would do the same for me, right?"

As if! I wouldn't have taken this omnivore along for not even a single yard. He instead of me would be standing at the roadside and stick out his ketchup-stained thumb. I would probably regard this burly Mexican as a highwayman, step on the gas and scam. Insofar I'm impressed by José's helpfulness

and begin to doubt myself – because, despite my admiration, I'm rarely capable of doing what I admire in others.

## **Dessert**

One and a half months later.

I stand in front of my apartment, open the door, I'm met with a scorching heat and turn on first the air conditioner and then the TV set. On the matt screen, Mr. President is announcing that he will put the Department of Homeland Security into operation within the current term of office which I seriously doubt as I take a seat on the black chaise lounge and make the allegedly most powerful man in the world disappear from the scene with a single touch of a button.

My feet placed on the table, I change the channel to watch the match of the Giants where Miller just takes his third strike and has to leave the field. Although it's a disappointment for me as a faithful Giants fan, the circumstances – especially one of them – allows me to be not too depressed about the bad performance of my team. The good thing is that I am with a lovely girl for a few weeks now. Thinking of her makes my work seem like a breeze, lets me see the world through rose-colored glasses and a lost Giants match seem like a minor annoyance. The oppressive clouds of the past have dispersed and Pete is only a chimera from a bygone era.

My new flame's name is Stacy and we meet a lot, go to the movies, theater or shopping. Of course I'm aware that even this being in love, as fresh as it still is, will taste stale and stagnant one day which, I'm determined to delay as far as I possibly can – because for now, Stacy is the best therapy for my martyred soul.

The more I meet her, the less I think of Pete who I already have detached from my mind to such a degree that it wouldn't

bother me if he had silently perished in a gutter, consumed himself completely or been sentenced to death for cannibalism. However his biography may have turned out by now – after our last meeting there was no doubt about my decision: I had to put an end to the whole affair, start a new life and waste no thought on the past.

Stacy helps me with it as best as she can. She has already introduced me to her parents who she said were very fond of me and we plan a tour to Las Vegas in two weeks – not to get married but “just like that” which, of course, many married couples have claimed prior to their Las Vegas trip. Stacy could even have convinced me of a world trip; no distance could have been too far, no mountain too high to make her happy and to forget my negative experiences – although the latter should have taught me that no matter which woman you love, she will sooner or later become too expensive, too snippy or too boring and that what has initially been a dream woman will turn within weeks into a love trauma not worth the efforts of her seduction. But that's how it is with the butterflies in your tummy: if you want to catch them you need a fine web as only a woman can knot it who even as a myth can only play tragic roles and has internalized them to such a degree that it has become impossible for her to accept any other role.

I'm convinced that a marriage is the worst possible way to stay permanently in love but that doesn't keep the equally ardent and short-sighted suitors from taking a chance, against all odds.

It's shortly before eleven and I have just switched on the TV set as the doorbell rings which is a little puzzling as I have no appointment and it can't be Stacy neither – she has her own key. Who the heck is bothering me?

Maybe just some rascals who prank me. I keep quiet and hope that it will stop when I don't move but exactly the opposite happens. The ringing turns into a storm ringing, a tornado ringing, a hurricane ringing. I regret that I haven't signed in to

be connected to the new entrance camera. Then the monitoring screen would have kept me up-to-date about everything going on at street level and I could have cursed the unwanted visitor from up here and chased him away.

As it is, however, I pull the blanket over my head, turn from one side to the other and wait until my torturer decides to give it up. It takes at least five minutes until the annoying noise finally breaks off. I yawn and devote myself to falling asleep which is no big deal after a 16 hour workday. Since I have to get up early and I don't have much time to sleep, my dreams start pretty soon ...

*I'm on the street. Restaurants everywhere. Mexican, Chinese, McDonald's. The sun shines but it's cold. I count the venues, forty-three overall.*

*Pete is waiting for me, but where? I try to go by the neon signs that are mounted everywhere, but they are all marked with the same word. How am I going to redeem my promise when I don't know where? There's not much time left. I will check all restaurants, just have a short look if he sits at some table and then move on.*

*With a sigh I set off to the first tavern, a posh Italian. The waiters here carry ties, perfume and cuff links on silver trays through the corridors but neither Pete nor any other guest is in sight. I scam before I end up as the main course. A Chinese cooks for the next premise which offers cannibalistic abominations for all tastes. No guests are cooked here, only Taiwanese and terrorists, which allows me to stay a little longer, but still no trace of Pete.*

*So out on the streets again. I'm not successful in the next restaurants either, but then I scuffle along an apartment building and trip over something that sits on the ground. Even before the beggar has pulled back his hood I'm sure that it's him, but far from it! Death itself is sitting there and scythes instead of crutches lean against the wall. He hurls his cold,*

*sclerotic grin at me and I take to my heels and as I realize that I'm actually carrying two legs with Pete's name written in blood on them I throw them on the street immediately.*

*Even though the Grim Reaper cat-calls at me that I can't escape him I run further and further up the road that seems to have no end and suddenly appears to be plastered with burgers. I don't find Pete anywhere – maybe he has ended up in the Italian's cooking pot – but I still keep on searching until the end of the road. As I leave the last restaurant, the signs begin to blink as if trying to attract my attention. They form an almost endless row that continues up to the horizon. The signs are marked with a single word in blood-red letters ...*

My alarm clock delivers me. I start up as if Godfather Death was standing next to my bed, ready to wield his scythe. The digits blink and signal half past four. I have to be in my office. An important pitch needs to be prepared.

In the bathroom a gust of cold water relieves me of the last residues of my dreams that got caught between my synapses and the gurgle of the coffee machine calls me into the kitchen. The breakfast calms my nervous system that thanks to this ritual switches into the daily grind which it is used to as a way to effortlessly survive. Today is the crucial meeting with my customer so I have to wear my best suit to tastefully enhance my presentation. I grab the work folder, whip on my cloak and leave the apartment – or rather I would have left it if wasn't for a figure sitting in front of my door that I only after careful scrutiny identify as my former friend Pete.

I wish I could ignore him, simply move on, not think about what has happened and what I have left to say, but I know that this would only postpone the confrontation. Pete is awake before I can make a single step. He sleepily blinks at me and mumbles an incomprehensible greeting into the vacuum of my hospitality. He sounds hoarse, even more hoarse than usual, and overall looks like a dying junkie. His eyes are bloodshot, all

else is chalk-white. His hands are trembling, his clothes have even more holes than last time and he's still not wearing a prosthesis.

I'm afraid that he could drag me into his mud, that he may have come for just this purpose and my fear turns into a despair that infuriates me more than ever. Why else should this parasite suddenly show up at my door? I'm sure he wants money. I prepare to refuse, to tell him point-blank that he needs a physical and psychological treatment if there's any hope for him at all.

"What do you want? I'm in a hurry", I try to be brief with him and to emphasize my words. I consult my watch which, however, has stopped around half past one.

Pete doesn't move a bit. He knows too well that I can't let him sit here without at least hearing him out. He gapes at me out of cavernous eyes and begins to stutter as if he had been born with a speech impediment. It's about eating and hunger, that much I can understand, and he asks me to give him something or he might starve at my apartment door. I'm not completely sure but shortly after Pete has uttered the word "hunger" it's like I hear a *click* somewhere in my skull and I'm back into my dream. I see everything clearly: the neon signs above the restaurants, the Grim Reaper wrapped in Pete's rags, laughing out loud about my attempts to escape.

I can't stand around for long now, I say. I have to go to work, an important presentation, he should know how it is. But he seems to have forgotten because when I try to climb over him he grabs my leg and tugs it back, tearing out a piece of my linen pants which he clumsily holds between his fingers and stuffs it into his mouth to suck at it like a child at its thumb. I'm really pissed off by me former valued friend now for damaging something of value to me. Equally furious and frantic I fling my cloak to the ground but I have to pick it up again immediately as Pete is about to grab it, having already swallowed the piece of linen.

I kick his raised arm aside and clear a path to the door which I yank open and slam shut behind me like being chased by the devil, like there were a dozen illegal immigrants waiting in the hallway to rob me of everything I have.

I have to go to work, he sits in front of my door, my suit is ruined and work is waiting. It's usually only in a movie that you have so much bad luck. Or am I still lying in bed and it's all just a dream? I almost wish it was so because it would be a premiere: for the first time I consciously experience a dream and can control it. I'm my own director, powerful as god.

What would my dream self first do in this situation? Top priority would be to get another suit that has to be here as soon as possible – I can't face the marketing experts in such an amputated state as I am now. For security purposes I also take a baseball bat of the Giants in my hands, only as a threat to keep Pete from groping me. I will simply climb over him and consider on my way to the city how to get rid of this obtrusive intruder in the most efficient way. So I tear open the door and Pete, of course, topples into my apartment. His upper body hits the carpet in the hallway and he tries to sit up again with both hands on the floor and moves towards the kitchen.

Just what I needed! I have to get him out before he reaches the refrigerator or worse. With one leap I'm behind him, put the bat aside and grab Pete's remaining foot to drag the unwelcome visitor out. He has nothing to cling to so I at least manage to haul him to the door frame that he desperately clutches with ten fingers, begging for mercy.

"N-n-no, Mike, p-please d-don't ..."

I try it with a last yank, then his leg falls back to the ground and I pick up the baseball bat.

"Either you let go voluntarily or I have to teach you a lesson," I snap at him.

"B-b-but aren't we f-friends?"

"We were friends."

"B-b-b-but ..."

"Okay, if that's what you want."

I strike his fingers – not too hard so that I can't be hold liable and just long enough that he lets go of the door frame. He looks seedy as he squirms on the floor, holds his bleeding fingers and watches me with trembling lips.

I resolutely pull the door shut, try to ignore him, to simply go on, but this is exactly the wrong thing to do as he grabs my pants just as I have turned round and tears at it as if his life depended on it. Fortunately the pants are made of cotton but even this will not resist the sneaky attack for long. What the hell is wrong with this guy? Even in the state he's in, he should be able to realize that I don't want to have anything to do with him anymore. But instead he clings to the past, the lovely hours that we have shared and he drools on my shoes and socks as he stammers all his stories.

I have to draw the line somewhere, I think, I kick his face and make it bleed. To crown it all, a drop of blood splashes on my snow-white pants and expands to a nice stain – one drop too many. I grab him by his hair and hurl his head against the wall which should teach him a lesson. I don't want to see this nuisance never again. What does he hope to achieve with such a behavior? Does he seek reconciliation? He should know that it's far too late for that. But I'm going to make him understand, as soon as I have him in my apartment. I will beat him up until he gives in and disappears on his own, never to show up at my door again. I hope to find a plausible excuse for the delay that my customer can accept.

I'm in such a rage, no longer in control of myself that it all happens automatically, like in a trance. I unlock the door, drag in Pete's gaunt body, take care that nobody is watching, take his crutches and let the door shut. Now he'll have the shock of his life! He drools, spits blood and babbles like a demanding child – "We're hungry!", "But we're good friends!" and stuff like that. I will show him what we are. We're no friends, I say,

no nothing. And I emphasize it with a blow into his stomach. He screams out and begs me to stop, to leave him alone, but I don't even want to understand him. I'm already in a blood rage. I want to make this dog whine and beg not to beat his worthless life out of him for good! Who does he think he is, that he shows up here in the middle of the night and keeps the doorbell ringing? It was his fault that my sleep was full of fear! If he's willing to promise, however, that he will disappear immediately, never to be seen again, I might consider to perform an act of grace that he doesn't really deserve and let him move on unimpededly. If he doesn't take this chance, then god (or whoever this cannibal offers his sacrifices to) may be with him. I make sure that he has understood me and agrees never to approach me again.

"Y-yes, of course!", he whines with the last of his strength.

"And you will never still your hunger with a human being again?"

"Y-y-y-yes-y-yes ... O-o-o-o ... Aaaahh ..." His facial features smooth out and snap into a demoniac grimace, clearly the face of an obsessive, an uncontrollable beast. "Nooooooo!", it suddenly booms in my head and in all my frenzy I don't realize that this voice is very different from Pete's with regard to volume and distinctness: "No! We will never surrender to you people. Humanity has failed and it can't be spared if we want to appease our hunger."

He cries but all my fuses blow now. How I use the baseball bat, which body parts I strike and which bones are broken before my work is done and I rinse the sports equipment in the bathroom – I don't know. The sudden realization of my black-out horrifies me at first. Why did I do this.

The whole bat is red. As I realize what I have done to Pete, I'm seized by a shock first that gradually dissolves into relief – after all, something in me whispers, the world had to be released of this monster, or not? His battered body lies on the carpet in the living room, luckily only a simple rug that can

easily be replaced without anybody wondering and, just in case, I can claim that I had enough of it. What's even more important is that nobody will miss Pete. I cover the floor through the hallway into the bathroom with newspaper, fill the tub with hot water and put in what has once been my friend. Red liquid immediately spoils the clear transparency of the faucet water and cloaks his body like a shroud.

I feel relieved of a huge burden, a yoke that I couldn't have carried any further.

Of course I have to shower and dress up again now and, most of all, remove the traces of a fight. All this takes about half an hour.

Later in the car, as I wonder how to get rid of the body most thoroughly, I come up with the crazy idea of asking Stacy to dinner tomorrow, maybe together with some friends. We could hardly consume such a huge meal on our own.