



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #18
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**IN THESE STORIES, TIME MATTERS MUCH MORE
THAN USUAL...**

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Who Owns Famous Moments in Time?

Short stories force authors to compress language and thoughts to focus on a central idea. Writers must quickly establish the setting and move on, while still allowing enough world building to put readers into the story. For stories set in the real world, an efficient way to do this is to place the story within a larger historical event. “American Civil War” is a three-word phrase that conveys a tremendous amount of information to the US-based reader, and, to a lesser extent, to English-speaking readers everywhere.

Out of 264 entries to this contest, three used the 1969 moon landing as an iconic moment in history that helped quickly convey information to the reader. (One of them, *Transmission*, was selected as an honorable mention.) This choice became more poignant after the recent death of Neil Armstrong, who made what many people consider the most famous footstep in history. But it also brought up a question: if Neil Armstrong disapproved of stories that used “his” moment, would it matter? Does anyone “own” an iconic moment in time? What obligations do authors have when they put iconic moments of history in their stories? Is anything off-limits or beyond the bounds of taste?

Thinking about whether anyone owns a moment in history, our first answer was no, of course not. There are important players in the action, but they don’t get to control how others write about, or even creatively re-imagine the moment. Simply by being an iconic moment, it becomes just as important to the people who were only spectators, albeit in a different way. Anything so thoroughly ingrained in the collective psyche belongs to all of us.

But then again, if the iconic moment is important to so many people (“Where were you when X happened?”), doesn’t that imply some level of care? In essence, we all have a stake in it. Don’t authors need to respect how people think about what happened? So maybe you don’t worry about whether Neil Armstrong would have approved of how you present the moon landing, but you might worry about offending the general public. While more a consideration for straight fiction, even farce can push too far and make people rush to protect “their” moment, their history.

And consider that these iconic moments in history could even be moments from fiction. There are plenty of fans of the Star Wars universe who are angry with George Lucas for changing their favorite moments. Consider the reception a short story would get that re-imagines Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a child abuser whose violence against Scout leads her to imagine a world in which he would be an honest lawyer and paragon of virtue.

So, where do we go from here? Do we take iconic moments and use them however we think our stories need them to be, or do we set limits out of respect for everyone who finds those moments to be personally important? For us, the balance was tipped by the iconoclasts that we have admired. Yes, they could go too far and offend a lot of people, including us. But they also forced us to really think about why we were offended, and how much of that offense was based on real damage, versus an automatic defensive reaction to something we loved being attacked.

If we set certain moments as too sacred to touch, then we prevent a lot of malicious garbage and shock for the sake of shock, but we also prevent questions that can lead to a more complete understanding and appreciation of those moments. Taking liberties with an iconic image can clear away clutter by more narrowly defining what makes it iconic. For the moon landing, the most important thing is that some human from Earth stepped on the moon, a completely different world from our own. The details matter to history, but the short story writer should be allowed to change those details as the story requires without feeling the moment is somehow ruined.

If you have an opinion on any of this, let us know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #18 of *On The Premises*!

Keep writing and reading,

Bethany Granger and Tarl Roger Kudrick
co-publishers of *On The Premises* magazine

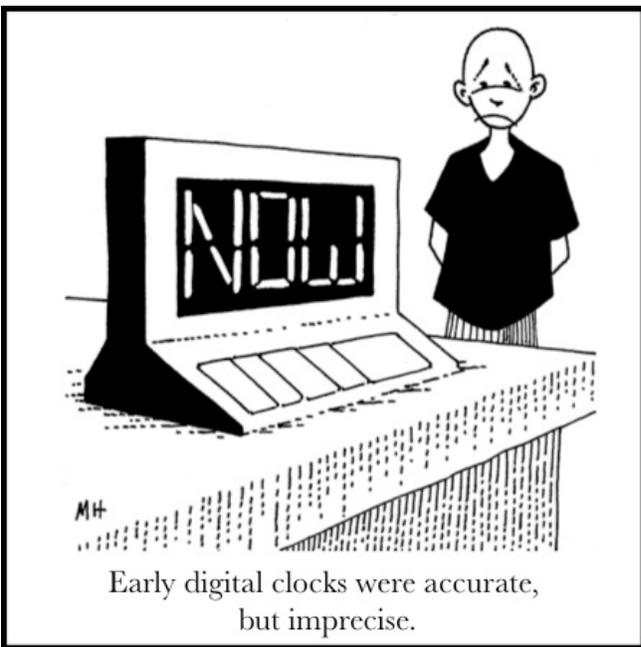
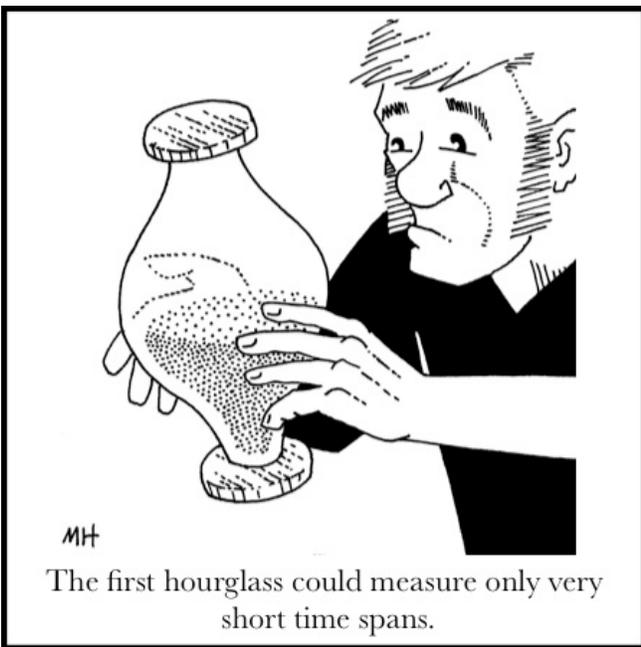
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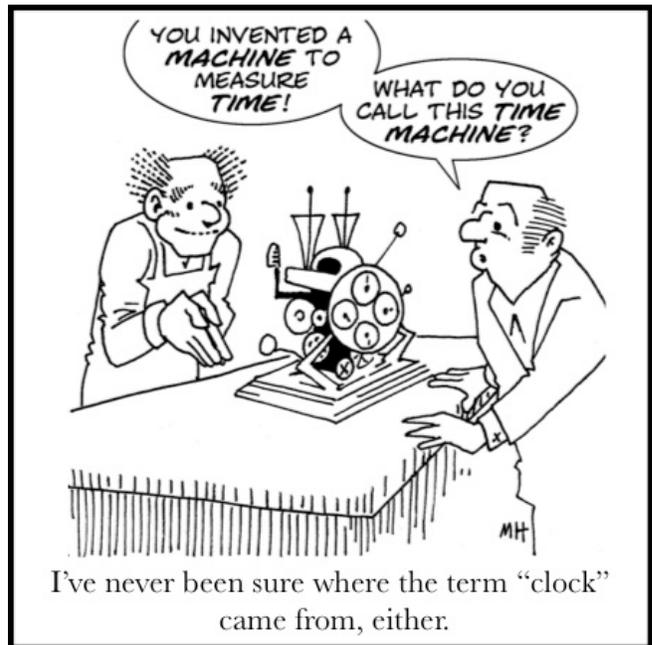
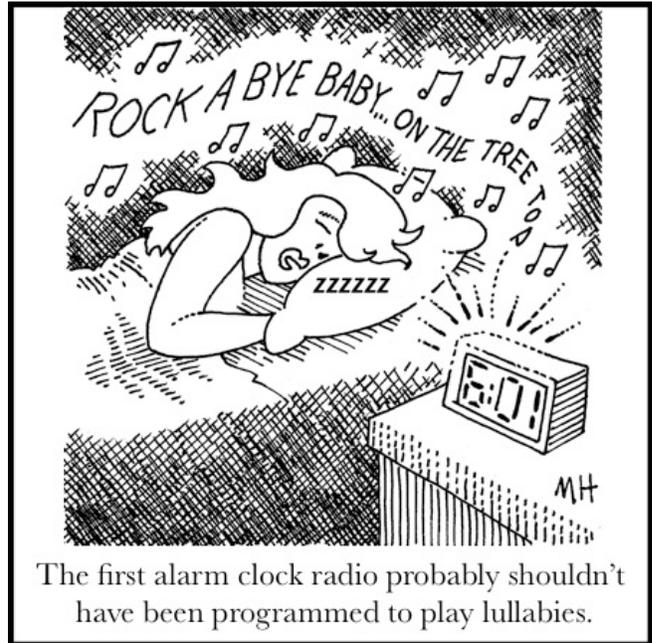
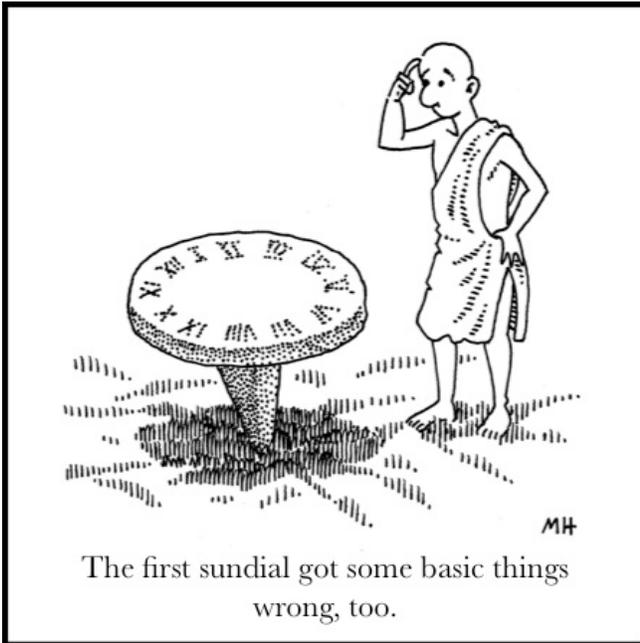
by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

Time is one of those concepts that is totally obvious, yet would be nearly impossible to explain to someone who has no understanding of it. It's harder to measure than you might think, too. Sure, we're used to it, but back in the day...

Some things are easier to show than explain, so Tarl Kudrick (writer) and Matt Howarth (illustrator) have collaborated again to bring you:

A Brief History of Failing to Measure Time Well





FIRST PLACE

Born and raised in the Bahamas, Collie now lives in southern California penning fiction outside her work in marketing. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in *Expanded Horizons* and *Big Pulp* respectively. She also writes under the name Ada Winder. This is her second short-story sale.

The Fugu Feast

by *T.N. Collie*

A surge of feeling almost gripped the man as he caught sight of the gallows near the trees—no one had mentioned it or the five mismatched chairs near the cliff, despite their irreverent arrangement but obvious significance. The camp’s sales pitch glossed over such minor details in a package that emphasized going out with a bang; for those who didn’t prefer carbon monoxide or a kit of plastic bags and helium, who cared not to rely on a compassionate doctor, or traumatize innocent bystanders with other leaps in the dark. For those who had no desire to paint walls with their blood. For all who were sure but didn’t mind dragging death out.

While the importance of the gallows was clear, the man wasn’t sure how it fit into the overall spirit of the camp. It didn’t seem the place where one simply hung from a rope or dove to one’s death, where one simply chose one’s weapon of choice. The site was a playground—the gallows and chairs sandbox toys—and the man expected to be shown how they’d come to be.

He was welcomed warmly by Bob, a gentleman in his fifties with some extra weight on his body and cheeks and a smile Santa would envy. “You came on a good night, John,” Bob said to the man, his grin a glare. “It’s the Monday Night Fugu Feast—not everyone gets to experience it.”

Bob patted the man on the back then draped his arm over the man's shoulder, which he promptly shrugged off.

As they walked toward the cabin, Bob explained the culinary Russian roulette.

While Bob spoke, the man saw what could have been a ghost pass by a few yards away out of the corner of his eye.

He stopped, looking the woman full-on.

"Meredith," Bob explained, then proceeded to brief him on the woman's history with the camp.

Meredith had entered the camp in the dingy white nightgown she was now wearing and just one other possession: a black-and-white flyer with her face on it, the word "Missing" above it, her name, height, eye and hair color, and the date thought disappeared below it.

Meredith had never participated in the fugu feast and didn't like food in general, Bob told the man, adding that most people left the camp within three weeks but Meredith had been there over four. She looked like she had chosen to starve herself to death—her cheekbones prominent over sunken-in cheeks, dark circles in the hollow underneath tar-colored eyes, pale skin verging on translucent, stringy brown hair the man could see parts of scalp through.

Bob joked that no more than fifteen people lived on-site at a time as they continued walking, then told the newcomer he was now resident number thirteen. "Al took off yesterday," he said, as if Al had gone on vacation or run away when it was clear that no one left the camp alive. "A game of hangman," Bob continued, then went on to elaborate although the man didn't care to hear more.

Al had arrived two weeks prior and stuck mostly to himself until Gary, a bipolar man ten years his junior, moved in three days later. According to Bob, the way the two got along, it was as if they'd been buddies their whole lives, becoming inseparable until Gary took a leap over the cliff, independent of the camp games.

The following day, Al volunteered to play hangman, and since Gary wasn't around, had to select a different guessing buddy. He ended up choosing Meredith, who had barely spoken a word since she'd gotten there, and who could hardly be expected to call out sensible letters to the word puzzle presented.

She kept saying the letter 'T' and once the first and only 'T' had been revealed, the repeats counted against Al as incorrect. Seven 'T's later, Al's neck broke as his body plunged.

As the story ended, the man was glad Bob had stopped talking.

*

When Bob opened the cabin doors to reveal a well-stocked recreation room and the spacious living room of a ten-bedroom cabin capable of sleeping thirty, the man was reminded of the considerable entry/exit fee he'd paid. The generosity of the living quarters was only part of what made sense of the fees. The other part he hoped to experience sooner rather than later.

He looked around and found himself surprised to see a beautiful blonde whom Bob pointed out as Shelly. She seemed to perpetually twirl a lock of her curly hair as she sat in one of the sizable living room chairs staring at the large, flat-screen television, although not as if she could see the images on it. She had blue eyes framed by tawny lashes, and a frozen look of pensiveness.

The man waited for Bob to say something about her beyond 'Shelly,' but all Bob said was that she'd be joining the feast tonight, along with Edmund and his wife Alice, an elderly couple also in the living room who were holding tight to each other's hands. They seemed to see the same vision playing before their eyes, the only indication they were still in the present being their firm grip on each other.

Then Bob mentioned Evelyn—a woman who shunned all other activities and participated in the feast alone, and had the misfortune of having had clean feasts for the past two weeks with no one taking a poisoned bite. She'd be joining them again this night, as was James, who, at the mention of his name, looked up with sad but kind brown eyes from a rocking chair nearby. He gave what was probably

meant as a friendly smile then his eyes went back to the photo album he'd been flipping through.

Bob mentioned a few other names, pointing out those who happened to be around or walking by, one of which was a fairly normal-looking girl reading a book on a couch. She had very long, red hair; a slender frame; and spindly, long fingers which made the man think of a daddy-long-legs. Bob claimed she was gifted. He also pointed out a brown-haired boy named Adam playing foosball with a blond youth called Sam, both ex-military.

Then Bob announced the feast would soon begin and let the man know he would be partaking. He extended an offer to the man and before he could respond, he mentioned one of the few official rules of the camp: *Do not play a game unless you're prepared to lose*, a rule that seemed silly to the man because—weren't they all there because they were ready to lose? Still, the man had just arrived so he declined.

What would happen to the remainder of his orientation if Bob died at the feast tonight? the man wondered aloud.

The chef would take care of the rest, Bob said. It was usually his job—this among other things. The only resident with intentions to remain, the chef kept the traditions and stories going. The camp going. And besides being the camp's director and cook, he was also the undertaker of sorts—ridding the camp of bodies through flesh-eating dermestid beetles, an incinerator, and acidic mixes.

Bob smiled before disappearing into the dining room to join the other five who had started filing toward it: the old couple, beautiful Shelly, kindly James.

The man also caught a glimpse of a refined woman who must have been Evelyn. She looked plucked straight from the fifties; a politician's wife perhaps—with an upper-class bearing, dark hair stiffened into an up-do, black vintage dress, white gloves up to her elbows. The man thought the white gloves an odd choice for a feast.

Six people went in to dine, and one hour later, six people came out.

TUESDAY: MUSICAL CHAIRS

Bob had said there'd be one official game per day, and Tuesday's was musical chairs. The man remembered musical chairs as a child and with the placement of these five chairs, knew at once what this variation involved.

Bob told the man that the results of musical chairs were even more inconsistent than the fugu feast—more than any other game played at the camp. Sometimes no one would die, and sometimes, one or more people would end up over the edge of the cliff. Bob warned the man not to be alarmed if someone slipped or jumped before the game was done or at any point, and the man wondered why Bob saw fit to warn him.

The chairs were arranged in a way that left one chair three feet away from the cliff's edge. When the game had been played the previous week, no one had fallen or leapt as the chairs were taken away from the play space one by one. The 'losers' stood by to watch the game to its end.

Danny, a tall, thin, dark-haired boy whose age was tough to tell—he could have been fifteen or early twenties—ended up winning the game and chose not to take a winner's exiting dive as a few had done in the past.

As she was last week, the reading redhead, Amy, was the source of music, her weapon of choice a flute, which, when put to her lips, instantly arrested the man and he stared at her fingers as notes flowed from them.

While Amy's music played with the air, the man felt the beginnings of it—something stirring in him, and he wondered if what he was feeling was also what initially delayed the circling of the players for a few seconds. It even crossed his mind that it might have helped everyone survive the previous week. That perhaps the players had been extra careful—consciously or unconsciously—to not lose out on hearing Amy's melodies.

Then the six players began circling the five chairs: Danny, ex-military buddies Sam and Adam, skeletal Meredith, Shelly, and James.

At the first pause, Meredith was left out of a chair and became an observer. She stood off to the side as Bob removed one of the five chairs from the game.

Next out was Shelly, then James, then Danny, who folded his arms looking slightly peeved. Down to Sam and Adam, the two circled the single chair remaining, eyes locked on each other, grinning like children, and when Amy's music stopped, Adam hit the chair first, releasing triumphant laughter as his bottom connected with it. His friend laughed along with him with equal joy then, in a flash, took two steps back toward the cliff. Still smiling, his hand came to his temple in salute as he looked into his friend's eyes. Then his expression sobered up as his brown eyes rested on Amy.

Amy had only a moment to stare back in alarm. She then turned away with blank eyes, missing the moment Adam reached for his friend and their hands locked before they both tumbled over the cliff.

*

Despite the almost jovial approach to the camp, and the quiet, pleasant nights and playful days, every once in a while someone chose a solitaire game, staying in their room until discovered.

A cabinet in each bathroom was filled with pill bottles for this purpose; for those who decided to relinquish having like-minded people around, choosing to overdose silently instead.

Everyone but Sam and Adam returned to their rooms that night, and in the morning, one other person no longer awoke.

Amy was found blue on the bathroom floor, her long fingers curled around one of two now-empty bottles of sleeping pills.

WEDNESDAY: TIC-TAC-TOE

Tic-Tac-Toe almost always resulted in losses whenever it managed to get enough players. It required at least seven players, yet more people tended to fear the game

since it required burying oneself alive. The game had been skipped the previous week, replaced by a version of Rock-Paper-Scissors, and in other weeks, by different games on reserve.

The man decided to sit this game out too although he'd agreed to be a wildcard—the final player for the winning team should there be one.

The chef was overseeing since Bob had decided to play.

The lines of the game had been spray-painted white on the grassy terrain making nine large squares with a round hole dug into each of them, ten feet deep.

The man watched as old Edmund and Alice teamed up with James and became the X team, while Shelly teamed up with Danny and Bob, becoming team O.

Bob and Edmund were chosen to go first by their teams. A coin was flipped and Bob became player one. He chose the center square hole to lower himself into and a large, heavy stone with an O drawn on it in white chalk was placed on top, sealing him in. Edmund chose the bottom left corner to make his X, Shelly the top right for her O. After her stone was placed, Alice chose the square-hole next to her husband and below Bob's, making the next play obvious. Danny went ahead and blocked a bottom row of X's from occurring.

What would happen next became clear: regardless of where James played, the O team would win—unless the man, the wildcard turned O, decided on an unlikely play.

As James chose the middle right square to mark his X, the man chose the top left for the diagonal win, but instead of getting into the hole, began setting loose the winning team members as he had been instructed to do. He and the chef worked to pull out Shelly, Bob, and Danny.

Since there had been no deadlock, Edmund, Alice and James were left behind.

*

The man usually welcomed his all-too-infrequent nightmares—the pounding of his heart, the pouring over of possibilities as his eyes popped open. Then

disappointment set in as his settings registered, his mind settled, and numbness returned.

That night, the man was haunted by images of the old man and woman, screaming out each other's names, trying to punch through the dirt to reach each other's hand in the dark—regretting picking a game that buried them an unreachable three feet apart.

THURSDAY: PICK-UP-STICKS

The number of residents in the camp had dwindled quickly, so the man was not surprised to see new arrivals. One was a man who looked homeless: greasy, scraggly, long dark hair, facial hair abundant, dirty, ill-fitting rags for clothes. The man wondered how such a vagrant-looking person could afford to join the camp.

The other two newcomers were women.

The man had also begun to see the other resident who'd been there when he'd arrived, but hadn't shown his face until now: a man in his forties who, by the robes he was wearing, looked like he'd been a pastor. He had dark brown skin, almond-colored eyes, and walked around with a Bible, but never said a word.

But it was none of these residents, new or old, that played the day's game of pick-up-sticks. A two-player game, this evening's players were Meredith and Danny.

Meredith's face had lit up tremendously when the game was announced. She had priority to play over the newcomers and had never looked so happy as a pile of yellow and blue needles was dumped in front of her. The game had not been played the week she entered the camp, and in the two previous weeks, others with seniority had beaten her to it.

She grinned a feral grin at Danny as she claimed yellow.

Meredith played skillfully for the first few minutes, and so did Danny, until one of the needles dislodged from the pile at his manipulation and its poisoned tip found

his hand. He was convulsing in moments, but Meredith seemed oblivious as her eyes greedily took in the toxic pile.

She grabbed a yellow needle and sunk its tip into her arm, needlessly pushing the plunger.

Before dissolving into convulsions herself, she picked up a blue needle and headed for the crook of her other arm but never made it.

FRIDAY: EXPLORATION

Friday's game was moved to Saturday so the camp could replenish its players, and the newcomers could be taken through orientation. The man was even less interested in the new arrivals than the residents he'd met there.

He saw Bob leading them around, describing the games so they could start plotting out which they'd like to see played and which to participate in. He even saw Bob point at him at some point, but knew Bob didn't have much to say about him beyond his date of arrival and the generic pseudonym he'd given for the purpose of on-site identification.

On this day off, the man was not interested in any of the recreation room games or anything on television, or even the jacuzzi. He didn't care to talk to any of the remaining residents who'd been there before him, except one: he'd found himself wondering what Shelly sounded like.

He found her in the living room flipping through a familiar-looking photo album. When she realized someone was watching her, she shoved the album off to the side, avoiding eye contact.

"His family I guess," she said shrugging, appearing embarrassed. Her voice had a warm, velvety tone, unexpectedly deep with a slight twang.

The man had gotten a look at some of the photos: the late James smiling with a young boy and girl, and a pretty, dimpled woman.

“An accident I think,” she continued, still looking away.

“How do you know?”

“The rest of the pictures. And some newspaper clippings at the back.”

“What about you? Why are you here?”

She finally looked at him.

“We’re not allowed to talk about that—it’s against the rules. Didn’t Bob tell you?”

The man didn’t understand.

“Sometimes,” she said, “people don’t agree about your reason. They might try to talk you out of it. But you can’t do that here.”

The man was mildly curious now.

“Who enforces these rules anyway?” he asked. *And how?* he didn’t ask.

Shelly went rigid for a few moments. Then she looked around furtively, and when she spoke, her voice was a whisper.

“The chef,” she said. “He takes care of everything.”

SATURDAY: DON’T SPILL THE BEANS

A two-player game played with two pots and two pounds of castor beans divided equally between the players. The object of “Don’t Spill the Beans” was to get as many of your lot of beans into the pot without tipping it over. The person whose pot tipped over first then had to eat their spilled beans.

Shelly decided to play the game, and the man decided he’d play with her.

She smiled at him when she saw him volunteer, and he did not know whether or not to smile back.

The man didn't think about where the game would go—about the inevitable tipping over of one of the pots. He also didn't think about those beans he recognized, the poisonous ricin within.

As the two tossed bean after bean, the man found Shelly's smile infectious. Slower, then faster and more and more carelessly, he even began laughing along with her as bean after bean sailed into and around the pots as they got more and more creative with their tosses.

Shelly's blue eyes sparkled.

When Shelly's pot tipped over, the laughter that had found him slipped away as her beans poured out.

The man stood, watched her stuff a few beans into her mouth, then walked away.

SUNDAY: HANGMAN

Bob claimed Sunday was the most somber day of the week—partially because with games such as musical chairs and tic-tac-toe, no one had to see the dead bodies, or witness life slip out of them so gruesomely. Yet, as dark a cloud as Sunday's game seemed to cast upon the camp, hangman was never skipped, and almost everyone would show up to watch it.

When the pastor volunteered to play, the man felt a tiny ripple of something pass through the crowd, almost like a suppressed cry of protest.

He had not seen much of the pastor, and certainly had not picked up on any special relationship anyone at the camp might have had with him, but somehow, the majority of the camp seemed to disagree with his participation.

The pastor looked around at the faces, his eyes eventually resting on the immaculately made-up Evelyn, silently choosing her as his guessing partner. For once, Evelyn looked nervous.

The pastor remained looking dignified in his black and burgundy robe as he was put into place and the noose positioned, his mahogany face resigned but proud.

Then the word puzzle was pulled out of a hat.

Three words: six letters, three letters, four.

The lines were drawn on a dry-erase board with a black erasable marker.

Evelyn made her first guess and two 'E's filled in, one at the end of the first two words. Then she guessed an 'O' and it appeared in the third word. Her third and fourth guesses, an 'M' and a 'C' counted as the first two strikes against the pastor. Five more and the game would end.

Evelyn ventured an 'A,' a 'T,' and an 'H,' all of which materialized. But 'N,' 'D' and 'F' did not. The two 'R's that showed up as a result of her next guess made the puzzle look solvable.

"Braise the pork?" Evelyn guessed.

The man noticed her voice shook as she said it and a similar quality seemed to exist in the shimmering eyes of most onlookers.

It was the sixth strike against the pastor.

Evelyn took a breath and looked at the puzzle again.

Her next words came out sounding the way he imagined a mouse would sound saying them.

"Praise the Lord?" Evelyn squeaked, her eyes now almost impossibly large, her composure long broken as well-manicured finger-tips rested on her lips.

A collective sigh unabashedly escaped as the noose was loosened and the pastor was freed.

MONDAY: THE FUGU FEAST

The man, Bob, Evelyn, the pastor, and two of the newcomers elected to partake in Monday night's feast.

The man detected something different in the air and while he knew there was a chance he would survive, he didn't mind. He was also fine with dying at this time, having caught a glimpse of the thing he'd been looking for: tasting it in notes flowing from a flute, in the strange aftertaste of his most recent nightmare, in the intangible ripples of the previous day.

He'd gotten his money's worth.

Even now as he sat at the table, he realized he wished Shelly sat across from him, that he was looking into her clear blue eyes. That he could tap her feet underneath the table and see how she'd react. Tell her his real name. He also wished for an emotional understanding of the relationship between Sam and Adam, the friends who'd become like brothers. That he knew what it was like to be in a lifetime partnership like Edmund and Alice.

But as the participants finished the feast and awaited their wine, the man caught a moment between Evelyn and the pastor as she smiled at him then squeezed his hand in such a way that the man's heart finally burst as his body began going numb.

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SECOND PRIZE

John Burridge's short story "The View from the Top" may be found on the *Analog* web site (<http://www.analogsf.com/201009/vft-johnburridge.shtml>). His short story "Up" won the Whidbey Student Choice Award for December 2008. His short story "Mask Glass Magic" may be found in the anthology *Writers of the Future, Vol 23*. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Reset Romance

by John Burridge

For Sheila, waiting for Dan to materialize was the worst. At least jogging in the morning helped her relax. The last few days and nights she'd gotten jittery, wondering if her calculations were correct and if she'd given herself too much lead time. She let the rhythm of the run soothe her and ran around the block so many times she lost count. After a brief cool-down and stretch, she returned home.

She headed to the bedroom to change. As she entered, a pop of air displacement and rustling magazines surprised her. A few seconds later and she would have been naked.

Not that it mattered that much in the long run, but still.

*

Dan saw Sheila—hair bleached blonde and with green tips this time—standing in the doorway with her thumbs hooked in the waistband of her black running pants, looking straight at him. Crap! Her eyes widened with surprise—probably at a man popping out of nowhere into her bedroom.

She released her pants and they snapped back into place over her hips. Then she scowled. “Get out, Dan.”

For a moment he thought his Red Button hadn’t worked right and he’d gone back only five minutes.

She crossed her arms over the sweaty rock band T-shirt she wore. In the glimpse before her arms covered them, Dan recognized the band members, but not the band’s name. At least he could read the language.

“Uh, but we haven’t met yet,” he said. He slipped his Red Button into his pack.

*

Sheila could tell Dan was off balance. Good.

She pointed down the hall and reminded herself that he was a manipulative bastard who thought he was being romantic. “We don’t need introductions.”

“Oh-kay,” he said. “It would be a help if you could tell me what today’s date was.”

“It’s six years, four months and an odd number of days before we get divorced.”

*

Something was wrong with this timeline. She shouldn’t know about the divorce. “But—” Dan said.

“It’ll be different this time.” She stepped forward and grabbed his elbow. “Yeah, yeah. Apparently, that’s what you always say.”

Her speech; her too-perfect dye-job; her skin not quite as young-looking as it would have been if she were twenty-five; and her voice, well, too bitter. The clues snapped together.

“Sheila! Baby, I’m trying to fix things for us.”

*

Damn, thought Sheila. He'd finally caught on to her usual trick of pretending to be one of her alternate past selves. She kept dragging him by his elbow through the duplex. "You got me. Now get out."

The duplex was a mirror image of homes they usually popped into. As she steered Dan out of the bedroom and down the hall, he said, "Wait! There's something I need to tell you—her."

There always was.

She supposed she should be grateful, but she didn't miss a beat. "I'll tell this universe's Sheila to not go grocery shopping on Friday, May 15, 2009."

*

The ungrateful bitch propelled him toward the front door. It almost made him wish he hadn't gone back that first time to save her.

"And there's something *I* need to tell *you*," Sheila said and opened the door. "Mrs. Olsen will be driving her kid to the ER." She thrust him out. "So don't try to save me by slashing her tires to prevent her from leaving her driveway." The door slammed shut.

Dan stood on the front porch of their—well, in this universe—Sheila's duplex. Early morning sunlight shone into his face. He turned and pounded on the door. "Sheila! Let me in!"

*

Sheila sighed. Dan was cute, and she supposed in his own way he meant well. But she needed to make their relationship clear. She yelled through the door, "I'm calling the police if you don't leave!"

"I love you!"

Not enough to not go back to reboot their past every time a problem cropped up. "If you loved me you would have stayed with me in the future." God, she'd yelled that enough times and it still hadn't worked.

“We can start over!”

She shook her head and flipped open her cell phone. She made her voice extra loud so it would carry through the door. “Hello? My name is Sheila Wilson, 4392 West Harrison. There’s a strange man I’ve escorted out of my house but he’s hanging around on my front porch. No, I don’t know how he got in. Yes, he’s still there. You will? Thanks.”

*

Dan pounded on the door. “But we’re married!” He pulled a house key out of his pocket. It fit in the lock, but wouldn’t turn. Damn; different universe, different lock.

A police car appeared a block away. Dan dug through his pack, armed his Red Button, and pressed it. As the universe exploded into smoke, he considered when he might try next.

*

Sheila thanked the officer and closed the door. Then she took a shower, dressed, and left a summary note for her younger self.

She sat on her alternate’s bed. She took out her Red Button from a drawer in the night stand.

She needed to get back to her life. She was grateful he’d prevented her death, but she got angry when she thought of how many versions of herself were wasting time trying to save other versions of herself from versions of Dan trying to time-tweak their marriage. He’d gotten addicted to hopping back.

If only he wasn’t always trying to avoid problems.

If only he wasn’t always trying to limit her choices.

Some dark, 70% cacao chocolate waited for her in her home universe. She pressed her Red Button.

*

Dan jumped and tried to look innocent when Sheila popped into their bedroom. The backpack over his left shoulder slid down to his elbow and he almost dropped his Button.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he said.

“I merely followed you,” she said, an accusatory tone in her voice.

He shook his head. “I’m trying to save our marriage.”

“I know you think that,” she said, “but your tinkering is destroying the meaning of our vows. We can’t be us if you’re always in the past. I can’t be me.”

There was her old argument again; he used his standard comeback. “You can’t be you dead, either.”

“I’m *here*,” she said. “Don’t go.” She sounded tired.

She was always nagging at him to stay.

“I’m already there,” he said. The curtains rustled from the displaced air of his departure.

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THIRD PRIZE

Theresa Rovillo lives with her husband and daughter (another budding writer) in Connecticut. She had her first taste of publishing success with her second place win in an essay contest on Mark Twain sponsored by a local publication. "Miss Betty Comes Home," her first fiction submission as well as first ever attempt at writing for *On The Premises*, is based on actual events.

Miss Betty Comes Home

by Theresa Rovillo

In apartment 1A of 33 Bentwood Drive, Evelyn Reyes reaches for a diaper from the stash she keeps by the changing table to find it's the last one.

"Dang!" she mutters. She secures it quickly to Georgie's bottom, picks him up, and goes hunting for more. Finding none, she glances at the clock.

9:37 P.M.

"George, we're outta diapers!" she calls. "If you hurry, you can still make the store by ten!"

As her husband gets ready to go out, Evelyn looks to see if they need anything else—first in the fridge, then the pantry, where her eyes fall on a calendar hanging inside the door. The big red circle on it stops her cold. Her eyes dart to the clock.

9:42 P.M.

In that same instant, George takes hold of the front door knob and calls out, "Hon, I'm leaving!"

“Don’t!” Evelyn almost screams. “It’s the fifteenth!”

His hand recoils as if shocked. George steps away from the door. Evelyn, with the baby still on her hip, joins him in the tight little apartment hallway. Both adults hold their breath and listen. Outside their locked front door, from a point just before the first step of the main hallway staircase, a board creaks.

Exhaling with relief, Evelyn whispers, “That was close.”

“Yeah,” George says. “Miss Betty’s right on time, as usual.” He hugs his wife and son.

It is 9:43 P.M.

A footfall sounds on step one...then two...three...four... and THUD! On step five, a heavy encyclopedia, or atlas, or maybe a thick city phonebook—no one knows for sure—hits the floor. Mary Lawrence in apartment 1B hears nothing. She had been feeling ill all day, so when her husband Mark left at 6:28 P.M. for his third-shift job at the hospital, she had crawled right into bed and promptly fallen asleep.

Charlie DiMatteo in 2B, however, hears everything as he sits and watches a *Cheers* rerun. Of all the occupants of 33 Bentwood Drive, only Charlie had ever actually met Miss Betty. As a boy, he and his siblings had often been pressed into service by her to help carry things up to her apartment. He smiles now, remembering how much Miss Betty had loved her ‘finds.’

“Be careful with that,” she would instruct, as he and his brother Sal, or Mario, lugged a heavy table, or chair, or whatever else up the two flights of stairs to the third floor. And careful they had been because if the object was delivered safely, Miss Betty rewarded them with cookies, or marbles, or even a quarter. But heaven help them if so much as a tap or bump occurred because for an old lady—and Miss Betty had always been old—she could cuss up a storm!

Now, as the footfalls resume, Charlie lets out a few choice swears for old time’s sake and adds, “Good to have ya home, Miss Betty.”

The footsteps stop right outside the front door of apartment 2A, home to the Prescotts—dad Joe, mom Rhonda, and nine-year-old twins Karen and Kathy. As the “Rainbow Dash” My Little Pony clock on the girls’ nightstand changes from 9:44 to 9:45 P.M., it is exactly four months to the minute since ‘the incident’ had occurred: when curiosity had gotten the best of Karen and she had swung open her front door to see—absolutely nothing!

Surprised and disappointed, the girl had tiptoed out to the bottom of the second floor staircase before her mother had quickly whisked her back into the apartment. Karen never did catch a glimpse of Miss Betty that night, nor any other. By then, however, the damage had been done.

After a brief interlude, the footsteps resume. They make their way to the second staircase and begin to climb. At the same time outside, Denzel Stevens of apartment 3A steers his car around the corner from Main onto Bentwood. He had awakened at the crack of dawn, worked hard all day, grabbed a fast-food dinner, and by 7:37 P.M. had been immersed in a cut-throat game of volleyball at the gym.

Now Denzel is exhausted and wants nothing more than to take a quick shower and fall into bed. Instead, he looks at his wristwatch. It reads 9:45 P.M. He checks the glowing clock on his dashboard. 9:49 P.M. Trusting neither, Denzel decides to drive around the block a couple of times.

“Better safe than sorry,” he reasons and passes by number 33.

It is 9:47 P.M. and the footsteps sound on the third floor. Once again they stop. Landlady Diane Dexter in 3B draws in an anxious breath. The last thing she wants or needs is another episode like the one with the Prescotts.

“Just a minute more and we’re home free...” she whispers. “If everyone just stays away...”

*

Four months ago, the scene had unfolded pretty much like all the other times. For the first few days after Karen had opened her family’s front door, all was fine. Mrs. Dexter calls this the “getting acquainted” period. Then, things around the

apartment had begun to go missing only to reappear in unusual places: hairbrushes in the refrigerator, cans of food in dresser drawers, and framed family photos in the laundry basket. Rhonda had yelled at the girls for playing the foolish pranks, but they had both vehemently denied everything.

One day, Joe had been watching television when the channel changed.

“What the...! Hey!” he had yelled, looking around for the twins.

Then he had noticed the remote control lying on the coffee table. He had switched back to his show only to have it change immediately back to the other station. Frustrated, he had checked the batteries and once again changed channels. But back it went. Dropping the remote, Joe had left the room to look for his family. Not finding them, he had returned to the living room to find the TV turned off. He hadn't dared turn it back on.

From that day forward, any and all appliances had randomly turned on and off by themselves. Water in the shower had gone from hot to cold and back again. The sheets of meticulously made beds had wrinkled by day and blankets were pulled off sleeping people at night.

The Prescotts had tolerated all of these annoyances, albeit with a lot of grumbling. After all, just like everyone else in the building, they had been warned about Miss Betty.

“She has dementia,” Mrs. Dexter had told them. “She gets confused. If you leave your door open when she comes home, she'll wander in. Then she's not gonna wanna leave and you'll be stuck with her until the next time she comes home.”

Although Joe and Rhonda hadn't quite understood the logic of that statement, just like the other tenants, they had been swayed by the lovely neighborhood, the spacious rooms, and especially the low rent to sign a one year ironclad lease to live at 33 Bentwood Drive. By the middle of the sixth month in their new home, however, they had wanted nothing more than to run away as far as possible. That was when Kathy had been thrown from the couch while reading quietly in the living room.

“Mommy! Mommy! Miss Betty pushed me!”

Hugging her bruised daughter, Rhonda had felt helpless. That night, it had only gotten worse. Both girls had burst into their parents’ room, screaming hysterically.

“She keeps getting into bed with us!” explained Karen.

“She came into mine first, so I went to sleep with Karen.” Kathy went on. “Then she tried to climb in there, too. Mommy! Daddy! We don’t want to go back!”

The entire family had slept together that night. The next morning, Joe and Rhonda had gone to speak with Mrs. Dexter.

“What’s done is done,” she had informed them. “On the fifteenth, Miss Betty will come home again. If you don’t open the door, things’ll go back to normal.”

“We can’t wait that long!” Joe had protested. “Our girls are hurt and scared out of their minds!”

“Please!” Rhonda had begged. “Can’t you call someone? A priest, maybe?”

But Mrs. Dexter had just shaken her head and stated, “My Aunt Ruth and Uncle Morty, the previous owners, had called all the experts—priests, rabbis, mediums—to get Miss Betty to move on. Nothing’s worked. After she came home the first time, she’s refused to leave ever again.”

“That makes no sense! She has to leave in order to ‘come home.’ Can’t she just stay wherever it is she goes?” Rhonda had reasoned.

“But that’s just it,” countered Mrs. Dexter. “Great-aunt Betty never goes anywhere anymore. Back when she was flesh and blood, she’d wander around the neighborhood looking for treasure. She’d take stuff off curbs and even pick through people’s trashcans. Everyone knew her and when she started getting lost, they’d kindly bring her home.

“One day, Miss Betty disappeared. Searches went on for days and even months. Finally, after almost a year had passed and all hope of ever finding her was gone, Miss Betty just came home. She never explained where she had been or what had

happened. She just went into the apartment she shared with Ruth and Morty and stayed there until she died.”

“Why won’t she stay dead?” Joe had grumbled.

“She does.”

“You know what I mean!”

“If you’re asking why she’s still here...” Mrs. Dexter had shrugged her shoulders. “She’s just a confused old lady who loves her home, I guess. The only consolation is that someone had noticed a pattern. Now, as long as everyone keeps their doors closed for a few moments once a month, there are no problems.”

“But there’s a big one now!” Rhonda had exclaimed.

Mrs. Dexter had just steeled herself and reminded them, “You were warned and instructed. Now you’ll just have to wait it out.”

So, the Prescotts continued to live with the strange goings on in their apartment. Then one morning at breakfast, Karen’s plate of toast had been snatched away. Hungry, the youngster had pulled it back. Suddenly, the plate had whizzed across the room and smashed against the wall.

Furious, Rhonda had flung open the kitchen door and shouted, “Get out, Betty! Get out of my house! Now!”

Whoosh! A fork flew past Rhonda’s head, hit the wall, and clattered to the floor. Before she could even take a breath, Kathy’s glass of milk had followed, shattering on impact. Then every plate, bowl, cup, etc., had followed, hurling at Rhonda, who did all she could to keep from getting seriously hurt. The twins had been unable to help, for fear of getting hit themselves.

“Please stop, Miss Betty!” Rhonda had pleaded. “Please! I’m sorry! You can stay!”

And just like that, the tantrum had stopped. Not bothering to clean up, Rhonda had packed bags for herself, Joe, and their daughters. She didn’t even call her

husband until after she and the girls had checked into a nearby motel and there the family had stayed until the sixteenth of the month.

*

“Come on... come on...” Mrs. Dexter encourages as the footsteps start their shuffle down the hallway.

They pause at the big front window—Miss Betty likes the view—then continue to the door marked ‘3C’, behind which are two rooms filled to capacity with all sorts of stuff. Once upon a time, these rooms had been part of apartment 3A. After Miss Betty’s death, Ruth and Morty had tried to clean out her ‘finds,’ but she had pitched such a fit, they’d left things alone. Instead, they sealed off the rooms from the rest of the apartment and installed a new door opening out to the hallway.

At 9:48 P.M., Miss Betty passes silently through that closed door.

Once again, all is well at 33 Bentwood Drive. Once again, all the other inhabitants go back to living regular lives, at least for a little while. Because as everyone knows: although Miss Betty never leaves, she always comes home...

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HONORABLE MENTION

Sarina Dorie is a speculative fiction writer, artist and belly dance teacher who currently lives in Eugene, Oregon. She has sold 22 stories in the last two years to a variety of magazines including *Daily Science Fiction*, *Flagship*, *Allasso*, *Roar*, *New Myths*, *Untied Shoelaces of the Mind*, *Penumbra*, and *Crossed Genres*.

Sarina's fantasy novel, *Silent Moon*, won two second place and three third place awards from Romance Writers of America. Her novel is now available on Amazon and Smashwords.

Now, if only Jack Sparrow asks her to marry him, all her dreams will come true.

For more information, please visit: www.SarinaDorie.com

The Quantum Mechanic

by Sarina Dorie

Marian's headband flashlight shone on the surface of the vacuum chamber she had slid into. She replaced the panel over the inter-cooling system of the cold fusion reactor she was servicing—or what her boss hoped would be a cold fusion reactor if it didn't explode this time—while she pretended she didn't hear him arguing with her sister, Vana, again.

Dr. Malachlor's raspy voice was loud enough to hear from across the room and inside the machine. "There are highly sensitive experiments in this laboratory. Don't touch my equipment again."

Vana laughed. "Or what? You're going to spank me?" Vana could have read the ingredients on a cereal box and made it sound sexy. The sultrier her voice and the

more flippant the comment, the more Marian could tell her sister's feelings were hurt.

There was a time Marian had envied the way buxom blonde Vana attracted the attention of any man she wanted—Marian's boyfriends included. At times like this, seeing her sister with two ex-husbands and currently in another unhappy relationship, she wondered if she were the lucky one. The times she ate dinner alone in her apartment reading blueprints, and cuddled up to manuals in bed, she didn't feel so sure. If only Marian hadn't confided in Vana how brilliant and handsome her employer was when Dr. Malachlor had first hired her, Marian might have had a chance to show him how sexy brainy brunettes could be.

Marian slid deeper inside the machine. She tilted her head so the beam from the light attached to her headband shone on the next panel. Nothing was wrong with this section of the inter-cooling system, but it was slightly quieter here in the womb of the machine.

"Don't set that there!" Dr. Malachlor's muffled voice said. "That laser will split the atoms in your body apart and render you into a pile of incomplete particles."

"Ooooo. Talk dirty to me, you big, bad atom-smasher."

"No! That's the cold fusion reactor." Marian could practically hear him tearing out his gray hair.

Vana tiskied. "Viktor, you asked me to stop by your 'secret laboratory' to bring you lunch. The least you could do—"

"I swear you do these things just to—Aaagh!"

The entire wall vibrated and a high-pitched screech buzzed in Marian's ears. She didn't know what they were doing out there, but it sounded like they had turned the reactor on.

With her inside.

She frantically pushed off from the wall and squirmed back toward the open panel she'd climbed in. "Hey! I'm still in here. Turn the machine off," she shouted over the dull rumble.

Dr. Malachlor's voice rose above the thudding clunks of the machine, but she couldn't make out the words. The metal of the panels around her was warm to the touch. A brilliant white light blinded her. Marian squeezed her eyes closed and prayed *she* wasn't going to be rendered into a pile of incomplete particles.

*

Marian's head swam as the room spun in a blur. She could barely breathe. Putting a hand to her ribs, she realized the constraining sensation she felt was a corset under her dress. She blinked and refocused her vision on the screwdriver in her hand. Why was she holding a screwdriver? And why was she wearing goggles on her head instead of her flashlight headband?

Marian turned her head over her shoulder, studying the steam fusion generator that filled half the laboratory. The twisted jumble of wires disappearing into the heat chamber and the mass of tubes and valves connecting the steam exchange systems looked wrong. Instead of buttons there were levers and knobs. The screens were blank and there were *gears*. It didn't look like Dr. Malachlor had even turned it on today.

Was she losing her memory? Why did everything feel different?

She noticed the sticky heap of mushy apples and flakey pie crust spilled over the controls. From the plastic wrapped sandwiches and the unopened bottle of soda on the floor, she suspected this might be one of Vana's accidents.

Dr. Malachlor sat at his computer, silver spectacles on his hawk nose as he squinted at the punches he made to his Babbage cards. Oddly, steam rose from the top of the computer.

"Where's my sister?" Marian asked.

Dr. Malachlor didn't bother to look up. "What sister?"

She rolled her eyes. She replaced the screwdriver in her toolbox and ducked under an arm of the generator to get the paper towels from the corner by the sink.

The gas lights flickered and the sound of a pop and breaking glass came from the other side of the wall. Three confident knocks came from the other side of the door. Without waiting for an answer, a man peeked his head inside. Though salt-and-pepper speckled his temples and crow's feet crinkled the corners of his eyes, he would have deserved the "Mr. Eye Candy" label Vana bestowed on good-looking men.

The man's gaze was glued to a flat device with knobs he held in his hand. "That should take care of that." He twisted one of the buttons and then tucked the screen into a pocket of denim overalls not so different from Marian's own. "I'm here to fix a space-time continuum for a Dr. Viktor Malachlor."

Marian glanced at the open tool box he carried. It was filled with screwdrivers and wrenches as well as some futuristic-looking devices. His name tag read "Bob." She reached for paper towels but instead found a pile of folded rags. Having no other options, she grabbed one and squeezed around the machine to clean up the spill.

"I didn't call a mechanic. Or a physicist," Dr. Malachlor said.

"No, the you in this dimension didn't. But another you did. Your experiments are interfering with another dimension's time." Bob checked off something on his clipboard and shoved it into the side of his tool box before stepping past Dr. Malachlor.

A quantum mechanic? Marian glanced at the steam fusion machine. Could it be that it wasn't her? Reality was malfunctioning? Pi was still 3.2, right?

"Oh, no you don't. This is a *secret* laboratory." Her employer stretched out his arms to block Bob from going further, but the man stepped forward anyway, pushing Dr. Malachlor back.

Marian sighed. If Dr. Malachlor had paid for one of the more state-of-the-art, underground secret laboratories—or at least hired a receptionist to guard the

entrance—it was far more likely his laboratory and experiments would have stayed a secret.

The stranger halted at the sight of Marian wiping chunks of apple from the controls. “Marian?” he asked.

The intensity of his gaze unsettled her. Something about his refreshingly earnest face was familiar. He reminded her of that cute guy she sometimes saw eating at the hot dog stand down the street. Although, she was fairly certain that man was younger and had longer hair.

She glanced at Dr. Malachlor who had rushed back to his computer to turn off his screen. “Do I know you?” she asked.

“Not yet. But you will.” He dropped his box of tools and swept her into his arms. He kissed her with such tenderness Marian suspected she wanted to know him in the future.

Still, it was the present that was important.

She pushed him back. “Excuse me, *Bob*. I don’t know what you think—”

His blue eyes turned mournful. “I’m sorry, Marian. I haven’t been able to do that since, well... the you in my time had a heart condition and we didn’t know it...” Tears filled his eyes. He cleared his throat and stepped back, though he held her hand in his, smoothing his thumb over her knuckles.

A buzz to her left caught Marian’s attention. Dr. Malachlor stepped forward. “Get out of my laboratory. I’ve got steam power and I know how to use it.” He held up what looked like a tuning fork attached to wires that connected to a pressure cooker. Marian didn’t remember a steam laser being in the lab.

Bob shook his head and tisked. “Wow. Things really must be messed up. This world has our steam power and my world probably has your electricity.”

Dr. Malachlor lunged forward, his quaint laser in hand. He didn’t get very far, what with all the tubes connecting it to its power source. He was abruptly jerked backward.

Bob turned to her again, and repeated, “This world has our steam power and my world probably has your electricity. Wow. Things really must be messed up.”

Marian opened her mouth, about to say he had already said that, and it didn’t make any more sense the second time around. To her further confusion, she noticed Dr. Malachlor slowly slinking backward.

“I’ve got steam power and I know how to use it. Get out of my laboratory,” he said.

Bob stepped forward. He smoothed his thumb over the back of her hand. The irritation in his blue eyes softened into sorrow. He stammered out an apology—the same apology he had just uttered before. Tears filled his eyes.

Her hand dropped from his chest and for a moment, she melted into his embrace as he kissed her. Her heart skipped a beat and she couldn’t help noticing this kiss was better than the first one. She considered all the times she had stayed late at work instead of going out on dates, not wanting to be like her sister.

Still, it was the present that was important. But *this* wasn’t the present anymore. This had happened moments ago. Everything was happening backwards.

Words spilled from her lips, her mind divided by what she now saw and what she had been thinking moments ago. “I don’t know what you think— Excuse me, *Bob*.”

Bob reversed his steps toward the door. “But you will. Not yet.” The toolbox on the floor lifted into his hand.

Her lips moved and her voice came out despite her attempt to control it. “Do I know you?”

Marian tried to break out of the cycle, to say out loud what was happening, but her mouth wouldn’t work. Instead she turned back toward the machine and pushed pieces of apple across the controls.

She listened to Dr. Malachlor and Bob’s repeated exchange of words as her boss now pushed the stranger toward the door. Marian shook with effort, trying to free herself from the backwards pattern. It took great concentration to keep her thoughts from returning to what they had been the first time this had happened.

“I’m here to fix a space-time continuum for a Dr. Viktor Malachlor.” Bob twisted one of the buttons and then tucked the tool into a pocket of his denim overalls. “That should take care of that.”

Marian lurched forward, falling to her knees—which were fortunately cushioned by layers of ruffles and petticoats. She was free. Bob placed a hand under her elbow, helping her to her feet. She exchanged startled glances with Dr. Malachlor. Like it or not, something was wrong with the space-time continuum. And they needed a quantum mechanic to fix it.

*

Dr. Malachlor pulled on his rubber gloves and paced the room. The quantum mechanic unscrewed a panel on the side of the steam-powered generator and stuck his head inside. Marian sat on the floor next to him, no easy task in a corset. She watched in fascination as he took apart the gears under the control board and rewired it. Whatever he was doing, she wanted to remember it. Time travel was far more interesting—and probably more lucrative—than failing at steam fusion again.

“So we actually made a time machine but hadn’t realized it?” Marian asked.

“More like a time distortion machine. You’ve probably noticed things seem a little off. That’s because they don’t belong in this space or time.”

Marian glanced at the steam-powered laser next to the sink. “So you’re from the future and a different dimension?”

“Yeah. Can you hand me that pair of pliers? Thanks.”

Marian studied the spilled apple pie and the sandwich still on the floor. There was something about that, but her brain grew fuzzy and it became harder to remember what it was as the moments passed. Apple pie... a fight... who had spilled it?

“Someone’s missing from this time?” she asked.

“Yes, your sister, Vana. She’s in a different dimension right now. The space-time continuum where I come from. That’s why I’m here, actually. You think Dr.

Malachlor has a hard enough time dealing with one Vana, imagine two of them.” He laughed, the merry tone so contagious Marian joined in with him. He squeezed her hand, the gesture familiar and alien at the same time. “Can you hand me the molecular energy converter?”

Marian reached for one of the strange looking devices—a little clock with wires and suction cups attached to the ends. Then she saw another unusual tool with blinking lights and reached for that instead. She hovered between the two, then selected the suction cup clock. He didn’t complain when she handed it to him, so she assumed she must have chosen correctly.

Bob closed the panel and screwed it back on. “Looks like my work here is mostly done.” He sat up but made no attempt to move. His gaze lingered on her, causing her stomach to lurch. She’d never believed in silly things like love at first sight like—who did? Oh yes. Probably her sister. But the longer she spent with this man from the future, the more her heart yearned for someone to love her in the present.

Bob brought her fingers to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

As much as she pined to hear such words from a man, it was hard to believe. “But if you loved me, why haven’t you gone back in time to prevent my death?”

He cupped her chin in his hands, his lips so close he could have kissed her. Instead he spoke softly. “Do you know how many dimensions there are? Every choice, every changed action at the last second splits and creates another reality. I’ve probably visited a hundred different dimensions by now and warned you. But I can’t go back and change *my* time.” He enveloped her in an embrace, tucking her head under his chin as they sat side by side. He smelled of brass and WD-40, everyday scents that she knew she was going to now associate with him.

He twined his fingers through her hair and kissed her forehead. Marian wished they could have stayed like that forever.

“Ahem. Are you done tampering with my steam fusion generator?” Dr. Malachlor demanded.

Bob rubbed at a pink scar along his jaw. “Yep.” He pulled out his clipboard and rose, handing it to the doctor. “Just sign here and here and date over here.”

Dr. Malachlor flipped through the pages, signing on the lines. He hesitated, reading over what he was signing.

Bob grabbed the clipboard and shoved it into his toolbox. “No need to read the fine print. It just says all people will return to their proper space-time zones, including but not limited to people you might not want to see.”

“Wait a minute. What does that mean? Who wouldn’t I want to see?” Dr. Malachlor asked.

Bob winked at Marian and strode out the door.

Her heart lurched in her chest. She’d finally met someone—a man who was brilliant and handsome and was in love with her, brainy brunette tendencies and all—and he was leaving for a future where she no longer existed. And she would be alone again. She ran out after him. “Wait! Bob, I need to ask you something.”

“Actually, you prefer to call me Bobby.”

“Um, okay, Bobby. How do I—I mean, when will I meet you?”

“You’ve already informally met me a few times at the hot dog stand. And you’ll meet me again very soon.” He glanced at his watch. “Probably in about fifteen minutes.”

She laughed. “You’re from the future, so aren’t you supposed to keep things like that a secret? You know, so the space-time continuum doesn’t get messed up?”

He shrugged. “That rule book hasn’t been invented yet. Oh, by the way, after I leave, you’re going to need to excuse yourself from the room to evacuate the building so you won’t get caught in the cross-fire of any exploding bolts or anything when the cold fusion generator blows.” He pointed toward the window of the laboratory. A slate gray building could be seen across the street. Within, a figure sat at a desk. “And if you would be so kind to run to the building over there and save my life, I would be grateful. That’s actually how you and I meet. And not

that I'm one to complain, but you always say you wished you had taken the time to brush your hair before meeting me."

"What?" Marian glanced back through the open door. Dr. Malachlor was turning the machine on.

Bob squeezed her elbow.

"So to summarize: go to the ladies room to get Vana—that's where she should be now—brush your hair, evacuate the building, and then go over to my building on the third floor and save your future husband from dying in an inferno."

"Got it," she said.

"Oh, and if you can remember any of this as time begins to correct itself, you may want to get your heart checked." He squeezed her to him and kissed her one last time. "And one more thing, on our first date when I ask you if you want to see my Tesla coil, that isn't an innuendo for sex." He handed her a list. "Don't lose this. It's to remind you of everything you need to do when you get back to your space-time."

She shoved it down into the safety of her corset.

*

Marian blinked against the harsh white light. The reactor hummed all around her. She was inside the machine. She continued squirming out, surprised by how easy it was to move as she wasn't wearing a corset. Dr. Malachlor stood in front of the reactor, muttering to himself as he attempted to clean pie from the controls.

She shook his shoulder. "We have to get out of here. The machine's going to explode."

Dr. Malachlor held up a gooey handful of apples. "Where is that sister of yours? She made a mess with that pie all over the controls."

"Did you hear me? The quantum mechanic said your machine is about to explode!"

“He sabotaged my machine? I knew I shouldn’t have signed those papers.” He wiped his sticky hands on his lab coat and turned toward his computer.

Marian raced into the hall and pulled the fire alarm. The loud chime blared. It wasn’t likely many people were in the building, it being a Sunday morning, but she would take no chances.

Now what was she supposed to do? Her brain felt foggy. Oh! Her sister! She raced down the hall to the public restroom and found Vana applying lipstick. Her eyes were red and swollen.

“You wouldn’t believe what that jerk just said to me in a future space-time,” Vana complained.

“We need to evacuate. The cold fusion machine is going to blow.”

Vana rolled her eyes. “Again?”

Marian glanced at the mirror. Her brown hair looked like a puff ball, sticking out with static around her headband flashlight. She tore it off. “Hey, do you have a hair brush?” She’d left hers in her purse which was still in the lab. She wouldn’t have time to retrieve it if the machine was going to explode soon.

Vana rummaged through her immense Coach purse. Marian grew impatient. She grabbed her sister by the elbow and dragged her toward the stairs. She hoped Dr. Malachlor was already out. Vana continued to look for a brush as they descended. Once out the front door, Marian left her sister on the sidewalk.

“Hey, I found the hairbrush!” Vana shouted after her.

“No time now,” she called over her shoulder as she crossed the street to where Bob worked. “Call Dr. Malachlor on his cell phone to make sure he’s on his way.”

“Where are you going?” Vana asked.

“I need to go save my future husband.”

Vana raised an eyebrow, her posture changing from frazzled to sex goddess in less than two seconds. “Is he cute? Do you need help?”

For all Marian knew, there was another dimension out there where Bob and Vana hooked up. Well, it wasn’t going to happen in this space-time. “My future husband. Not yours.”

*

Marian tried every door on the third floor until one of them opened. She rushed into the cluttered white room, shouting Bob’s name. She heard a man’s voice respond. She ran past a desk and tripped on a box of tools. She dove forward and tried to catch her balance. But her flailing arm caught several fluid-filled beakers on the counter and knocked them over. Her momentum took her toward the electric blue light of a laser cutting into a sheet of metal. Time seemed to slow as she fell. Her breath caught in her throat. She squeezed her eyes closed.

She didn’t experience the searing pain she expected. Something collided with her from the side, knocking her off her feet. Arms reached around her waist and hoisted her onto unsteady legs. She looked up to find Bob—only he was about her own age. He stared down at her, out of breath. He was even dreamier than the older man she’d met, his face young and hair brown and held back in a ponytail. Forgetting he didn’t know her, she touched the smooth edge of his jaw not yet tarnished by a pink scar.

He chuckled and cleared his throat. “It looks like I just saved your life, miss.”

She pulled back, feeling confused. “That’s not the way it was supposed to work. I was supposed to hurry over here so I could rescue you from a burning building.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Who told you that?”

“A you from a different space-time.”

He rubbed his hand over his unblemished jaw and shook his head. “Is that so?”

And you believed me? I hate to tell you this, but I think I may have set you up so I could rescue you and make you fall in love with me. Did it work?”

Marian straightened her overalls, trying to hide her disappointment. “I don’t think so.” She glanced out the window, spotting the only lit room in the building across the street. Dr. Malachlor was no longer at his desk; he’d probably evacuated. He would be pretty ticked off to learn she’d interrupted his work for no reason.

Bob extended his hand. “Well, it’s nice to meet you anyway. I’m Bob. It happens we’re working on a time machine over here. I guess I was successful then?”

Marian stared at the half-built tower of junk piled up against the wall. It didn’t look like much of a time machine to her. “Actually, I like to call you Bobby.”

“Oh, no. I go by Bob.”

She shrugged and left, closing the door behind her. She held her head high, trying not to let her wounded pride show. Here she had thought she was finding her soul mate or something. This entire scenario had probably been some kind of prank. She doubted she even had a... what was it he’d told her was wrong with her? A brain tumor? A heart arrhythmia?

No sooner had she started down the hallway than something exploded behind her, rattling the entire building. Windows of the rooms lining the hall shattered. Marian raised her arms and turned away to shield her face from the burst of glass. Several lights went out. Dry wall and wood flew into the hallway.

A bolt shot into the hallway and skidded past her. Something whooshed by her head, thunking into the wall. She blinked. The hair brush she’d left back in the lab impaled itself halfway into the cream-colored surface. So the cold-fusion reactor had exploded. She wondered if that was what future Bob had meant when he’d said she had wished she’d taken the time to brush her hair—grabbing her hairbrush so it wouldn’t nearly impale her. Or perhaps that was why he’d alluded to her taking her time getting there. He’d tried to change her fate from nearly being struck by a hairbrush, but time had turned out to be just as fixed as those moments when she’d been locked in the backwards pattern. All those dimensions he’d traveled to in order warn her about her future death, had it made a difference? Why hadn’t he written it all down for her?

A thud and a strangled cry came from the room.

The window of the door was broken. A warm glow emanated from inside. Marian raced back in, coughing from the smoke. The fluorescent light flickered before dying out completely, leaving the fire to light her path.

“Bobby?”

No reply. Something inside the supposed time machine was on fire. Pieces had fallen off. She edged around the corner of the counter, gagging from the fumes. A beaker of fluid on the counter popped, peppering her arm through her sleeve with glass. She screamed at the lightning jolt of pain. Momentarily, she staggered before forcing herself onward.

A gaping hole in the wall gave her a ghastly view of the crater in her building across the street. The horror of it distracted her from looking at the debris at her feet. She almost missed Bob in the wreckage.

He lay face down. A metal coil from his time machine lay across his back. She grabbed the coil, but withdrew her hands as the metal seared her palms. Frantically, she looked for something to use to move it. She found a lab coat to shield her hands as she threw the coil aside. Something else popped behind her.

There was no way she could carry him. And there was no way to grab his collar, turn him around and support his head in the enclosed space like they'd taught in that First Aid class. Trusting she'd done the same in future Bob's dimension, she grabbed his ankles and dragged him out into the hall.

Her heart raced so fast it felt as though it skipped beats, the pattern erratic. She placed a hand on her chest. What had he told her about her heart?

A whoosh of fire clouded out of the room, knocking her to the floor. It took a few seconds before she managed to stand and pull Bob to the elevator. Considering she couldn't drag him down the stairs without injuring him worse, she had to trust this was the choice she'd made in the other dimensions that had saved him. Once in, she pressed the ground button before dropping to his side. Immediately, she checked his pulse. It was steady, but she couldn't tell if he was breathing with the way he was laying face down. She rolled him over, but still couldn't tell.

Marian tilted back his chin and plugged his nose. As she pressed her mouth to his, he twitched and jerked his head to the side. A trickle of blood dripped from the cut on the edge of his jaw.

He blinked at her. “Really, we’ve just met.”

She laughed at that. “I’ve known you longer than you’ve known me at this point.”

By the time Marian helped Bob stagger out of the elevator, the paramedics were in the lobby. They took over, questioning her about what had happened and asking if anyone else was inside. Her heart roared in her ears, drowning out the chime of the fire alarm. The erratic thumps sounded off. There was something about that. Something she couldn’t quite remember.

“Oh, my god! Honey, are you all right?” Vana’s voice was distant, even as she shook Marian. “My sister needs medical attention.”

“Are you injured, ma’am? It looks like you’re bleeding,” one of the paramedics said.

Marian placed her hand on her chest, not sure if what she was feeling was love or something else. A poke of paper caused an itch inside of her bra. She slipped a hand under the collar of her overalls and pulled out a folded note. She opened it and read Bob’s reminder. The dizziness cleared from her brain.

“I need you to check me for a heart condition,” she said.

Future Bob might never be able to return to his past to save her and create a different future for himself, but Marian was determined that in this dimension, she would have her quantum mechanic and a happy ending, too.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Ruba Abughaida is a lawyer and a writer. She has published book reviews for *Wales Arts Review*, her travel story "Granada's Arabian Night" was published by *inTravel Magazine* and she has an upcoming flash fiction publication in *The Rusty Nail*. She is currently working on her first novel while simultaneously being in awe of and exploring the delicate intricacies of short stories and poetry. You can follow her on Twitter @RubaAbughaida. "Traveling" represents her first regular-length short story sale.

Traveling

by Ruba Abughaida

Henry and Mary had been married for fifty years. This was long enough to rarely notice the transformations in each other's physical appearance that had come at them with time. They had the advantage of being able to conjure each other up at twenty when they first got married, at thirty when the children were growing up, and even at forty when they reclaimed their lives and took trips on their own.

"It's like you see the essence of each other," their neighbor and oldest friend had said to them on their last wedding anniversary.

On most days, Henry did not notice the individuality of the lines etched into the now thinned skin of Mary's cheeks and forehead, and Mary did not see the thickened skin of Henry's nose and lips, nor the way deep, short strokes raged in mad downward bursts which met in a fold between the bridge of his nose. If, as a result of an argument or an annoyance, their wrinkled and loosened selves came into view and they saw the years that revealed themselves on their bodies, a few seconds of suspended disbelief came through them along with the understanding that they were finally old. They would be disoriented and surprised with this new

outlook until the world became clear again in its unfocused way and they could see as before.

In their familiarity, they moved around each other in synchronized order; their knowledge of each other's habits and requirements always sitting alongside their interactions like signs on a road. This helped Mary particularly before they left for London to see their daughter and Henry insisted in being involved in every detail starting with the packing of the suitcases; his years of managing a workforce seeping into their travel arrangements as he insisted on taking charge of the passports, reminding her of weight restrictions, and packing their medicine pills. This was not uncommon territory and they inevitably argued a few days before a trip, but knowing what to expect gave the proceedings an air of humor which they could laugh about when they were safely on the plane and when Mary re-told the events to her children.

“Baba will never change.” They would all giggle to each other as she would describe the days leading up to their flight.

They had agreed to come to London after Sarah's insistence that they visit under the guise of her wanting them to spend more time with the children. All three of them went along with this story for slightly different reasons that were distinctly their own, but they ultimately joined together in a common purpose, which was their love for Sarah's children. Mary had wanted a trip void of the stress of decision making. She did not want to think about the future but she also didn't want to upset her daughter who was pushing her to make some choices on behalf of both her and Henry. Mary had not, in all the years of their marriage, made a decision that Henry was not a part of or did not lead in some way. When they finally got Henry's diagnosis, these last few weeks in Lebanon had felt like a large balloon was floating over them with a string hanging from it. No one was brave enough to pull on the string, but Sarah was about to, and Mary felt like this thing that had been seen but not mentioned would come crashing down at their feet.

Henry and Mary woke up at dawn while they were at Sarah's house as they did every morning in Lebanon and, although she didn't need it, they tried to help Sarah get the children ready for school. Their father left too early to join in the

morning rush. This was so that he could be home early, he had explained to them when they first arrived.

The children were easy this morning. They got up when they were told to, although Adam asked for “just five more minutes.” The girls didn’t cry when Mary put their school uniforms on or ask to wear something else to school. They all sat down to breakfast with relative calm and ate the cereal placed in front of them. They remembered to speak Arabic and talked with their grandparents easily.

“Remember that I’ll be back after lunch today Mama, like I told you yesterday. I’ll be at the gallery for some meetings until I pick the children up. Will you and Baba be fine on your own?”

“Yes, we’ll be fine.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about us.”

“The weather’s nice today. You could go for a walk. I showed Baba how to turn on the television. There are two remote controls. The gray one is for the Arabic satellite. He knows how to do it.”

“You should have showed me. You know what your father’s like with electronic equipment.”

“Shall I show you quickly before we leave?”

“No. Come on. You’re all going to be late.”

“I have my phone if you need anything. The number’s on the fridge and I’ve saved it in your mobile phone.”

“Sarah, we’re going to be fine. Call us later.”

“Ok. I left Baba’s newspaper on the kitchen table,” she called out as she shuffled the children towards the car. Mary looked into the kitchen and saw that Henry was already reading through Al-Akhbar which had been placed for him in front of the

chair he liked to sit in. He read his newspaper daily even when they were away. Mary realized that he had been having a good few days without any confusing questions about everyday things like how he should shave or what the toothbrush was for.

“Henry, I’d like to go for a walk later. We can have lunch on that street with all the shops. Kings Road, I think it’s called.”

“Ok my love,” he said.

They had their mid-morning Arabic coffee in the living room, the smell of cardamom and spices filling up the lower level of the house. Mary had brought several small bags for Sarah to keep in the freezer. She had also bought a suitcase full of things that Sarah loved and could only get in Lebanon.

‘You’ll never change.’ Henry had laughed when he saw her packing it. “They have food in London you know. Make sure it’s not overweight.”

“They don’t have this food in London,” she said. This was one suitcase’s weight that she was prepared to argue with him over.

“No cheese, Mama.” Sarah had warned them when Mary told her what she was packing.

“They won’t let you bring that in. Anyway, we have labneh here. It’s not as good, but we do have it.”

So Mary had unpacked the tubs of yogurt-like cheese she had asked the store to wrap for travel and divided them between each of her sons. There was no point in keeping them in the fridge until they got back. But she kept the fresh vine leaves, the shrink wrapped plastic containers of olives, the large jar of deep green olive oil pressed at her sister’s farm in the mountains, the bags of nuts from Al-Rifai, the sweets cooked with rose water and the boxes of mastic gum.

“Mary, I’m ready,” Henry called out.

They walked out of the maze of stone houses lining the slightly narrow road until they reached Sydney Street. Mary noticed a gardening shop called the Chelsea

Gardener as they walked down it and she asked Henry to wait for her while she went inside. “You don’t have to come in with me. I won’t be long.”

“I’ll come with you.”

His agreement saddened Mary. She saw that he did anything she wanted to do if they were together, not wanting to disappoint her any more than he felt like he already had. She did not like this, resenting that he was changing the dynamic of their relationship by treading carefully around it as though only seeing a future based on its fragility. She wanted to remind him that they had built a life out of its core, not this glass weight that he was afraid to break. She said nothing instead.

They walked through the enclosed area that housed orchids, lemon trees and several types of cactus. The sound of running water soothed the air as it trickled heavily from the small stone fountain to the left of the room. Mary let her hands fall along the plants and rubbed some of the leaves between her fingers as they walked past and to the outdoor area at the back of the store.

“This is beautiful,” Henry said to her when they stood outside. He had always loved their garden but didn’t have any interest in helping her maintain it.

She led him past hydrangea bushes and tables of potted basil and mint leaves and she touched them again, feeling their roughness before she sniffed the scent from her hands. She stood in front of roses climbing their trellises and read the names and descriptions on the cards dug into the soil. English names that they didn’t use in Lebanon.

“I’d like to buy something for the house. Something that doesn’t need too much care so that the children can help, too.”

“We can stop here on our way back so that we don’t have to carry it now.”

“Yes.”

They walked out of the Chelsea Gardener and past the Vietnamese restaurant down the stairs. Phat Phuc—her Adam had whispered its name last week when Sarah suggested they have lunch there. Even she knew what that meant. They

turned left at the traffic lights until they were on Kings Road walking past Heals and Habitat displaying their garden furniture in the window. They stopped across the street from the Chelsea Town Hall where a wedding had just taken place and watched a photographer take pictures of the bride and groom. The wedding group, who stood in front of them on the stairs, wore a mix of Indian saris and Western clothing and some laughed nervously as the couple kissed for the camera.

“Where shall we stop for lunch?” Henry asked.

He took her hand and held it in his, the way they were used to doing when they walked together.

“There’s a sandwich place that’s further down. We can go there.”

The lunch crowd had started to filter into Pret-a-Manger and Henry and Mary got into the queue behind them. They studied the selection closely and chose roast beef and cheese sandwiches and fruit packets from the fridges that hummed all along the left wall. When they reached the till, Mary asked for a coffee for both of them. They found a table behind the cash registers where a large skylight lit up the seating space and sat side by side eating quietly and deliberately, as though each movement mattered. Mary looked around and thought of how casually dressed everyone else was compared to them. Henry wore a suit as he had done every day for the last fifty years, with beige corduroy trousers, a white shirt layered underneath a black sweater and a light brown suit jacket. It was cold in London although it was June, but they had expected this cooler weather when they packed. Mary had suffered from bunions for years as a result of high heels and genetics, so she wore her closed medical shoes during this trip. Sensibly black and of a stretchy material that would not hit up against the protruding belly-like bone causing it to flare red with pain.

“Am I going to get this, too?” Sarah had asked when Mary began complaining about it.

The doctor had given her surgery as an option, but she did not want to be immobile for months. Henry would not be able to cope with taking care of her now and she did not want him to go from husband to nurse with all that was to come.

Her mother had always warned her about how that would change the rhythm of a marriage, even at their age.

They were sipping their coffee when Mary broke their silence.

“Henry, we should decide what we’re going to do about things.” She faltered with the sentence but pushed on. She needed to do this now when he was coherent. “We have decisions to make about the house and hospital care and other things.” She looked forward only, not wanting to see his face.

“I know.”

“Sarah wants us to come here, to live with her.”

“No.”

“We don’t know how long it will take for things to stop being manageable for both of us.”

“I don’t want you to have to leave the house because of me. We will stay there. In Lebanon.” His sentences sounded shortened.

“I don’t mind moving.” She faltered again.

“The boys are there. They can help,” he said.

“Sarah said that she wants to do this and that the boys will be at work all day. She’s right about that. Their wives won’t help us the way that Sarah will.”

“I don’t want you to lose our home and life there because of me. It’s too much for Sarah to take on with the children and her husband and the gallery.”

“You know that you’re getting worse and I can’t take care of you by myself.” She didn’t like reminding him of his deterioration and she felt a heaviness in her chest as she said the sentence. She didn’t want to cry in front of Henry or all of these strangers staring at computer screens and mobile phones.

Henry heard the inflection in her voice and put a hand over hers. “You don’t have to manage on your own. I’ll arrange for someone to come in and help. They can stay in the house if we need them to. I have good doctors.”

Henry had always been able to speak to his wife about almost anything, unlike so many of his friends who had doled out their sentences drop by drop as though through a syringe. But he found that at this moment, he could not say to her what he really wanted to say and that was that he didn’t want to leave his house, that he was sorry for not taking charge earlier, that for the first time in his adult life he found it difficult to make decisions for both of them, that this disease was awful and he couldn’t face the thought of moving to London so that he could wait to die. He knew that it wasn’t likely, but he believed that he could get better if they just stayed in Lebanon and if that didn’t happen, then he would be eased into the illness surrounded by familiarity.

Mary didn’t agree or disagree with anything he said. Time—that had spread before them as endless, sometimes suffocatingly so—was now a withered sliver of a thing that they grasped onto, praying it would slow down. She busied herself with opening the plastic packet containing a child-sized handful of grapes when her mobile phone rang. Sarah had insisted that they get one a few years ago when she was in Lebanon with the children for the summer. She had even taught them how to Skype from the phone. Mary fumbled in her pocket to look for her glasses. She liked knowing who was calling before she picked up, but this could mean that the ringing would go on for some time until she could locate them. She saw that it was starting to irritate those around them who finally looked up from the screens with numbed-out eyes and giving up; she pressed the green button on the small phone.

“Hello?”

“Who is it?” Henry asked.

“Just a minute Henry.”

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mama. Where are you and Baba?”

“We’re at Pret-a-Manger on Kings Road, having lunch. We had some sandwiches and are eating our fruit now. Did you finish all your work?”

“Yes. I’m going to come and get you now.”

“No, don’t come. We liked the walk and it’s not far from the house.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. We’ll see you a little bit.”

Henry gathered up the plastic wrappers and Mary took them from him to throw away.

It was starting to rain lightly when they walked out of the café and Mary took out the small umbrella that she always kept in her bag in London. Her children used to tease her about how she always had anything they asked her for in there: plasters, tissue, creams, gum, coins for parking, an apple. The “Mary Poppins bag” they used to call it.

“It’s so heavy, it’s going to hurt your shoulder,” Sarah would insist and had tried to get her to clean out her bag and carry a smaller one, but it never lasted. She always went back to the same one, filling it up with all the things that she collected during the day.

Mary didn’t like feeling that her children had to take care of them and she knew that Henry was right in refusing moving to London. She could not take the most important decision of his life away from him whether he would know it or not. He liked to tell the story of how his father did not leave his house until he died there at the age of ninety-seven. “Everyone came to him.” Henry had made that a mantra in their family.

They walked a few steps only when it began to pour with the part of the sky that was directly above them appearing to be on the move.

“Look at that,” Henry said to her.

The umbrella was flimsy and turned itself inside out with a gust of wind that came from behind them.

“Let’s go in here.” Henry said as they passed a shop packed with color. The walls were lined with necklaces and earrings, shiny bracelets and twinkling flip flops. To pass the time until the rain lessened, Mary picked out some bracelets that shone with colored beads.

“The girls will like these.”

By the time they walked back outside, the rain had stopped in a huff as quickly as it had started. They walked slowly back down the Kings road and Henry reminded her about buying a plant. Mary didn’t know how he was the one with the illness when she forgot things more than he did. They said you had to keep your mind active but he hadn’t even stopped working, and not out of necessity, but love of knowledge.

When they walked back into the Chelsea Gardener, she picked out a rubber plant with the help of an older woman who worked there. Mary talked details with her in her broken English and she liked that the woman didn’t seem to mind the slight language barrier. The woman told her that she had a daughter too that she bought low maintenance plants for.

“She works long hours and she travels quite a bit. I couldn’t have bought her something that needed too much attention,” she explained.

“Will you be all right carrying this home?” she asked them both.

“Yes, thank you.”

Henry carried it in the crook of his left arm and took Mary’s hand in the other. A young couple at a bus stop smiled at them and then at each other. Mary had noticed before how something about them made people react in this way. It began to rain again from just above them while white clouds in the distance floated in a rain-free sky.

“This country has very strange weather,” Mary said.

The calm sky further ahead seemed to be observing the gray white light and the rain, separate from it, watching it hysterically fall around them. Even the clouds that had brought it were moving away across the expanse, distancing themselves from such behavior. It reminded Mary of a layered cake that ended in a mess of tears.

They huddled close to each other under the cover of the umbrella, Mary tightening her fingers around Henry's large hand as they walked back to the house.

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HONORABLE MENTION

James Calbraith is a 34-year-old Poland-born writer, foodie and traveller, currently residing in South London.

Growing up in communist Poland, he had his first story published at the ripe age of eight. His debut historical fantasy novel, *The Shadow of Black Wings*, was published in July 2012 on Amazon. Since then, he has published two more volumes in *The Year of the Dragon* series—*The Warrior's Soul* and *The Islands in the Mist*—as well as a standalone fantasy novella, *Dragonbone Chest*.

Transmission

by James Calbraith

In Memoriam Reginald Fessenden, Radio Pioneer

The sun rose small, cold and red over the massive gray brick of the terminal building. The sky was clear and purple. No cloud marred the flat curving horizon. None ever did.

Franklin's tiny truck trudged unhurriedly along the bumpy road, slowing almost to a stop before each mercury mud-filled pothole. The cargo was precious: five hundred freshly laid eggs from Eleanor's farm, snuggled warmly in thermofoam. Enough to cook breakfast for the entire town. The hens were generous this summer.

The truck entered the town's limits, passing under a gate of colorful lights and pendants of metallic foil. The preparations for the Landing Festival—the greatest event of the decade—were in full swing, even though there were still a few days left.

He stopped by the Church of Star Bogart. Franklin liked that small building, with its white-washed walls, titanium-plated roof and the old fifty-inch screen altar inside. His grandfather had helped build it not long after the founding of the colony and Franklin and Eleanor were both given their names in the temple. Even now, with the new larger church built in the town center, he preferred to worship here.

He stopped at the back of the church and honked twice. The vicar's plump, smiling face appeared on the chat screen. "Do you have something for me today, Franklin?" the intercom screeched.

"A dozen blue ones, just as you asked, Betty."

He flicked a switch and the conveyor tube rolled out from his truck, linking it to the kitchen receptacle. A hiss of quickly dissipating steam confirmed the package had been received.

"Oh, they're lovely!" the vicar rejoiced. "Thank you. How is your sister doing?"

"She's fine. It's shearing time so she's even more busy right now. She might not be coming for the regular Show this week."

"I understand. I'll send her a recording later."

"She'll appreciate that."

"I do hope she's not planning on missing the Landing."

"Oh, of course not. She's looking forward to it greatly. We all are."

"That's good to hear. Give my regards to Shirley and the boys."

"Sure. See you tomorrow, Betty."

*

The airlock light turned to green and the round door clicked open. Franklin took off the helmet and entered the house.

Shirley's face, framed by a storm of golden hair he so loved, was sad and tired. He guessed immediately what had happened.

"What did he do this time?" he asked, taking her hands in his. A cup of cold tea remained untouched on the table.

"He cut his hair," she said, holding back the sobs. "I... I don't know what to do anymore."

"I'll go talk to him."

"You've talked to him a hundred times!"

"This time I'll *really* talk to him."

She looked at him, frightened.

"Don't hurt him!"

"Of course I won't!" he scoffed. "That would be out of character. Why don't you make us a new pot of tea, dear."

He knocked on the door of his firstborn son's room. "Elvis? Can I come in?"

There was no answer.

"I'm coming in anyway. You have thirty seconds."

He counted to thirty and pressed his master key to the lock. The door slid open. The room was dark. Elvis was lying on the bed motionless with headphones on his head. Franklin sighed and flicked the stereo off.

"What're you listening to, son?" he asked when Elvis grumpily raised himself to sit, "Hendrix? The Doors?"

He knew the answer would not make him happy. His son's hair was cut short and his clothes were dark and plain—a grey shirt and black trousers.

"Stanton's Fourth Movement."

“*The Absence of New*,” Franklin read out the tag. “Got it from a warp-ship?”

His son nodded.

Franklin sighed again and sat down on the bed next to the boy.

“I don’t understand you, son,” he started. “why don’t you want to follow the Great Circle? I would have thought you’d love it in this period. The Summer of Love was all about the young people. Free love, rock, drugs... you haven’t even touched your stash in a week.”

“I don’t need artificial stimulation. It numbs the senses.”

“All right, I respect that. Not everyone has to take them. It’s not the obligatory part of the character. But what about all the rest? The music? The clothes? Can’t you at least wear the jeans when you’re at home? Trousers are trousers.”

“They’re not even real jeans, dad. They’re plastic. And they chafe.”

“Their symbolic meaning counts more than what they’re made of. And the discomfort helps us reflect on how the Stars had suffered.”

“I like *these* clothes better.”

“Your mother made you those jeans. Do you really want to make her sad?”

Elvis shrugged in silence. Franklin lost his patience.

“Dammit, young man! This is my home and you will obey my rules!”

“You’re slipping into the wrong decade,” Elvis reminded him with a mocking smile. “Why don’t you whip out your leather belt while you’re at it.”

Franklin grit his teeth in helpless anger. He stood up and headed outside. Suddenly, he got an idea and turned around.

“We’ll be having a proper Observance tonight after supper. It’s been too long since we had one.”

“Daaad... not today,” moaned Elvis, “I’ve got homework to do...”

“No discussion. I expect you to wear proper clothes and behave as befits the character. We can’t do anything about the hair, but... I guess you can be a Vietnam recruit.”

A flick of the stereo’s switch was the boy’s only response.

*

The small, 14-inch home altar was decorated with plastic flowers and family photos. A bowl of quinoa gruel stood in front of it as an offering to the Stars that were about to grace the screen.

“Hurry, dear, we’re almost ready,” Franklin shouted towards the kitchen.

“I’ll be right there,” answered Shirley.

A little boy in pink pajamas sat down before the screen. John Fitzgerald, Franklin’s younger son, was only six and did not need to conform to the character yet.

Franklin fiddled with some of the recorder’s knobs, adjusted the photos, touched the flowers. Everything seemed ready.

“I wish he’d hurry up,” he said with his eyes raised towards the ceiling.

“He didn’t come down for supper,” said Shirley. “Are you sure he’ll want to come for this?”

“He did say he had lots of homework. Let’s give him a few minutes more. He wouldn’t dare miss the Observance.”

They sat in silence in front of the screen. Franklin recited Fessenden’s Prayer in his head one last time. It was his favorite passage from the Early Recordings.

One, two, three, four

Is it snowing where you are, Mister Thiessen?

If it is,

Telegraph back and let me know.

Such simple words, and yet so much meaning. First, counting to four calmed the mind. Then came the poignant question: *is it snowing where you are?* Are you in trouble? Do you need help? And at last, the promise of contact. The Transmission brought hope to the scattered, stranded remnants of humanity. We may be all snowed under, separated from each other by measureless expanses of time and space, but as long as the Transmission lasts we are all bound together. *Telegraph back and let me know.*

“Daddy?” John Fitzgerald’s voice snapped him out of the contemplation. “Why is that red light blinking?”

Franklin’s eyes opened and followed his son’s pointing finger. The alarm light was, indeed, blinking repeatedly, but somebody had turned the volume slider down to zero so that the danger was not noticed too soon. The red light indicated loss of pressure and temperature somewhere in the house. He knew exactly what it meant.

Elvis had left the building.

*

The register showed that the roof airlock had been breached almost half an hour before John Fitzgerald had spotted the alarm. The boy could have been anywhere by now.

Franklin cursed, climbing into the truck. He was more worried than angry. Being outside at this time of night was dangerous even for someone wearing a suit. And he wasn’t sure if the boy had managed to suit up properly before running away. It may have been the middle of July according to the Transmission Calendar, but this remote planet knew only the eternal winter. If something went wrong with Elvis’s suit, the boy would freeze within minutes...

Franklin dared not think about such things. The boy was not stupid. He would probably just hide at one of his friends' for a while. The nearest of his school colleagues lived half a mile away and Franklin decided to check there first.

In a way, his son's behavior made him proud. Being a rebel teenager who runs away from home was, after all, all part of the character, whether Elvis realized it or not. There was simply no escaping the Great Circle. The boy must have realized it at last.

"Hi there, Jesse," Franklin spoke to the intercom. A dark, sleepy face appeared on the screen. "You wouldn't happen to have seen my son around your place tonight?"

"Oh, it's you, Frank. I'll check with the kids. Hold on a moment."

Jesse returned a minute later.

"Sorry, they haven't seen him. Anything the matter?"

"No, it's alright. Don't worry."

"Take care."

One, two, three four. Is it snowing where you are? Franklin repeated the prayer.

You bet it is, Mister Fessenden, he answered, tapping his fingers nervously on the steering wheel.

*

The hills glinted silver in the light of the sun. The truck climbed to the top of the highest peak and stopped. Franklin opened the cabin and climbed out. He raised the binoculars to his eyes, surveying the valley.

Three days had passed since his son had gone missing. Elvis must have been hungry and tired now, hiding away for so long. His suit was still reporting life signs, so at least Franklin didn't have to worry about his son's health. But the

suit's location beacon had been hacked or broken. How long had the boy been preparing this escape?

Franklin wondered what he had done wrong. He did not think of himself as a bad parent. He had always tried to strike a good balance between leniency and strictness. Perhaps he had been too lenient. He shouldn't have let the boy play around the warp-ships terminal so much. The townspeople had always tried to avoid the ships and their crews. The spacemen were a bad influence on the colony's youth, with their decadent philosophies and so-called "news" they would bring from far-away places. As if anyone cared what happened on some other world!

The small crew at the terminal had been informed of the boy's disappearance as well, but Franklin wondered if they would really report anything. Perhaps they were in league with Elvis all this time... perhaps they wanted to recruit him to become one of their spacemen?

No. Franklin dismissed these thoughts with a shake of his head. This was forbidden. The warp-ships came and went, transporting necessary supplies between the worlds, but they could never take anyone away from the colony. Such were the rules.

But if his son was not hiding at the terminal, where was he? There were very few places a human being could hide for this long. Beyond the line of the hills to the east lay a featureless flat plain of shimmering mercury ice. To the west were the hydro farms and energy plants, maintained automatically. A human presence in one of those concrete-domed buildings would be detected in an instant.

He studied the town through the binoculars. It was the eve of the Landing, and almost every roof had been decorated with shining lights. Every home except his own. Franklin didn't have time to put up the lights, too busy with the search. The plain black roof stood out like a sore thumb among the rainbow myriad of light-bulbs his neighbors had prepared so painstakingly. He felt a pang of guilt. He was disrupting the communion.

And he would have disrupted it even further if he'd failed to join the congregation at Star Bogart for the Show. This was simply unacceptable, a shame for him and his family. Why did Elvis have to choose this of all weeks to run away? Why couldn't he have waited at least a few days, until after the Transmission?

The Transmission, he realized. Of course. There was one more place he hadn't checked. Far away on the other side of the hills...

*

The enormous dish of the Transmitter cast a long elliptical shadow over the ice plain. The giant antenna picked up signals from the Old Earth, amplified them and sent further into space, towards worlds even more distant and remote than their little frozen orb. This was the holiest place on the planet, and the last place he would have expected his son to choose as a refuge.

He found the boy inside the empty control room. Like the energy domes and farms, the transmitter was fully automated, but it had a small, airtight space provided for the emergency repair crew. There were also some supplies stored in the cupboard. When Franklin entered, Elvis was boiling a cup of dried noodles over a heat plate.

"I see you've set yourself up nicely," Franklin remarked, studying the room. There was even a make-shift bed in the corner. So that's where my thermofoam's been disappearing to, he thought.

"I've been coming here for weeks after school."

"I thought you were playing with your friends."

The boy shrugged. "All they wanted to play was Hamburger Hill and Zip to Zap."

"And what did you want to play?"

"I don't know. Something *new*. I got this game from the spacemen but I can't figure out how it works," Elvis said in a whining voice, pointing to a small box abandoned on the control panel. Franklin picked it up and studied the array of buttons, flicks and lights for a while, but couldn't make any sense of it. This was

the problem with all the *new* stuff. Nobody understood it any more. Not even the makers, he suspected.

“Come back home, son. Today is the Landing. Everyone is waiting for you.”

“I don’t care for your useless rituals. What does it matter for us what day is it today? Will the sun shine any warmer? Will the mercury melt? Will the food taste better? These are the important things, not the Transmission.”

“You’re wrong. It is important. Not only to your mother and me, but to all of humanity. The Transmission is what makes us civilized.”

“Being creative is what makes us civilized.”

Franklin laughed at the blasphemy. “Humanity is thousands of years old. Do you really think there’s something left to create?”

“Then why bother? Why not just live our lives as we want to, without repeating everything in an endless cycle?”

Franklin sat down on the thermofoam bedding and took off a glove to scratch himself on the nose.

“The Great Circle binds us all,” he replied, echoing the words of the Creed.

“Scattered on the lonely planets, tens and hundreds of light years apart, we take comfort in the knowledge that somebody out there at the same relative time is watching the same show as us. Just imagine, son—the ancient Stars on the Old Earth are now all sat down in front of their screens, preparing to watch the Landing, just like we are. Doesn’t that stir something inside you?”

“But all those people are long dead!” Elvis protested. “And there are new generations on Earth, still alive, still *making things*! You could board a warp-ship today and see them all tomorrow, talk to them, shake their hands!”

“And are these people more real, more relevant to you and me than the ones on the screen? Look outside, son.” Franklin gestured towards the window. The sky was already dark and the first bright dots started to twinkle against the blackness. “Look at the white star over the horizon. That light may have been born hundreds

of years ago, but it's coming to us *now*. To us, it is *all* new. This is the first time we see it."

He waited until Elvis nodded, reluctantly, acknowledging his words.

"That toy you have here—on Earth it's already a month old, or more. I bet it's out of fashion already. Like all the old Shows. But on this planet nobody has yet seen what we are going to see today. The Transmission is happening as we speak. Every second of it brings something different."

"Only because the warp-ships are not allowed to carry the recordings."

"Recordings..." Franklin scoffed. "What good are they when you have the real thing? Did you know the first tapes of the Landing had gone missing not long after? Nobody saw them again until Kepler-16 received the original SSTV signal and transcribed it. So much for your 'recordings.'"

"I... I didn't know that," Elvis said, for the first time looking genuinely interested.

"Oh yes. This is one of the lesser known miracles of the Transmission—and we'll be witnessing it tonight all over again. Now, would you really want to miss something like that?"

He tried to smile the warmest, most encouraging smile he could muster. Shirley should be here instead of me, he thought. She always knows better what to say.

Elvis looked at the stars again in silence, then at the clock in the middle of the control panel.

"It's too late. The Eagle has landed."

"We can still make it if we hurry," Franklin said quietly. He knew there would have been a several hours long pause between the Descent and the Walk.

"Alright, dad. Let's go."

*

The church hall was dark, stuffy and silent as the men and women gathered inside observed the grainy picture on the giant screen. Nothing yet moved, all they could see was a metal ladder gleaming against a black sky.

“It’s... the quality is so much better!” Elvis gasped, and then fell silent, realizing what he had just admitted to.

Franklin said nothing. He had long suspected his son of watching smuggled recordings of the Future Passed. It didn’t matter now. This was the best possible night for him to see the Truth of the Transmission.

“Yes, son. I told you the original signal was lost for centuries. Now, watch carefully. It’s starting.”

A white, shadowy silhouette appeared on the ladder, climbing slowly down. The vicar leaned over the control panel to strengthen the signal and turn up the volume. The words started breaking through the background noise.

Franklin watched the ancient astronaut transfixed, his heart filled with emotion. They were all witnessing a true miracle. As the radio waves reached the receiver, carrying the ancient message from the Old Earth’s loyal satellite, and the speakers crackled with the sound of the first words uttered from the surface of another world, he stood up, his eyes filling with tears. The others stood up also, even his son, caught up in the moment.

“*Okay, I’m going to step off the LM now,*” said the man on the screen. In his great white space suit he resembled an angel calling them from a distant past, his words an Annunciation of the great future awaiting the humankind. *Nine, eight...* as the man stepped down onto the grey dusty surface, Franklin counted out the seconds before the next sentence. He looked down at Elvis—his son’s eyes were as glued to the screen as everyone else’s. This is it, boy, he thought. This is your *new* thing. No matter how many times you’ve seen it before, this really is the first.

...two, one. The speakers crackled again.

“That’s... one small step for man,” the white angel spoke, *“one... giant leap for mankind.”*

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