



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #11
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**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS MISUNDERSTAND AN
IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION OF SOME KIND...**

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Big-Time Changes at OTP

It's hard to know where to begin.

First, the web site has been reconfigured to display at a resolution of 1,024 x 768 because, let's face it, 800 x 600 is ridiculous nowadays.

Second, we now have a bookstore. It has three sections, but I'd like it to have four: books recommended by our readers. Tell us why you think we should put a specific book in our store, and we'll seriously consider it. We'd like to hear more objective reasoning than "I love this book," however. Tell us why you think our readers and writers would benefit from owning it.

Third, we've raised our prize funds. First prize is now \$180 US, second is \$140, third is \$100, and honorable mentions pay \$40. It'll be quite a while, I think, before the rates go up again, but our funding permits it, so we're doing it.

[Editor's note: by request of the author, the "Guest Writer" story originally published in this issue has been removed from its archived edition. The author is trying to sell it elsewhere. So our the paragraph that used to be here, which talked about the guest writer story, no longer makes sense.]

What's NOT different is, Tarl's still writing cartoons and Matt Howarth's still drawing them. This time, we explore the difficulty inherent in communication.

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #11 of *On The Premises*!

Keep writing and reading,

Tarl Roger Kudrick
co-publisher of *On The Premises* magazine

Cartoons!

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

Virtually every joint project that has ever failed can at least partly blame bad communication. The *Mars Polar Lander's* loss in the late 1990's is just one example. That's right—it's easier to build a machine that can fly to Mars than it is to communicate with it effectively. From there it's only a small step to conclude that rocket science might, in fact, be less difficult than clear communication.

Not convinced? Well hang on tight, because veteran cartoonist Matt Howarth illustrated six examples from Tarl's life that provide...

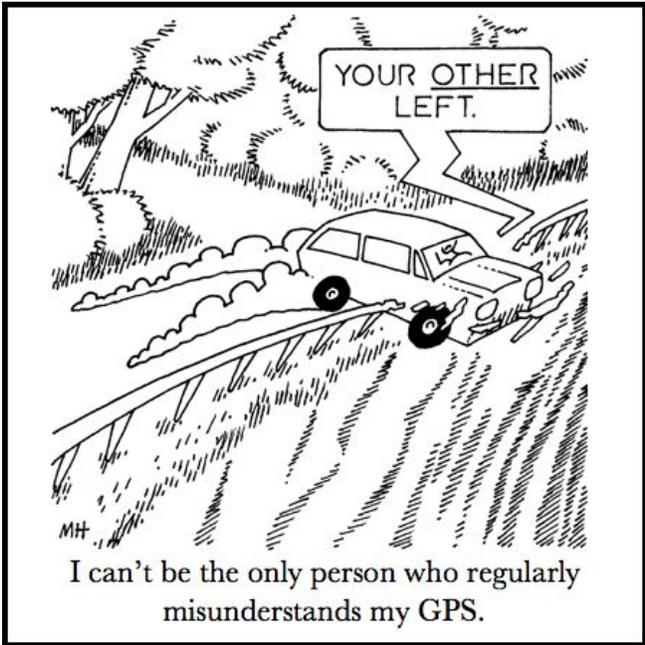
Further Evidence that Communication is the Most Difficult Activity Human Beings Routinely Attempt



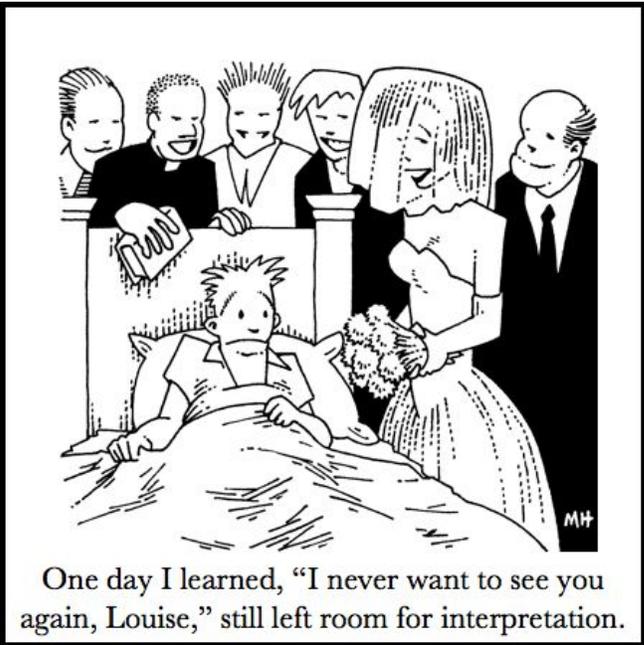
My parents and I had different ideas about what “being treated like an adult” meant.



Then there was my infamous mistake at the “Dress Like a Mobster” party.



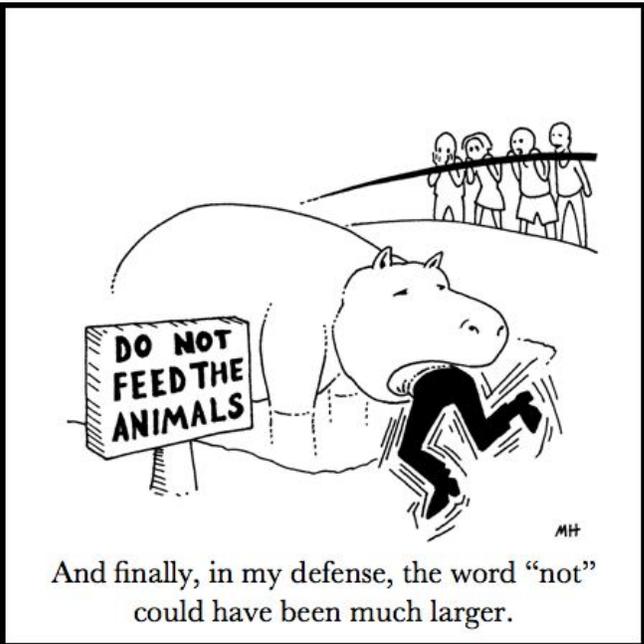
I can't be the only person who regularly misunderstands my GPS.



One day I learned, "I never want to see you again, Louise," still left room for interpretation.



Then my client said, "I wanted a giant *poster* to advertise my funeral home."



And finally, in my defense, the word "not" could have been much larger.

FIRST PRIZE

Ken was a programmer before he became a lawyer, and he thinks that legal drafting can benefit from some software coding practices. His fiction has appeared in *F&SF*, *Strange Horizons*, *Science Fiction World*, *Writers of the Future*, and *The Dragon and the Stars*, among other places. He lives with his wife and daughter in Massachusetts. His web site is at <http://kenliu.name/stories/>.

The Phoenix

by Ken Liu

Guojie's oldest sister, Guohua, had gotten up an hour before to make breakfast for the family and to prepare his lunch. By the time she gently woke him, the boy's parents and his other two older sisters had all tiptoed out of the one bedroom they all slept in, ate, and quietly left for the fields so that Guojie could sleep a little longer.

He ate quickly. There was an egg and a cup of milk. He was the only one allowed these "brain foods."

"Study hard," Guohua said to him, as she handed over his school satchel, filled with his books and a lunch made from fresh steamed *mantou* and pickled mustard. She smiled at him in the starlight before sunrise. "Remember that you are a phoenix."

There were no chairs in the classroom at Shantoucun. Each child was expected to bring his own seat. Every morning, ten-year old Li Guojie had to make a decision: to walk the five kilometers to school with the heavy three-legged footstool made

of red jujube wood (and to carry it back at the end of the day if he didn't want it to be stolen), or to go to school without it and stand through six hours of lessons.

Today, he opted to leave the footstool behind. He wanted to enjoy the light walk to school, though he knew that he would pay for it later in class. But Guohua's words echoed in his mind. Even without the footstool, he felt he was carrying a heavy weight.

Years ago, his father had gone away to Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, to work in the construction boom and send money home. But his leg was broken in an accident and never healed properly. Now there was no choice but for the father to limp to the fields everyday with his wife and three daughters to try to eke out a living while grain prices fell year after year as the city folk bought rice imported from America.

There was only one hope for the family: Guojie had to go to college to get a good-paying job in the cities. His sisters needed dowries and his parents needed support.

*

When Guojie was born, the entire family had gone to pray at the Daoist temple on the other side of the mountain, two hours away by donkey cart. His father paid the old priest with the last of their savings for a good fortune for the boy.

The old priest wrote down Guojie's hour of birth on a slip of paper and burned it in a brazier. He prayed, chanted, and danced, while two apprentices helped him carry his magical staff and compass. As he danced, a bamboo divination slip fell out of the bundle of identical slips tied to his waist. The old priest stopped and handed the slip to Guojie's father.

"The Life of a Phoenix." Guojie's father read the characters slowly. But he had gone to school for only a few years when he was a boy, and he could not recognize all the characters on the slip.

The spirits will let me understand what I am supposed to understand, he thought. He skipped over the unknown characters and read only those that he knew: "From mountains to big cities. Golden. Dazzling. Prosperity. Happiness!"

The family could hardly contain their joy. “You are a phoenix!” The little girls danced around the baby boy and sang.

“A fortune is not a prediction of the future,” the old priest said. “It merely tells you what is possible if you strive hard. Toil is ever the fate of the poor.”

The family nodded, but they gazed lovingly on their baby boy. If he studied very hard, he would carry them all.

*

Guojie stood at his desk—a posture that had the advantage of keeping him awake—while the teacher tried to stuff knowledge into his brain. He was fast becoming a collection of the most random facts the world had ever assembled.

In the rural hinterlands of Gansu Province, thousands of miles from China’s coastal metropolises, schools made do with what they had. The textbooks were old. The math problems, for example, were drafted during the Cultural Revolution and featured word problems about pig iron.

A donation from some kind Americans through a charity had allowed the purchase of a set of books on modern knowledge, and the teacher, free of the influence of modern educational theories, proceeded to make the students memorize them. After memorizing rainfall figures in the Amazon and the special products of each of the Mid-Atlantic states of America, Guojie spent the rest of the morning memorizing sample programs written in Microsoft Visual Basic. It did not matter that no one in class, including the teacher, had ever used a computer.

What chance did children like Guojie have, when the children of the cities have cram schools, teachers with real degrees, literate parents, classrooms with chairs, and other wonders? Every year, fewer students from the rural hinterlands made it into college in China.

But the Li family’s faith in the power of education to fulfill Guojie’s destiny was unshakable, and the boy persevered.

*

Guojie's grades qualified him for the county middle school. This meant that he had to leave home and live in a dorm at the county seat with other children whose homes were also in remote villages. The children cooked their own meals, and Guojie volunteered his steel washbasin to be used as a communal wok, a sacrifice that everyone cheered.

One night, while Guojie and his friends stir-fried some bean sprouts with tofu in the schoolyard, chatting and laughing all the while, an American couple carrying huge backpacks passed by. The children and the couple stopped and stared at each other. The children's faces were covered in soot from the coal fire used for cooking, and their clothes were patchy and dirty.

"That is really sad," the American woman said.

The man frowned at the coal stoves. "That's a lot of CO₂." They took out cameras to take pictures of the children and their dinner.

"They don't smile," said the woman. "Why don't they smile? In Vietnam they smile."

Guojie could not understand their language, but the American couple, even though they were sweaty and dirty from hiking all day, radiated such a sense of confident, superior sophistication that Guojie instinctively felt ashamed. He had glimpsed the wider world, and its pity and disapproval needed no translation.

*

"Education is the only path out of poverty," Guojie read in his textbook. "It opens you to a new world."

Guojie's test scores were good enough to get him into one of the better high schools in the provincial capital, where the teachers had real degrees and there were a few computers. He finally learned what Microsoft Visual Basic was. He found that he had a talent for math and programming—perhaps those early feats of memorization had some benefit after all. He observed his city classmates carefully and took the bus across the city to buy similar-looking clothes from

used-clothing peddlers. He learned to imitate their accent, to sit the way they did, to eat without making too much noise or licking the bowl.

Boarding at the high school also meant that he could go home only for the major holidays. This was fine with him, since going home made him anxious. He was growing used to the way he spoke and sat and ate in the city, and felt out of place at home. He could no longer imagine a life laboring in the fields or the factories along the coast. Looking at his sisters and parents through his new eyes, he was embarrassed by their lack of refinement, and ashamed of his embarrassment. It was easier not to go home.

He felt like the fish with legs in the diagrams illustrating evolution. The water was no longer the place for him, but he did not yet know how to climb fully onto land. College was now not merely a dream, but the only path forward, and he studied out of a sense of desperation. He did not know what he would do if he were to fail at *gaokao*, the college entrance examination. He needed college. He *had* to become the phoenix.

The more he learned, the fewer choices he felt he had.

*

His parents held a great feast: Guojie was the first boy to go to college—and the University in Beijing!—in the whole county. It was as if he had taken first place on the Imperial Examinations in the days before the Republic. Guojie tried to enjoy the feast, but he could not. Everything around him—the wrinkles on his oldest sister's face (a girl her age in the cities had the benefit of face cream imported from Korea and Japan), the broken shingles that they had no money to replace, the debts carefully recorded in ledgers hidden at the bottom of the drawer in his parents' cabinet, under a pile of shirts and pants thin as muslin from repeated washing—reminded him of how much his family had sacrificed. He did not get into college, *they* did.

He left home for the train to Beijing as soon as he could, as though he were fleeing some disease.

He walked through the campus of the University, and looked around in amazement. In the basement of the new library, the computer lab awed him: hundreds of bright, white carrels with gleaming monitors, the soft hum of the air conditioning and the click-clack of keyboards providing the background music for a dream. Had he made it? If he simply kept on doing what he had done to get this far, would he get his degree and get that mythical job, the secure perch from which he would lift up his family?

College life was nothing like how he had envisioned it. The students, almost all from the big cities, had studied all their lives for the college entrance examination. But now that they were in, they decided that they could just coast through and pick up their diplomas at the end. So they spent most of their time debating philosophy, going to nightclubs and karaoke bars, and pairing up. To Guojie, they seemed like an entirely different species.

His roommate, a Shanghainese, held a party in their room for some of his Shanghai friends. Guojie sipped beer as he listened to them. They discussed bands in underground clubs and American books. They talked about avant-garde sculptors and ski trips in Europe and Japan. They talked about piano lessons and cram schools they had gone to together. They talked about freedom. They talked and laughed about sex, lots of sex.

Nobody mentioned a family of six sleeping in the same bed, sisters that needed dowries, crippled fathers and aging mothers weighed down by a mountain of debt incurred to send their son on a desperate gamble. Guojie had nothing to add to their conversation, and their talk began to irritate him.

“You are from the countryside, right?” A girl asked.

Guojie nodded. “Poorest county in Gansu.”

Other students from the countryside who had made it this far lied about where they were from and disguised their accents. Sometimes Guojie did the same thing. But now Guojie was drunk and his accent slipped. Also, he no longer wanted to feel like he belonged with his roommate’s friends.

“You are so lucky,” the girl said.

Guojie looked at her.

“Look at us and our lives of privilege, far away from the noble simplicity of the peasants and their daily toil. Our parents, blinded by their pursuit of vulgar, material success, don’t understand our ideals and our modern yearnings, and so we become cynical. But you and your family still live a life of authenticity that we can only dream of.”

One of the boys made a rude sound. Guojie remembered that the boy had boasted that he preferred to only read books in English. “Don’t be an idiot and romanticize poverty. Being poor does *not* make you noble. It just keeps your horizons close and your spirits mean—I don’t mean you, Guojie, since you’re obviously an exception to have made it here—but the poor are simply pawns for those who want to use them, like a certain political party in our strange country.”

Guojie imagined this girl, with her permed hair and white teeth, her Japanese perfume and American jeans, trying to experience the noble virtues of a bowl of dirty drinking water in Shantoucun. He imagined this boy, with his smooth hands and his easy certainty, looking over and judging the bent figures of his parents and sisters in the fields with contempt. He wanted to laugh, and then he sat on his hands so that he would not give in to the urge to punch the boy as hard as he could.

*

Guojie’s major was computer engineering, a path supposed to lead to employment with the foreign firms that were setting up offices in China. They offered the best pay and the best benefits.

Doggedly, he continued to work hard, not out of an innate interest in the subject, but to seek the peace of being completely absorbed in a programming challenge. During those moments, he could temporarily forget his family and their faith in his fortune. It was a stupid superstition, he knew, but they had all invested too much to stop believing now.

He worked hard because, unlike his classmates, if he did not have the best grades or win the competitions, he could not count on an uncle or a family friend to make

the right calls with the right people to open up doors. If he wanted to be the phoenix, all he could count on was himself.

*

He met Mingli in the computer lab one night. She was trying to access some pictures posted by a friend who had married an American and settled in California. The site was overseas and blocked and all she got was an error message.

He glanced at her as he walked by her workstation. She had wide eyes (no glasses—rare among the women who made it to the University), a small nose, straight, long black hair that draped down past her shoulders. Her eyebrows were furrowed in disappointment. He did not think she was extraordinarily beautiful.

She looked up, caught his eye, and he stopped. She shrugged and smiled. Something in her smile reminded him of the fragrance of *huaishu* flowers: sweet, unassuming, fresh.

He sat down next to her and showed her how to get around the net filters. Together, they looked at the pictures of her friend and her new baby. Then he asked her if she was hungry, and if so, perhaps she wanted to get some sweet dumplings with him from the vendors along the street just outside the campus.

Mingli's father was a professor of history while her mother used to be a stage actress. She had a younger sister still in middle school. When she was younger, her father had been a visiting scholar in America, and she had spent three years overseas. She majored in economics. "Have you been to North Carolina?" she asked. "Scuba diving there is incredible."

From a certain angle, her life seemed like the lives of the girls who were his roommate's friends. But because she did not act as though their different childhoods and experiences had any moral implications or deeper meanings and because she did not pretend to be troubled by her privileged life (which was really just a way to boast), Guojie felt at ease with her. She was very beautiful, he decided.

As they shared a bowl of sweet dumplings, he told her about a favorite memory from his childhood in Shantoucun. In early summer, clusters of white flowers, like strands of firecrackers, hung heavy on the boughs of the *huaishu*, the pagoda trees that lined the road home from school. Often, Guojie climbed these trees to pick the flowers, which made a nice snack. They tasted sweet and cool, and their light fragrance refreshed him. After eating them, he would have the strength to carry the heavy footstool back home to his family, patiently waiting at home.

“Lovely,” Mingli said. “I never did that as a kid. The *huaishu* here in the city are far too polluted for anyone to dare eat the flowers.”

Beijing offered many opportunities for dates for a couple without money. They went to art exhibits, unregistered music clubs, showings of banned movies in abandoned warehouses in the suburbs—the windows taped over with black paper and everyone huddled in the dark, hearts thumping, ready to bolt and scatter to the winds at the first sign of the authorities. They went to wine tastings and hitched rides from wealthy friends who had cars so that they could go on picnics far away from the polluted air of Beijing. Most of these were activities that Guojie had had no interest in before meeting Mingli, indulgences that he had thought belonged only to frivolous people like his roommate. But it was different with Mingli. He enjoyed doing these things with her, hearing her talk about what they were seeing and hearing. The world, filtered through her senses, took on new colors and filled with new sounds for him. For the first time, Guojie began to think that words like “philosophy” and “ideal” and “aesthetics” meant something, and were not just empty chatter that belonged to those who had no responsibility.

He was afraid to ask her what she saw in him. Once, while he was walking her home, she said, “I like hearing you talk about your family. You’re different from the other boys. You’re a grownup.” He repeated her words to himself like a mantra on the way back to his room.

He no longer thought about his family each day, and sometimes he felt guilty about that. He comforted himself by thinking that he would have to refocus on his family soon enough, when he graduated. The time he spent with Mingli was something like a vacation, a break from reality, a time when he could smoke

cigarettes and think about the word “freedom” as a promise and a right, not a fantastic luxury.

*

For the Lunar New Year break, he asked Mingli to go home with him. It wasn't until she said yes that he realized that he'd been holding his breath. He was happier at that moment even than when he received the letter from Intel earlier that month, offering him a job at their gleaming new research facility.

They squeezed their way onto the train, packed so tight that eight people sat in seats meant for four, and the aisles were as full of bodies as the subway trains during rush hour. They were participating in the legendary *chunyun*, the most massive annual migration of humanity in the history of the world, as hundreds of millions—migrant workers, students, businessmen—all over China went home for the biggest holiday of the year. She told him she'd never taken a train ride in conditions like this, but she only smiled at him when he looked at her anxiously. They sat on their suitcases in the middle of the aisle, and she fell asleep leaning against him, her head on his shoulder.

After the twenty-hour train ride, they rode a bus for another two hours before transferring to a donkey cart that would carry them for the final hour's journey over the circuitous mountain paths that led to Shantoucun. Mingli treated the trip as an adventure. “This is more comfortable than the time I rode a donkey to the bottom of the Grand Canyon,” she said, laughing. The driver of the donkey cart glanced back at her, startled at her Beijing accent and her loud laugh, like a girl in a TV drama.

Listening to Mingli as they neared his home, Guojie felt, for the first time, that he really had accomplished what his family wanted. He had gone to college and now found a job that paid well. He had gone out into the world and brought back to the mountains this beautiful, sophisticated woman from Beijing, this woman who had lived in America, who read the *Wall Street Journal* in English each morning, and whose skin was smooth like pearls and smelled like orchids. He wanted to show her off. She was a princess, and he was the phoenix who brought her home.

His parents and sisters tearfully welcomed him. They fussed over him and asked him an endless series of questions without waiting for his answers. They brought out plates heaped high with food to cover the table.

But they didn't know what to do with Mingli. She wasn't married to Guojie, so she had no status in the family. The idea of a "girlfriend" and the rules around it were understood in the cities, but this was Shantoucun. Awkwardly, the family set a place for her at the table, next to Guojie, and everyone spoke carefully until eventually the conversation died.

He saw that Mingli was trying but failing to connect with his sisters and parents. She was like a tropical bird that had been brought to visit a family of penguins in Antarctica. His journey from Shantoucun to Beijing had taken a decade, and Mingli was making the reverse trip in a single day.

Guojie realized that his family was afraid of embarrassing themselves or him in front of her, and they resented him for it.

The happiness that had accompanied him on the donkey cart just a few hours ago dissipated. He felt like a stranger in his own home, but unlike Mingli, he had no excuse.

*

They were married in a small ceremony attended only by her parents and sister. Weddings in Beijing were generally expensive, gaudy, and confusing. There were many things about them that annoyed him, like the way so many couples preferred a church wedding when they weren't Christian and the many unspoken rules that dictated the amount that must be spent on the banquet. But most of all, he did not want himself or his family to be the center of attention. He did not want to hear what might be whispered as people stared at a family of peasants, the family of the ugly duckling who somehow pretended to be a phoenix and managed to land a princess.

He was glad that Mingli didn't see the need for a lavish wedding. They didn't have time for a honeymoon either, as he had to start working right away.

“We’ll save up for a really grand trip,” Mingli said. “Let’s go to Australia, and we’ll go diving in the Great Barrier Reef. It’ll be much more fun than a noisy banquet with people we don’t know.”

He nodded. He was pleased by the fact that the money would be saved. But the idea of spending it on a trip was ridiculous. He needed to save money for much more important things. Vacation was over. It was time for real life.

A letter arrived from home. His parents wrote about the need to pay off the school debts. That was the only explicit request for money. They also wrote about the beautiful houses that other children in the village had built for their parents, about his sisters’ wedding plans, about distant relatives who had shown up to congratulate them on Guojie’s new job and fancy wife, and who told tales of their own money troubles.

Guojie read through the letter, and each hint felt to him like another weight added to his back. His shoulders sagged as he calculated how much money it would take to satisfy these hints, and he shuddered with fear and weariness.

He explained to Mingli about the need to save, about the hints in his parents’ letter. “We have responsibilities,” he said.

Mingli was silent for a while, and then nodded. “This is what I love about you,” she said.

He looked at Mingli’s beautiful, trusting face, and he felt guilty. For a minute he considered pretending to have not understood the hints in his parents’ letter. Then he was overwhelmed by another wave of guilt—he thought about the thin figures of his parents and sisters, as they tiptoed in the pre-dawn semi-darkness so that he could sleep a few minutes longer.

He sent the money home, but he didn’t feel as happy as he’d expected to feel from doing this act, long dreamed of as it was.

More letters arrived from home.

*

It was Lunar New Year again.

“How about we do something different this year?” Mingli said. “Just us.”

For a moment he did not know how to answer her. After a while he said, “We have to go home.”

“I know you miss them,” Mingli said. “I was thinking that we can go visit them later. But we can—”

He interrupted her, “We have to go *home*.”

The way he said *home* frightened her.

“We have to be with family on New Year’s,” he added.

“I *am* your family,” Mingli said.

Guojie turned away so that he would not have to look at her. “Don’t be selfish.”

Mingli looked at the profile of her husband, at his hunched-over shoulders, at the lines along his clenched jaw, daring her to say no.

“Will we ever do something just for ourselves?” she asked. “Don’t you think they’d want you to be free?”

Guojie did not say anything. He walked out of the apartment, closing the door gently behind him.

She looked around the living room, as if seeing it for the first time. She looked at it through her husband’s eyes: the plain furniture, the Spartan walls, her husband’s small wardrobe that he refused to let her expand.

For her husband, she now understood, *home* was not a space between the two of them, a pocket of quiet warmth. The apartment she stood in was nothing more than a temporary shelter for the affair he was having with her. *Home* was Shantoucun, the house with mud walls and the people living in his memories. What she had once taken as signs of thrift and a dedication to simplicity in life

were evidence that he had never put his heart into this place, into this life that she had thought they were building together. He did not live here so much as he sojourned.

She thought about the way her husband could be so sensitive when anyone commented about his accent or joked about his table manners. He was terribly ashamed of his peasant family and yet so fiercely protective of them. Though they were thousands of miles away and she was right here, his family would always be closer to his heart. What she had taken for his maturity and his sense of responsibility was in fact a kind of deep selfishness. The very thing that attracted him to her also locked her out.

Mingli got up and threw the travel brochures she held in her hands into the trash. She'd meant to discuss with him about the delayed honeymoon abroad. But she understood, now, there would never be such a trip.

*

Guojie sat under the *huaishu* by the side of the road. He had asked the donkey cart driver to drop him off here, saying that he wanted to walk the rest of the way home.

He thought about how to tell his family about the divorce. How could he explain? They wouldn't understand.

"You are a good man," she had said to him in the end. "But all your love has been used up."

Love? Obligation. Duty. Responsibility. Guilt. Maybe adding them all together got you the same thing. He was a phoenix, and he had fulfilled his destiny.

He sat by the side of the road, long after the sun set, long after the moon rose.

*

The Life of a Phoenix: Though it is born in far-flung mountains, the Phoenix is drawn to the great metropolises and urbane centers of sophistication. It is thus never at home anywhere. Although its golden plumage dazzles the eye, the bird's delicate wings

cannot carry a heavy load. While seeing it is said to be the sign of a prosperous age, it ever hungers for happiness for itself. The Phoenix thinks always of others, and in that selflessness, it loses its way.

— *Divination slip*

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SECOND PRIZE

Neil James Hudson last appeared in On The Premises with "John Comes Back" in March 2009. He lives in the North Yorkshire moors in the UK where he is currently terrorizing the local residents by learning to drive. He can be found online at <http://neilhudson.livejournal.com>.

The Haunting of Joselyn Seacroft

by Neil James Hudson

There was something about lying on the soft couch that made me want to cry. When I was vertical I could keep all my defenses in operation. I could keep the muscles of my face set, as if gravity were pulling them into a controlled expression, and the expression penetrated my skull to keep my emotions firmly secured. But horizontal, everything just seemed to sag, and so did my mind.

"There was still time, don't you understand?" I said. "When I found the note, there was still time."

"Just try to relax, Tamara," Doctor Hockfield said calmly, as if he were hearing matters of no importance.

"I don't want to relax," I said. "I want to keep it in."

"I know you do. That's the problem. You're using so much energy holding it in that you can't manage anything else."

I've no idea where Freud got his idea of transference. I'd hated Doctor Hockfield ever since I'd met him. I hated him for staying so calm, and for being so reassuring. I hated the black beard he wore as a badge of authority, I hated his straight nose

that mimicked the straightness of his thinking, I hated the way his expression stayed in neutral as if his engine was ticking over. I hated him for being sane.

“What we’re going to do is revisit the scene in your mind,” he told me.

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“But you can’t stop yourself. We’re going to think about it together, constructively, and in safety. And the first thing you need to do is relax.”

A fatigue overcame me then, and all I wanted to do was sleep.

“First of all, you’re going to do some exercises to put you in a relaxed frame of mind. Then you’ll think back to the day you found your friend, and we’ll try to work with the pain.”

He had me stiffening muscles from my toes to my scalp, then consciously relaxing them. I found it calming, but every muscle that stiffened reminded me of rigor mortis. Relaxing it again felt as if I were cheating death, and I’d never thought of myself as a cheat.

After this he made me imagine that I was in a safe place. I imagined lying by the side of a lake on a warm day, and for a second I could actually feel the grass beneath my fingers, and a slight breeze picking at the small amount of perspiration on my brow. I had to admit that I felt safe.

“And now, it’s time for you to go home.”

“I want to stay.”

“Imagine how you felt that day,” he said. “Imagine going through your front door, into your house. So far, everything feels okay. What are you thinking?”

“I want to see Joselyn,” I said. “I’m worried about her, and I want to see how she is.”

“Go and see her, then.”

I imagined how I'd called to her, and I couldn't tell if I'd called out loud in the consulting room, or just in my imagination. There was no reply, and I took the stairs, carefully, not wanting to disturb her if she was sleeping. I knocked a couple of times on her door, and could almost (but only almost) feel the solid wood against my knuckles. There was no reply, and I quietly opened the door.

"I knew she wasn't asleep," I said out loud to Doctor Hockfield. "She looked too peaceful. I'd seen her asleep before, and it's as if she can't let go of it. She's still tormented. But now, it had gone. Whatever it was." I remembered her brown hair spread out over the pillow as if it had been combed there, the slight trace of an easy smile on her pale lips.

"How do you feel about that?" asked the doctor.

"This isn't it," I said. "This isn't the problem. It was earlier."

"Let's go back then," he said. "Back to... when?"

"The morning. I was being quiet, not to disturb her. She couldn't work, of course, not with the depression, so I let her rest."

But there was one thing out of place. As I put my coat on and hunted around for my car keys, there was a note. A note on the small table by the door.

"Think of the note," said the doctor. "Imagine it. Pick it up, feel it in your hands."

I did. It was clearly in Joselyn's handwriting.

"What does it say?"

"It says: 'See you on the other side.'"

"And how do you feel about this?"

It started to build inside me again: the panic and the guilt. "I thought she meant after work. But she didn't, and there was still time. If I'd known what she meant—there was still time, and I could have gone upstairs and found her and called for an ambulance and there would still have been time..."

I was no longer reclining. I was sat upright, and my face was beginning to set, but there was more anger still to come out, and I had no one but the doctor to direct it to. “Don’t you see, you idiot? I could have saved her, but I didn’t because I thought she meant after work, but there was still time!”

“Tamara,” said the doctor. “I don’t think you’re very relaxed any more, are you?”

*

We had another go. I had to stiffen and relax everything again, and I got another lie-down at my imaginary lake. Then it was time for work, in my head at any rate.

“Pick the note up, Tamara,” said Doctor Hockfield. “But stay calm. Stay focused.”

I picked it up and read it, not vocalizing this time.

“Where is Joselyn now?”

“She’s upstairs in her room. She’s already done it-”

“So you can go upstairs and talk to her.”

For a second, no thoughts entered my brain. “That’s not what happened-”

“What happened doesn’t matter. This is imaginary. You can go upstairs and talk to her. You can tell her how you feel.”

It felt stupid. I could never talk to her again, that was the whole point. And yet, I found that I didn’t want to open my eyes and dispel the illusion. Not while Joselyn was upstairs.

I climbed up to her room.

I was about to knock, but it felt pointless. Part of me still knew that this was just a visualisation as part of therapy, and I knew what she’d done. So I pushed the door open.

Joselyn lay on the bed, with her eyes tightly closed. She was in an uncomfortable position, and I could see that she was still alive, because she still had the anguish about her. She wasn't at peace.

"I knew she had problems," I said. "Sometimes she hinted about her childhood, about her stepfather. But I didn't know it had gone this far."

"You need to talk to her," said Doctor Hockfield. "Go and wake her up."

"I can't," I said, then remembered that this was in my imagination. I held her by her left shoulder and shook her gently.

Her eyes opened reluctantly, and she took a few seconds to focus on me. Then, suddenly awake, she threw herself upright.

"Murderer!" she yelled. "You murdered me!"

And I opened my own eyes, not focusing on Doctor Hockfield, and unaware whether or not I was screaming.

*

We were near the end of our session, so there wasn't much he could do then. He reminded me that this was my subconscious feeling of guilt expressing itself, not Joselyn herself, and then he lost his nerve and prescribed me some sedatives. I took them sometimes, but they just reminded me of the tablets that had killed Joselyn. Our next appointment wasn't for a week.

During those days I wondered about canceling it. I had been a little scared by the vividness of my imagination, and felt that I'd gone in at the deep end. Yes, I wanted to sort my head out, but I wanted to do it gradually, with a minimum of pain. On the other hand, I really felt as if I'd communicated with Joselyn. I knew that I had to keep the appointment.

"What do you want from these sessions?" asked Doctor Hockfield, as I lay on his couch, sinking into it as if into the soft earth by my imaginary lake, or a grave.

“I want to be haunted,” I said, surprising myself. I must have been more relaxed than I thought.

“Go on.”

“I want her to be a spirit, with unfinished business. I want her to come back, and punish me for my failure.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because-” I wasn’t sure, and tried to let the answer come from within. “Because she’s ignoring me,” I said. “She should be furious with me, and she’s just not bothering.” It sounded petty, selfish, even spiteful, but I knew that I’d spoken the truth.

“Let’s try to talk to her again,” said Doctor Hockfield.

Once more I relaxed, imagined myself away. The doctor had reminded me that everything I saw was imaginary, even Joselyn: there was nothing to be scared of, because everything was in my head, and together we could keep me safe. But once again I felt myself enter a different mental state, almost a hypnotic trance (although I’m sure I never went under) and my imaginings were far more vivid than in ordinary life.

I found the note, and once again felt the emptiness inside me, as if I were the one who had swallowed the pills in a final act of self-hatred. I began the climb upstairs, and walked into her bedroom with no hesitation.

This time she was already sat up, staring at me with disgust. I wasn’t sure who she hated-herself or me.

“I’ll call an ambulance,” I said.

“You’re too late.”

“But you’ve only just taken the pills.”

“I took them six weeks ago.”

Doctor Hockfield said, "Ask her why she called you a murderer." I was annoyed at this: he threatened to dispel the illusion.

Joselyn spoke without my having to ask. "You were supposed to come and save me." I felt an accidental fleck of saliva land on my face. "I left you that note so that you'd come and find me before it was too late."

"I'm so sorry," I said. Even though I'd blamed myself, I hadn't realized this. "I didn't understand. I thought you meant you'd see me after work."

She laughed viciously. "I'd have said that if I meant it. I said, see you on the other side. How could that have sounded like work?"

Actually, I had no idea how I'd misinterpreted it so badly. I felt an unwanted anger arise. "How was I to know you'd kill yourself? You've never done it before."

Joselyn gave that laugh again. "All I needed was your help. I needed you. And where were you? On the reception desk, helping people buy new windows. You know why you didn't understand that message? Do you know?"

"It was a simple mistake," I said desperately.

"Because you didn't want to," she said. "Deep down, you knew that if you misinterpreted the message, you'd be free of me forever."

"Joselyn, that's so not true!"

"You couldn't solve my problems, but you could solve your own."

The illusion vanished, and all I could see was the grubby ceiling of the consulting room, grubby and artexed.

"Now I think we're getting somewhere," said the doctor.

*

I went back to the house during the week. I had been unable to stay there after Joselyn died, and besides, she'd been paying half the rent. I saw that it hadn't been

let out yet, and I allowed myself to stray onto the back yard. I felt like a killer returning to the scene of the crime.

I wanted to be sure I was imagining it accurately. I was returning to the house in my head every week, and I wanted to be sure that it was the right house. I saw the way the green paint was scratched off the back door, the exact pattern of the dull brown curtain in the window.

That had been the window to my bedroom. I shuddered and walked to the front of the house. Up above me was the room in which Joselyn had taken her life. I wondered if her ghost were there, and if that's what I was here to find. I stared through the glass panel in the door, and could see the table where I'd found the note. With a start I thought I saw the untidy page still there, but I knew the police had taken it away, and it just seemed to be a piece of cloth.

She wasn't here. If she was anywhere, she was in my head.

*

"I wanted to go up and save her," I said.

"I know," said the doctor.

"I don't mean then. I mean in these sessions. I hoped that I could go back and call the ambulance."

"But what would that achieve, Tamara? That would only be to pretend it didn't happen. You can't change the past. What you can do is to confront your own feelings of guilt, and move on."

"She's moved on already," I said.

"I think it's time we had another word with her."

I wondered how I found it so easily to relax when I knew what I was going to face up to afterwards. The exercises must have been highly effective. As the tension fell from my muscles, I felt as if I knew how Joselyn must have felt, when the pain finally left her. I could hear nothing, only the breeze rustling through the grasses

and the gentle lapping of the water in the lake, but the last thing she must have heard was me leaving the house. By then, she was probably too weak to reach the phone herself.

I lay by the lake for a little longer than usual, trying to gather my thoughts and psych myself up for my next visit, but I knew I was only delaying the inevitable and before I knew it I was back by the table near the door, at the bottom of the stairs. I didn't worry about how I got there. It was imaginary.

She'd said that I'd wanted her to die. That simply wasn't true, and I was going to have it out with her. It wasn't a conversation I was looking forward to. In fact, I was dreading it, and my hand lingered on the door handle for maybe a minute as I hoped I'd just snap out of it, return to reality and apologize to Doctor Hockfield, tell him that I was sorry but it just wasn't going to work today.

I opened the door, and Joselyn wasn't there.

I breathed out with relief. I walked towards the bed, smoothed the duvet with my hand, then sat down.

"You see?" said Joselyn. I was so surprised I jumped up again. "You're glad I wasn't there." She stood just inside the door.

"I didn't see you there," I said, trying to cover my embarrassment.

"You didn't want to. Just as you didn't want to understand the note."

I wanted to help, but I was angry with her. "Why are you taking it out on me?" I said. "I'm supposed to be your friend."

"Supposed," she said. "Get out of my way." She pushed past me, and resumed her position on the bed.

"You don't exactly make it easy," I said. "You're the one who needs a shrink, not me."

"No kidding," Joselyn said, and closed her eyes.

I sat down next to her. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you haunting me, Tamara?"

"What? You're the dead one."

"And I'm trying to stay that way. But I can't, because you're haunting me."

I had no answer to this.

"I cured it. I finally cured it. That day when I wanted you to come and save me: when I knew you weren't going to, I could feel myself fading, and then realized the pain was fading with me. And ever since then, ever since I died, it's been gone. I don't have to feel anything any more." Her eyes snapped open. "Until you, Tamara. You started coming back. Every time I wake up, and here I am, in this very room—did you honestly think I wanted to see my place of death again? And the blackness got here first. You bring me back to Hell every time you wake me up. So what do you want from me? Forgiveness? Punishment?"

"No," I said. "That isn't it."

"I could punish you, if that's what you want," she said. Suddenly I was scared. There were no rules here. I had no doubt she was right. "Tell me, Tamara, have you any idea why I became like this? Do you know what it was like for me as a kid, what they did to me, what I tried to get away from? What it was that followed me everywhere?"

"You wouldn't tell me."

"You never asked."

"I... uh... I thought you'd tell me when you were ready..."

"While you got off on being a martyr, and walked away when it got too much."

"You could tell me now."

"Go away, Tamara."

“I’m trying to help...”

“I said, go away.”

I opened my eyes, back in Doctor Hockfield’s consulting room. He looked across at me with a purely professional interest. He was the same as me, I thought: he cared when it suited him, but he’d walk away from it again as soon as our session was over. I needed more than him, and Joselyn needed more than me.

*

On the day she died I’d worked like a demon. I’d had a restless energy that I just had to dispel. I’d tidied the office and destroyed two years’ paperwork that had long since expired. I’d even taken over a couple of sales. And yet, I wasn’t really pleased with myself. I just felt as if there was something I’d forgotten.

I’d been trying to stop something from arising in my consciousness. And had I known I was doing it, I would have stopped, but the knowledge that I wasn’t being honest with myself was one of the lies I was telling myself, and I was a convincing liar.

I just couldn’t convince Joselyn.

I’d even gone back to work the next day. It was only halfway through the afternoon that I knew I’d have to take some time off. Some time to find myself a new place to live.

I was back to work now, and it was the same. It was something to stop me from thinking. I spent as much time as possible talking to people, customers, staff, suppliers, anyone, so long as it meant that I had to use my faculties responding to stimuli, and not in considering myself.

Only at my sessions with Doctor Hockfield could I let go.

“I’ve got an idea,” I told him the next time. “I want you to talk to her.”

“And how would that help, Tamara?” he asked, not betraying any surprise.

“You could help her. She’s right: I have no idea what was wrong with her. You’re used to these things. Perhaps if you talk to her, she won’t...”

It sounded pretty lame even as I said it.

“What’s done can’t be changed,” he said smoothly. “We’re trying to identify your own problems. You’re carrying a lot of guilt about your friend’s death. I think this idea is a symptom, not a cure.”

I had to help her though. I thought quickly. “But Joselyn-the imaginary one, in my mind. She’s the one who’s been providing me with all these insights. If she spoke to you, it could bypass me completely. She could tell you immediately how we need to proceed. It would save so much time.”

“I see,” he said, and I was worried that he did. But then he said, “Okay, we’ll give it a go.”

“I’m not going back to the last day,” I said. “I’m going to the day before. She won’t have taken the pills yet. It might make it easier to talk to her.”

“Agreed,” said the doctor. I knew that he hadn’t agreed to anything, and he was just trying to see where I was going with this. He probably knew that I was lying about my motives, but felt that I was lying to myself as well, and that I was subconsciously planning on telling him some deeper truth. Well, whatever: he may have been right.

I didn’t spend too long at my lake this time-I felt as if I’d dumped the responsibility for this encounter on the doctor. It was just starting to get dark when I arrived at the house. It hadn’t been an easy day at work, and I was hoping I could get Joselyn to co-operate.

I rushed through the front door, left my car keys on the table next to her note, and went straight upstairs to her room. I knocked at the door: she might not have been expecting me.

There was no reply, so I knocked again. I wondered if she’d gone out.

What was the note doing on the table? She wouldn't write it until tomorrow morning.

I pushed the door open and found Joselyn lying on the bed, empty pill containers on her bedside table.

"What have you done?" I cried.

"Knew you were coming," she said with a faint smile. "Thought I'd get it done early."

"You have to hang on," I said. "I know someone who can help. You can be cured."

"But then I wouldn't be me," she said dopyly.

"I'll get an ambulance," I said. I rushed down to the phone, and made the call. She was still alive, there was still time. The woman on the other end of the line told me to stay with her and provide CPR if she stopped breathing. I ran back upstairs, only then remembering that my mobile was in my pocket. Joselyn would accuse me of deliberately wasting time.

She was unconscious but still breathing when I returned to her. Was this how the pills worked in reality? I wouldn't know, I hadn't been there. I held her hand, repeated her name and tried to bring her back, and constantly checked her breathing. I didn't want any more subconscious mistakes.

I was impressed with how quickly the paramedics arrived. They pushed me out of the way, asked me a few quick questions, then banished me from the room. After ten minutes, they carried her out on a stretcher.

"No," I said, fearing the worst.

"She's in a bad way," said the first paramedic. I didn't get a good look at his face: I wasn't imagining him terribly well. I followed them to the ambulance and climbed in with them without being asked. I had to sit apart from Joselyn though, unable even to hold her hand. All the while the paramedic fussed over her, although I couldn't see what he was doing. The second one was driving.

At the hospital I was firmly shown to a waiting area while half a dozen people busily and noisily pushed Joselyn on a trolley away from me. I sat down but immediately jumped up again, pacing around the waiting area and occasionally outside. I tried to perform the relaxation exercises that Doctor Hockfield had shown me, but they just didn't seem to take.

Finally I was called for into a small consulting room. I was met by a senior doctor in a white coat, and I wondered if I were the patient.

"Tamara, is it?" he said. I nodded. "I'm afraid I've got some bad news."

"No!" I called out. "It was the day before! I was in time to save her!"

He shook his head sadly. "Perhaps it would be best if my colleague explains." The door opened behind me, and I turned round to see Doctor Hockfield walk smoothly in.

"Tamara," he said. "I think I'm getting through to you. You've got to come back."

"Back? Back where?"

"To reality. You've been here far too long."

I looked around at the consulting room. I was lying down on the soft couch, and sat up, confused.

"I've never seen a case like it before," said the first doctor. "It may be unwise to proceed."

"Do you know where you are?" asked Doctor Hockfield.

"I'm back in your room," I said. "I'm sorry, doctor, you can't speak to her."

"I think we're going to have to end these sessions," he said. "I don't think you're a suitable subject for this kind of therapy."

"But-" I said, then stopped myself. I'd assumed that he was stopping me from seeing Joselyn, but then I saw that I no longer needed him.

*

I went back to the house, the one that we'd shared. It still hadn't been let out, and I was able to force a back window to let myself in. It smelt dusty and uninhabited, and it was strange to see it in this state.

I left my car-keys on the table-there was no note yet-and climbed the stairs to Joselyn's room. I let myself in, almost expecting her to be there.

The bed had been stripped, but was still in its old position. I lay on it. If there was going to be a haunting, it was going to be here. I relaxed myself as Doctor Hockfield had taught me.

"I just can't keep you away," said Joselyn. She didn't appear so angry now.

I looked on the bedside table. The tubs of paracetamol were unopened. "Why did you get so many?" I asked. "You only needed a third of those to finish yourself."

She shrugged. "I wanted to be sure. You're on my bed, Tamara."

"And you're not getting on. It's different this time, Joselyn. Let's go."

"Where?"

"Somewhere safe. Somewhere you can just sit without any pressure."

We went to my lake. It was a warm day. I lay on my back, watching the few clouds wisp across the sky. Joselyn was on her front.

"Am I supposed to be impressed?" she asked.

"You're not supposed to do anything. You can talk if you want. Or just rest. Just as long as you know I'm here for you. And I'm not going anywhere this time."

She said nothing, just sat thinking for about half an hour. Then she began to cry. I put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay," I said. "Take your time."

After she'd calmed down, my mobile rang. I cursed and looked at it.

“Who is it?” asked Joselyn.

“Just that doctor I was telling you about,” I said. I added him to my blocked senders list. “There-he won’t be bothering us again. You don’t need a doctor. You just need someone to listen.”

“There was never anyone,” she said, biting her lip.

“There is now,” I said. The shadow of a cloud passed over us, then moved on, leaving us in sunlight. “I’m here,” I said. “I’ll always be here.”

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THIRD PRIZE

CAROLE CHIPPS CARLSON was an award-winning newspaper reporter/editor/feature writer/ columnist/publisher for many years before giving up her day job to write fiction. In addition to appearing in *Emrys Journal* several times, her stories have appeared in *Thema*, *Flying Island*, *Grassland Review* and other small literary magazines. She believes she found her literary voice while operating a weekly newspaper in the Missouri Ozarks where speech patterns are lyrical.

Always Say Shush

by Carole Carlson

Praskie Proctor's doings with men embarrassed all of us in Emery, Missouri, population 900, but she did get us past the shock of illegitimate children. When a girl has four as fast as she did, you might just as well get used to it.

Before her, a girl in trouble would go off to a home for "wayward girls" while her folks back here said, "She's in modeling school" or "visiting her aunt." But by 1975, with all those free love hippies in the 1960s to look back on, we'd got over just about every kind of immorality long-range. So now we'd have to get used to it short-range, right here in our own town.

Praskie walked all over town with her belly sticking out as if nothing was wrong. At first, people refused to speak to her. She didn't notice—she never gives anyone a chance to get a word in edgewise so to her, no reply from others is standard conversation.

In her fourth month, she'd start to baby talking, with her round hazelnut eyes staring down at her belly. "Hi, Pooky-pooky-pooky. You comfie in there? Aaaaaw. Curled up in there, I felt you stir, you sweetest itsy-bitsy..."

Doing that five minutes at a stretch on the courthouse square, at the day care where she worked, and at the doctor's clinic. One day, standing before the baskets of apples lined up outside Bob's IGA, she starts it: "Oh Pooky-pooky, just sniff them sweet apples," her head rared back and her eyes closed.

It was all I could do to keep from yelling down at her stomach, "No sniffing, Pooky-pooky. Pay no attention to your crazy mother." And Vera Kelly says to me, her lip curled up, "Just how much of her unrefined sugar can we swallow?"

I didn't say anything. I don't make comment on what Vera says to me, because she likes to misquote people on purpose, stir up trouble. Having no kids of my own, whatever I say, she could make it sound like I'm anti-kids. I know some in Emery already got the idea I never married because I didn't want to give up the important surname Emery. The real reason is husbands are bossy. Only I can't say that either. It would bring every man in Emery to my house just for the pleasure of not speaking to me.

Anyway, Praskie had three girl babies right off the bat and named them Sugar, Candy, and Taffy. Then she had a boy. "Thank the lord she quit having girls," Vera said. "She mighta named it Jello."

Praskie named her boy Marcus Welby, her being a big TV rerun fan. Her family's full of these bad names on account of their love affair with first radio and then TV. Strangers might think that Praskins is a prominent family name around here, but no. She's named Praskins because her mother was a soap opera addict who thought the surname sounded classy. Like those soap girls with what used to be last names: Ashley, Allison, Whitney.

Praskie's little girls' fathers were drifters. They glided into Emery, stuck close to easy-going Praskie and did odd jobs for her family in return for bed and board—*lots* of Praskie's bed we can bet. They drifted out again after a few months. Nobody ever got to know their names.

There was no handyman to be seen when Praskie got Marcus Welby started, so the worst of Emery's gossips whispered that she must of took up with the only man she *wouldn't dare* be seen with. Even the dumb pooky talker knew better than to show her face with Conway Smith. He's the colored blacksmith who forges iron fences and gates, ships them to rich people in Miami. Behind his back, people here call him Rastus. He makes himself scarce, even does all his shopping over in St. Joe, because he for sure knows white people here don't want him flaunting all that money he's got.

The town's better class of gossips always say shush to any rumor that's so shocking they'd have to really do something about it. So any talk about a white woman, even the kind like Praskie, and a colored man—they'd have to ignore it. When Craig Hammer at the lumberyard, the town's wisecracker, said, "*Look out!* She's next gonna have a kid named Hot Fudge Sundae," they didn't give their usual laugh. They made a point of ignoring it.

But we snuck laughs behind our hands. Emery people smirk about mingling of the races because it hardly seems possible it could happen. The only colored family in Emery is descended from the slaves Emery's whites used to own—low class. Now if a Moroccan prince was to walk into Emery, they wouldn't think of him as colored, just black-skinned. He could even marry one of our white girls maybe, take her back to his desert kingdom. Real romantic. A-course, a prince turning up around here is about as likely as that Harry Belafonte.

Anyway, the gossip about the blacksmith stopped when we all got concerned about little Sugar. Sugar was so cute we forgot she was illegitimate—cedar-brown curls, cobalt blue eyes, and a little twitch in her walk that was almost sexy but not disgusting. It turned out the twitch was a curve in her spine. The doctors in St. Joe said she had to work her legs extra hard to balance herself. She needed surgery.

The town pitched in to raise the money. Donation jars all over with Sugar's picture and "Please Help our little Sugar" stuck on them. It was nice that we had something besides gossip to glue us together.

At that time, Praskie's out-of-wedlock practices begun to spread. Emery looked like a hatchery—cheeping babies everywhere and no roosters crowing over them.

The Double-T Day Care (short of Tiny Tots) where Praskie worked filled up. Praskie was saying, “I’m going to buy a big ol’ house and start me a day care, too. All them sweet little pookies with no one to look after them while their mommies work.”

Well, she did. Bought the old Remington place. The rich Remingtons had kept it as a rental when they moved to a new ranch-style, but good law, it had got run down. Praskie’s workers swarmed all over it, re-roofing, straightening up the chimney, mortaring a corner where the foundation had given way. She covered the outside with blue vinyl siding and pink shutters and stuck up a “Pookies Place” sign. (Craig Campbell called it the pee-pee house, which many thought was going too far.)

Her and her current handyman, What’s-His-Name, tackled the inside. Between their many public kisses, they painted and wallpapered. She got a new hot-water tank, then new bathroom and kitchen appliances—the works.

Vera and her husband Charlie and me stood out front one day, watching the workers in amazement.

“Where could she of got all that money?” I asked Charlie.

“The bank,” he says. “Seeing as we got a booming market for kiddie care, I bet Warren Roberts would make a unsecured loan.”

“A responsible bank manager like that giving money to lame-brained Praskie?”

Charlie stuffed his big fists in his pockets and rocked on his heels like he does when he thinks he’s talking smart. “She ain’t lame-brained about kids. She’s got a knack, Lois.”

So Praskie settled in. Lived upstairs and filled the six rooms below with day care kids. Sweet-talked them all—“Hey, Pooky, how is oo today?” until the mothers got together and asked her please to stop, or their children would never outgrow their baby talk.

I guess she did a good job, but the questions about the loan still nagged. Nobody asked Warren. It could of made him mad.

*

Old wives in Emery—they stew over every little slight to their men. You’d think they were watching their husbands carry the cross up to Calvary. The men do their whining at home, and the wives repeat it all over town.

It was common knowledge that Charlie was purely insulted when Warren wouldn’t loan him the money for a new baler. Now Vera was saying, “Why would Warren Roberts be so generous with this silly girl and skip over Charlie?”

Vera finally wheedled some information out of Praskie. Her and me were walking by Pookies Place, headed for the church rummage sale. Praskie and the kids were playing drop-the-handkerchief in the front yard. Vera says, “Hey there, Praskie. Your place sure looks nice. Musta cost you a lot.”

“Sure did,” Praskie says. “Don’t you like them heart cutouts in the shutters? Cost extra but it was worth it to show the little ones I wuv-wuv-wuv ‘em and—”

“In the neighborhood of ten thousand for all this work, I bet,” Vera cuts in.

“Oh, more’n that. And we’re not through. We’re gonna get some new—”

Vera shouts her down. “More’n that? Really? You mean like fifteen?”

And Praskie puckers up her mouth like she’s getting ready to kiss What’s-His-Name. “Wellll. You’re getting’ closer.”

That squeezed-out dab of information was almost dead silence by Praskie’s standards, but it was enough to get gossipy Vera started. Her and Charlie exaggerated the amount a little more every time they repeated it. The last time I heard Charlie, it was, “You know that young fool loaned Praskie Proctor better’n forty thousand to patch up the old Remington place? You know how much river bottom land that’d buy?”

“Or a new baler for some responsible farmer,” Vera said.

Charlie said, “Double damn! Kee-rist! Must be a new law against solid business loans.”

Then some really bad gossip spread across Emery that I *knew* had to come from Vera and Charlie. How little Marcus Welby’s hair was wavy like Warren’s. And his smile—just like the banker’s.

“I don’t recall ever seeing Warren smile,” I said. “Anyway, smiles are pretty much all the same on two-year-olds, aren’t they?” I like a good piece of gossip as much as the next person, but when the bean crop fails on the land I lease on shares, I have to borrow on my house to catch up, and Warren’s always very nice about the loan. “No hurry, Lois,” he’ll say when he hands me the check. “We know you’re good for it.” You run Warren out of town with gossip, who knows how nice the next banker will be?

I happened on Milderd Sokolsky, the retired school teacher, in the IGA checkout line. We walked out together.

“Hooeee! Hot,” she says, fanning herself with a big sun hat. “Want to sit over there for awhile?”

So we set on a bench on the courthouse lawn. After a little this and that, I said, “You been hearing all this stuff about Warren Roberts and Praskie Proctor?”

It didn’t surprise me that she hadn’t. She grew up in historic Pennsylvania where I bet they’re still gossiping more about Benjamin Franklin’s sex life than about live people’s. Nobody here tells Mrs. Sokolsky much local news. She’s been known to laugh at it and make them feel foolish. Feeling foolish myself, I told her some of the whispering.

Then I said, “Personally I don’t believe it, and I wish all this talk would stop.”

“All right, and why are you spreading the talk to me?” she asked, but not unkindly. I could feel my face redden.

“Because you got more sense, Mrs. Sokolsky. People around here respect you.”

She laughed and slapped her long thigh. “As a teacher, Miss Emery, but they don’t like my bluntness. They’re still talking about my saying penis, not pecker, aren’t they?”

I was speechless. She’d said it again.

“So with no good reputation to lose since that controversy,” she said, “you think I should be the one fighting back at this latest gossip.”

My face still burning, I picked up my sack of groceries and moved off. “I guess you’re right,” I threw over my shoulder at her. “You *are* blunt.”

I got to admit her gumption fascinated me, so when she showed up at my door the next day I smiled and said, “Welcome.”

“I’ll do it if you’ll come with me,” she said. She’d tell “young Roberts” the ugly gossip if I’d come along.

We made an appointment with Warren. We could of just walked into his office any old time, but an appointment—that way he’d know this was important.

“Well, ladies,” he called out as we walked in. He poured us coffee from his desk decanter, his chubby fingers almost swallowing up those little paper cups. “What can I do for you?” And I knew he was thinking we’d come for another generous donation for the Methodist Women.

Well, blunt Millie—she sails right in. “Mr. Roberts, I dread telling you this, but there’s ugly gossip about you.”

Warren who was all set to take a slurp from his own big china mug set it down slow, and Millie went on.

“Time to put it to rest. People are hinting that Praskie Proctor’s little boy is yours.”

The tan drained out of his face.

Feeling sad for him, I said most people know the rumor is pure meanness. “I bet it’s on account of that loan. It made someone mad. They thought you played favorites.”

“What loan?” Warren said after a sizable pause.

“To Praskie.” He looked at me confused, his little blue eyes squinting even smaller while I went on. “To fix up the old Remington place.”

“The bank didn’t lend her any money,” he said. “If bank regulations permitted, I could show you a list of current loans we’re handling. None to Miss Proctor.”

I looked at Millie who was looking at him. She laughed under her breath. “This town. I swear to goodness, Mr. Roberts. If there’s a way to cause confusion, they’ll find it.”

“Then where did she get all that money?” I asked.

Warren just shook his head. “My god! That’s why everybody’s grinning at me nowadays.”

I felt a kind of shame for the town. I’m fourth generation Emery. I feel half-responsible when the town named after my family is making a fool of itself.

As we left, Warren said, “You ladies just assure everyone that we’ve never lent Miss Proctor any money for anything.”

I went right home and called Vera. “Warren Roberts flat says the bank never loaned one red cent to Praskie.”

“Maybe not the loan department,” she said, “but what about a personal loan right out of his pocket—for personal services rendered.”

I called up Mrs. Sokolsky. I don’t know her all that well. Nobody seems to. She sticks to her books and her gardening. But I figured we were knee-deep in this thing together now. Ought to get on a first-name basis.

“Millie,” I said, “now they’re hinting it was a personal loan from Warren.”

“Oh shoot. We’re going to have to find out where she did get the money. Don’t you hate it? None of this is any of our business.”

“It is if Emery says it is,” I said.

Then Millie did what I would never of had the nerve to do. “I just went on and asked Praskie,” she said when she called me back, laughing about it. “You can imagine what she must have thought. Me, an old woman she only knows from her hateful school days, asking her where her money came from.”

“Well, what did she say?”

“ ‘A source friendly to me.’ That’s what she said. In other words, ‘none of your business,’ and she’s right, Lois.”

“You think the blacksmith might of give her the money?”

“Why?” Millie asked.

“Because Praskie’s little boy, with his amber hair and amber eyes and toasted meringue skin, looks more like he could be the blacksmith’s than Warren’s.”

“You’re getting off the track, Lois. There’s no reason to think that the boy’s father, whoever he is, would feel obligated to give Praskie money.” She laughed. “It could just as easily come from the U. S. Postal Service if you want to start gossip about Praskie and the mail car driver.”

And I laughed, too. “So I guess we’ll have to quit looking for the donor.”

“Quit?”

“Well, I’m surprised,” I said. “I thought you hated gossip.”

“Certainly. That’s why we’re sticking with this to get at the truth, frustrate Emery’s gossips.”

Millie and me got to meeting for coffee at the Sunrise Café next to the IGA. We’d compare notes on what we *hadn’t* found out. We weren’t making any progress, but

Millie being a reader who can talk to you about anything made her more fun than most others in Emery.

“I’ve got a theory,” Millie said after some talk about Norwegian gods and other stuff I never heard before. “The money comes from outside of town. I don’t think anyone here could lend money and keep it a secret.”

“Except the blacksmith,” I insisted. “Off the track you say, but I can’t get that notion out of my head.”

Millie sighed and looked puzzled. Her ignorance about coloreds annoyed me a little, even if she did grow up in Pennsylvania and couldn’t be expected to know any better.

“Millie,” I said, “you don’t seem to have the least notion that a colored man would be real proud if a white girl gave birth to his baby, and he might just give her a cash reward.”

“Oooh,” she said, waving her hand and grinning at me. “Then why isn’t anybody in big-mouth Emery going on about *that*?”

“Because important people have made brags for years that there’d never be any mingling of the races in Emery. They got louder about it after that Supreme Court integration order back in the fifties. Said they’d string up anybody who tried it.”

“And why haven’t they strung up the blacksmith?”

“Because they can’t admit they’re all talk, that they haven’t got the nerve to drag him out and do what they say they’ll do. It’s easier to pretend they don’t know.”

“Aaah,” Millie said, nodding. “You mean no confrontations.”

*

About a week later, Millie’s peculiar habit of eating at the least-known restaurants paid off. We’d went shopping in St. Joe, but we didn’t go to Howard Johnson’s like everybody else. We went to a place near the old stockyards. As we paid our bill, we

spotted the “Please help our little Sugar” donation box with the picture of Sugar on it. Millie and me just looked at each other.

“What this for?” I asked the girl at the cash register.

“Little girl in a farm town around here,” she said, handing me change. “She’s got to have surgery.”

Mind you, it’s four years *after* Sugar’s back operation—done and paid for. I made a show of putting a quarter in the box and asked, “Who brought the box in?”

“A young blonde lady, super friendly, very much on the skinny side.”

Millie and me looked at each other. *Praskie to a T.*

“Do a lot of people give?” Millie asked.

“Oh lots! She picks the donations up about once a month.” She poked her finger at Sugar’s old picture. “How can you ignore a cute little thing like that?”

Back in the car, as Millie shifted gears on her Dodge, she said, “You can bet she’s got boxes in other out-of-the-way places.”

I argued against telling on Praskie. From everything I’d heard, she was doing so good with the day care children. Besides, Praskie’s cheating would give Emery a black eye.

“It’s fraud,” Millie said. “It’s only a matter of time before someone else snitches on her.”

I shivered when I pictured Charlie and Vera seeing one of those boxes.

“She may not realize how serious this is,” Millie said. “She could go to jail. The minute we get back to Emery, we’ve got to go see Henry Waller.”

*

“I tried to discourage you,” Henry said, a lawyer’s chill in his voice. “I didn’t approve of the casual method of raising money for the surgery.” Henry always

talks like he's from Kansas City instead of Emery. "You do remember I suggested setting up a trust fund in the child's name."

Yes, just once, and he hadn't exactly said it loud or insisted. Well, Henry's a lawyer after all. Sometimes they'd rather watch a mistake in the making and fuss over it later. That's how they make a living.

"If you had let me set one up, it would have closed automatically when the necessary amount was raised," he said all huffy. (Including an administrator's fee for himself a-course.)

"Well," I said, "none of that official stuff would have kept her from doing what she's doing on the side now."

He called Praskie, and I guess she got her latest live-in to mind the children, because she came right over.

"Oh, those people," she said, "eating out all the time, they got lots of money. They don't feel the pinch giving those little bits."

But that was just a brave front. She wasn't rambling like usual. She was even fixing to cry, her forehead puckering up and her lips pressing over her big front teeth.

And she hadn't exactly put those donation boxes at the Howard Johnson's or Steak & Shake or some other big-time place where everybody but Millie Sokolsky eats when they go to St. Joe. So she knew better.

"How much money have you raised in this way?" Henry asked.

Praskie blinked and lifted her shoulders, trying to act like it didn't much matter.

"Well, you'd better figure it out. If it's been more than two thousand, it could be treated as a felony."

Praskie begun to cry bucketsful. "I'm just a woman alone in this world, trying to provide for my four little ones and give a invaluable service to Emery."

Then Henry's voice gentled down. "That's fine, Praskie. If you make restitution—pay the money back—you've got no criminal record, so a judge isn't likely to send you to jail."

Henry and Millie and me sighed.

"Have you got a friend who could lend you some? A promissory note," Henry said—and then sighed again, surely knowing that once he'd explained why she can't put out boxes, then he'd have to explain a promissory note to her.

"But who on earth could she pay the money back to?" Millie asked. "She can't identify all those people she took it from or how much they put in the boxes."

"It could be more in the nature of a good deed, perhaps to someone else in need of money," Henry said.

It sounded way too complicated to me. I was ready to quit and go home, but Millie said, "If she gets the money and gives it to some other sick child. You know, Henry, the box we saw says only 'Please help our little Sugar.' People could think that's a common noun and not her real name."

"Sure," I said, "and the picture's an old one, not much the way Sugar looks now. It could be anybody's kid."

Henry ordered Praskie to pick up all the boxes right away. "Put the money in a new bank account with a neutral, compassionate name—something like Little Invalids Fund."

Millie's schoolteacher way with words came in handy now. "That's too stuffy. Let's call it Tiny Tim's Friends. You know Dickens's little lame boy."

Henry turned on his tape recorder and made quite a show of asking Praskie if she wanted him to represent her.

"Your subterfuge has to be reported to the authorities immediately," he said. "I'll notify Hoagie this afternoon while you gather up the boxes. I'll let him know the money is being donated."

I relaxed. Hoagie Remington has been sheriff for fourteen years. If there's anything he hates it's a messy crime. Takes away from his time breeding and marketing cattle. Folks around here say the reason we don't have felony trials in this county is because Hoagie works them out other ways. Besides, Hoagie was one of the Remingtons who benefited when they finally unloaded that old place on contract to Praskie. Even if it was fixed up, he wouldn't want it dumped back on him while Praskie sat in jail.

So the Tiny Tim's Friends Fund was set up with Millie as trustee. I refused to put the Emery name on it.

"I'll not risk dragging my family's good name through the mud," I said to Millie, and she said, "If I had a name with a burden attached, I'd change it."

The next job was finding a worthy kid, and Henry said we should ask the board at St. Joe's big hospital where Sugar had her surgery.

By the time of the hospital's board meeting, Praskie had deposited better than thirty-five hundred dollars. Millie shook her head. "How many of those boxes did she have, Lois?"

"Thirty I bet." I was thinking of all the money she'd used already on the house remodeling.

I told Millie I'd go with her to the board meeting as long as she didn't introduce me by name and didn't expect me to say anything.

That board meeting was like a scene out of "Dallas" on TV. Fifteen suited-up people at a shiny mahogany table. Millie said Emery's got an anonymous donor who wants to give money through a Tiny Tim Fund "he's" set up at the Emery State Bank, wants it to help pay a sick child's medical expenses.

They all coo about that. "How nice"... "That's sweet"... "We can certainly use additional monies for the indigent."

And by the way, how much is it? Somebody asked, trying to make it sound like it don't much matter, it's the thought that counts. Millie hands around the deposit

book, and they “ooh” some more. Mostly to be polite, I guess. At a big hospital, that wouldn’t cover the price of appendicitis.

After the meeting, one of the board members, a little sparrow of a lady they called Sylvia, winks at me and Millie and whispers, “We know.” That like to scared us to death. We left in a hurry.

The next day, it’s already in the St. Joe paper. An anonymous donor from Emery is giving more than three thousand to the hospital for a sick, needy child of the hospital’s choosing. And the day after that, the paper announces that the donor has come forward. She’s Miss Praskins Proctor who had apparently been collecting donations ever since her own child had had surgery at the hospital.

Farther down in the story, they printed a comment from Miss Sylvia Green, a board member. “We knew immediately it must be Miss Proctor. Several years ago, we were able to pay her child’s medical expenses through a fund we keep for just such needs. That dear lady must have felt the desire to pass her good fortune along to some other needy child.”

Millie called me up. “Did you see what the newspaper reported today?” She was laughing so hard her voice choked to a stop.

“I don’t know what’s so funny,” I said. “She took us all.”

“But she doesn’t think of it that way, Lois. I called her immediately, mad as a hornet about her identifying herself. You know what she said?” Millie imitated Praskie’s loud, brassy voice. “If I’m gonna give all my money to some rich old hospital, I’m gonna get the credit for it!”

Well, I had to laugh myself. It was better if she did believe she had a right to that money. She’d be more convincing.

The only unhappy ones were Charlie and Vera Kelly. “I bet she’d previously sucked up a lotta money to pay for that house,” Vera said to me. And Charlie was spluttering it all over town.

But nobody was listening to them. Now we had a first-class benefactor in little Emery whose story of generosity was printed in the St. Joe paper. And we'd all played a part in it, donating to the *earlier* Sugar fund.

After a week, Charlie begun grinning like a preacher who's just caught himself another fornicator. "Praskie's a no-good bookkeeper. I bet she's still got bills to pay on that house," he said to me. "She's gonna have workers beating down her doors for their pay. She's gonna flat lose that house."

But she didn't, not exactly anyway. Henry had took charge of her finances. He said the blacksmith, who'd been stacking up money, made Praskie a promissory loan.

"See?" I said to Millie. "Showing his gratitude like I told you."

"Oh Lois," she said in her firm, school teacher voice, "he's a smart businessman is all."

And here's what's finally happening. A year's gone by, and Henry whispers to me, "She hasn't paid Conway Smith any of his money back. She keeps insisting the promissory note *she* signed meant he promised to give her the money."

The blacksmith's just quietly took over the property. Praskie must of signed some kind of paper she paid no attention to. She brags, "Now I'm resident manager and day care director," as if it's a promotion. Henry administrates from a bank account, some to Praskie and some to Smith after the overhead is paid.

Last Sunday after church, everybody clustered around Praskie and mewing over Sugar. Vera sidled up to me grinning. She squinted at Marcus Welby, and rocked on her heels, like Charlie does when he thinks he's talking smart.

She whispered, "Got *her* come-uppance, didn't she? *Now* she's working for Rastus and don't even know it."

Or maybe pretends she don't. And everybody else, too. Like Millie says, no confrontations.

HONORABLE MENTION

Desmond Warzel lives in northwestern Pennsylvania. His short stories have appeared in such periodicals as *Abyss & Apex*, *Shroud*, *Alternative Coordinates*, and *Whispering Spirits*. Those readers with sufficient long-term memory can read more of his work later this year in *Redstone Science Fiction*, *OG's Speculative Fiction*, and the anthology *Terminal Earth*. When he isn't writing, he's rooting for the Cleveland Indians or engaging in other, equally fruitless, pursuits.

Same-Day Delivery

by Desmond Warzel

Renninger looked like trouble.

Of course, they're *all* trouble, or they wouldn't be coming to me. By definition.

But it's a sliding scale.

*

My office is at the end of what most people would consider an excessively long and narrow corridor. It has no door, affording me a clear view of the entire passageway; a necessary concession to my unique brand of paranoia. I need to see them coming, and from as far away as possible.

Renninger strode down the corridor with his hands planted firmly in the pockets of his tailored gray slacks, affecting a nonchalance he didn't feel. His silk shirt was the kind purchased by people who unwaveringly equate "expensive" with "tasteful," but it had the virtue of distracting the eye from his open-toed shoes.

The egregious condition of his toenails would have put me off my breakfast, if it hadn't been years since I'd taken that meal.

I made a show of consulting my watch, though this was the sole appointment of the day—of the month, in fact. “Nine o'clock,” I said. “You would be Mr. Renninger?”

“Wally Kim sent me,” said Renninger.

“Wally's a good customer. Do you have anything else to say for yourself?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah.” His brow furrowed as he struggled to recall the security phrase he'd been given. He hadn't been told it was a security phrase, so it was going to take an intuitive leap. By my reckoning he had about thirty seconds to make the connection.

Suddenly his eyes brightened. “Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the—” and his lips and tongue were poised to utter what is known to linguists as the voiceless velar plosive, and to the rest of us as the “k” sound. He was going to say “country.” The word hung unspoken in the air for a second, during which I could sense Renninger's mental tires spinning. Finally, they found purchase, and he concluded the sentence correctly: “party,” not “country.”

“Very good,” I said. “Now we're in business.”

Renninger wiped his sweaty palms on his shirt, leaving broad damp tracks across the silk. “I wondered why Wally kept going on about that. He didn't say it was a password.”

“A password is easily compromised; it's best if you don't realize you know it.”

“What if I hadn't said it?”

“The entire section of floor you're standing on, and its analogues on the lower stories, would have teleported away, and you and the area rug would have enjoyed an express trip to the basement. Triggered automatically, even if I were incapacitated.”

“Can’t be too careful, I guess.”

“Indeed.”

“I think it’s this teleporting business I came to see you about. Wally Kim wouldn’t come out and say it—he kept skating around it—but he managed to imply pretty heavily that your shipping services work by—”

“Magic?”

“Yeah, magic. Wizardry. Sorcery. Voodoo.”

“Well, voodoo is something entirely different.”

“But you—”

“Yes, I use magic. Conjunction. Sometimes called abjuration, but the only difference is point of view. ‘Magic’ will suffice, between us.”

“And your services—”

“I will move your cargo, instantaneously, from anywhere in the world, to anywhere in the world, using only my mind. Tell me, what is your stock-in-trade?”

Renninger wiped off his palms again. His slacks now sported streaks of perspiration to match his shirt. “Well, it’s—does it matter? I was told—”

“If you were a saint, you wouldn’t be here, Mr. Renninger. What do you deal in?”

“Um. Pharmaceuticals.”

“Fine. Then the advantages of my service must be immediately apparent to you. In exchange for my fee, I eliminate all of your risk and most of your overhead. No more bribes; no more border crossings; no more transoceanic shipments. No more flying the stuff in at night in a disused airliner with the running lights off. No more entrusting a million dollars’ worth of merchandise to a lead-footed flunky who can’t drive from here to there without getting pulled over for speeding.”

“Would it be presumptuous if I were to ask—”

“For a demonstration? Of course.” I didn’t know to what degree my finishing Renninger’s sentences actually intimidated him, but it took negligible effort on my part. They always ask the same things.

I backed away from the desk and turned slightly in my chair, glancing out the window behind me. “Is that your yellow convertible parked on the street out front?”

“Yeah.”

“Hold out your hand.” I closed my eyes, opened my mind to allow the formation, and release, of a particular thought. It was done. For one of my faculties, such a simple conjuration over so short a distance requires no gestures or verbal incantation. I heard Renninger gasp as the sport coat that he’d left in his back seat suddenly appeared, draped over his outstretched arm.

The rest was negotiation.

When it was over I handed him a folder containing a set of blueprints and drawings. Taken together, they delineated the twin chambers Renninger would have to construct, one at the point of manufacture—somewhere in Thailand—and one here in the States. And ugly chambers they were, with floors whose tile pattern was a deliberately-chosen dog’s breakfast of clashing hues, and walls painted in swirls of avocado, burnt orange, and harvest gold that would make Peter Max reach for the Dramamine.

“Their uniqueness,” I explained, “eliminates the possibility of misdirected shipments caused by my accidentally visualizing a similar, but incorrect, location during the procedure. And having an identical origin and destination eases the stress of sending such a large mass.”

“Can I ask you something, one non-saint to another?”

“Go ahead.”

“This power you have; you just use it to make money?”

“If there’s a better way of keeping score in this life than money, I haven’t found it.”

“But you could do anything; teleport a tumor out of someone’s brain, or place a Green Beret squad in the middle of an al-Qaeda den—”

“No living matter. It’s the main shortcoming of my discipline, I’m afraid.”

“Nothing alive at all?”

“At all. But, like Microsoft, I can repurpose a bug into a feature. In this case, I can offer all my clients free decontamination of each shipment.”

On that jovial note, we parted company—briefly. Renninger only got as far as the doorway before turning back. He gave a nervous little laugh. “Say, what happens if I renege? I go blind? Turn into a toad? Get struck down by blue bolts from the heavens?”

“Not at all. You can terminate our arrangement at any time. In any case, the punishments you mention are beyond my capability. A magical discipline, such as teleportation, takes a lifetime to master. Dabbling gets one nowhere.”

*

To reiterate a prior point, Renninger was trouble. It would be some time, however, before I would appreciate just how much greater than the ordinary allotment his particular brand of trouble extended.

At the outset, everything went normally. Renninger paid his fees promptly and in the agreed-upon manner, and I moved his cargo; he quickly became just another client. At the time, I didn’t have any reason to think I wasn’t teleporting enormous quantities of “pharmaceuticals” from southeast Asia to the USA, just as he’d claimed. All I knew was that he’d set up the chambers just as he’d been instructed, and I was moving large masses between the two on a regular basis. Beyond that, I didn’t want to know anyway. Ignorance, in particular instances, really is bliss.

If I’d made a habit of watching the news, I might have gotten wise to the situation sooner. Instead, I didn’t find out anything was amiss until I came home one evening, having earlier facilitated one of Renninger’s shipments, to find the police waiting.

That in itself didn't bother me very much. The chances of any of my clients' misdeeds being pinned on me are miniscule. Even if I confessed, no one would believe me. For that matter, even if everything went wrong and I ended up taking the fall for my part in a particular act of smuggling, a few years spent out of circulation in some correctional institution wouldn't be any great shakes for someone like me.

But they bundled me into the car, not to haul me in for questioning, but to take me downtown to the smoldering remains of the office building whose top floor I had occupied until a few hours prior.

It was a Hiroshima in miniature; all the material of an eight-story building condensed into a single story's worth of refuse. The surrounding structures hadn't fared so well either; each had lost about a quarter of its mass and would likely have to be pulled down altogether.

As we threaded our way through the conglomeration of emergency vehicles clogging the street, they reassured me that I wasn't a suspect, but that I had the longest tenure of any tenant in the building and was therefore their best prospect for a witness.

Had I noticed any suspicious characters lurking around? I had not. Did I have any enemies? Not that I knew of. What did I know about any of the more recently-arrived tenants? Not a thing. In this economy, people moved in and out of the building faster than they could change the names in the directory: lawyers, tax accountants, one-or-two-man design firms, would-be entrepreneurs of all sorts. The entire building turned over every two years or so, except for my own eighth floor (and the seven offices directly beneath mine, which I rented under various names and kept vacant to facilitate my aforementioned booby trap; needless to say, I wasn't telling them *that*).

My first thought, I must confess, was that it had been magic and that I had been the target. Unlikely; we practitioners of the arcane arts were not in competition, and generally kept out of one another's way. In fact I didn't think I could even locate more than a few of my colleagues off the top of my head.

And no, it wasn't magic—not that I suggested this possibility to the constabulary—just a whole lot of TNT, which had filled the largest of the first-floor offices from floor to ceiling, and had I noticed any tenants keeping odd hours or taking strange deliveries? Again, no. And had I notice any sudden increase in nearby drug activity, because they were trying to connect this to the other bombings...

Yes, other bombings. All over the country, various highly-placed figures in the drug-trafficking game had died early deaths after having some piece of real estate—an office, apartment, or warehouse—blown out from under them by astonishing quantities of dynamite concealed nearby. Apparently everyone knew about this except me.

I told the police what I knew, which was nothing, and we dutifully stood and shook our heads for a moment, and they dropped me back at my house with instructions to call if I thought of anything helpful.

*

By the following dawn, the fact that I recalled no suspicious activity of the mundane variety had convinced me that the explosion *had* to be related to me. I made my way back to the site; the street was taped off but otherwise deserted this early in the morning. The air was thick with the stink of smoke and ash.

At first, I saw nothing. There's little useful difference between a pile of rubble at night and a pile of rubble in broad daylight. But as I scanned the wreckage, my eye settled on some very familiar sights.

Anyone else would have had to clamber through the treacherous ruins to investigate. For me, of course, it was the work of a moment to reach out with my mind and retrieve the artifacts in question. They appeared at my feet.

Several floor tiles of wildly mismatched colors. And a section of drywall, painted in a hideous pattern of avocado, burnt orange, and harvest gold.

It all fell into place.

For some weeks, I'd been teleporting TNT for Renninger instead of drugs. How would I have known? Not being clairvoyant, I can't see the stuff; I can only feel the mass with my mind. Renninger had selected a target, built his receiving chamber nearby, loaded up his origin chamber with dynamite connected to timed detonators, and contacted me. In each case, I'd been the one to pull the trigger, placing the bomb—utterly untraceable—at ground zero with my mind. And as long as only one receiving chamber existed at a time, I'd never know the difference. I orient on the pattern, not the physical location.

So Renninger had knocked off his top competitors one at a time, presumably intending to expand his business to occupy the resultant vacuum, and for a *coup de grâce*, he'd meant to tie up the solitary loose end by tricking the assassin into assassinating himself.

He couldn't know that I do all my work in an apartment I maintain specifically for that purpose, whose layout and decoration are conducive to the massive degree of concentration required. The office is only for meeting prospective clients; my net losses from the explosion were the desk, chair, and rug. I'll have to find another one before I resume taking new clients.

But I have outstanding business to attend to first.

*

There are those who would argue that I brought this on myself; that I should have maintained the proper wizardly air of mystery instead of explaining my work to Renninger in such detail. That it was my fault for exposing the weakness he turned to his advantage. That may be. But Renninger isn't the only one who can mislead.

I told him that a single magical discipline takes a lifetime to master. That is true.

That's why I learned necromancy first. Once I'd learned that, I had all the time in the world to acquire the others, of which teleportation was only one.

I told him that living matter can't be teleported. That, also, is true.

Unfortunately for Renninger, I haven't been alive for decades.

I'm going to find out where Renninger sleeps. I'll appear from thin air at his bedside, wake him, and wait until I see that precise instant of recognition in his eyes. And then I'll exact my revenge, bit by bit, bringing to bear every wizardly discipline known to humanity and some that are not.

"Blue bolts from the heavens," Renninger had said. I don't know where he got such a florid turn of phrase.

But it'll do for a start.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Kevin McClintock is a four-time award-winning journalist working for the a large daily newspaper in Southwest Missouri, but his true passion has, and always will be, penning fiction. He has sold several horror short stories since 2009, and is working on his first novel. He is married to his journalist/writer wife, is a stepfather to two wonderful girls, and personally takes care of two dogs, two cats, two guinea pigs and one seemingly ageless goldfish.

To the Hills

by Kevin McClintock

Cletus ignored the banging on his front door. He even said as much to his wife.

Yet the banging continued.

“Who the hell is that?” his wife moaned. She rolled over, taking most of the bedcovers with her. When it didn’t stop, Cletus pushed the pillow over his head and face.

“They’ll go away,” he spoke into his pillow. But they didn’t. If anything, the banging grew more insistent.

“Cletus,” his wife wailed.

Snarling, Cletus tumbled out of bed, nearly kicking over the bedpan at the foot of his bed. He didn’t bother dressing. Naked, he stumped through the living room and threw open the door.

It was Jeb—big dumb Jeb, standing there with hat in hand. The man looked absolutely terrified.

“What?” Cletus asked, his voice hard.

Jeb began to stutter, a nasty habit of his.

“Spit it out.”

“You’re naked,” Jeb finally said, working hard to avoid straying his eyes down past his friend’s neck. Jeb’s second nasty habit was stating the obvious.

“It’s half-past three,” Cletus said with a tired sigh. “What do you want?”

“We’ve done been invaded.”

Done been invaded—the words made no sense to Cletus’ groggy mind.

“They’s attacking,” Jeb continued, spying Cletus’ skeptical look. “They’s fell from the skies, near here, over in Grovers Mill. You’s ‘sposed to grab your shotgun and come along with me.”

“Grovers Mill? Why the hell would I want to go way the hell out to Grovers Mill?” That little hamlet, little more than a farming community, lay a good five miles away.

“‘Cause that’s where we’ve done been invaded!”

“Hog-spit,” Cletus said, but he nonetheless turned to dress, pulling down his shotgun from its spot on the wall when he was done.

“You better not be joshin’ me,” Cletus said, throwing some loose shells into a coat pocket.

“We’ve done been invaded,” Jeb said. “Scout’s honor.”

Cletus’ wife stirred in the bed. “Would the two of you just leave so I can steal me some decent sleep!”

Outside, Cletus hopped on one foot as he slipped on a boot. “Who’s invaded us? The Germans?”

Jeb shrugged his huge round shoulders. “Martians, they say.”

Cletus nearly tripped. “*Martians?*”

“The others are down at city hall.”

*

The “others” turned out to be Mercer County Sheriff Big Jim, City of Cranbury Fire Chief Terry and roughly a dozen residents, most of them crusty farmers like Cletus. They all were clustered around a wall radio. Scared voices were spilling out from the speakers.

“Got him!” Jeb yelled triumphantly. The others broke away from the radio and promptly circled Cletus. They looked relieved to see him, patting him on the back or grabbing his hand for a hearty shake.

“What’s this about an invasion?” Cletus asked Big Jim.

“That’s why we sent Jeb for you,” the sheriff said, a big fan man prone to sweating. “Felt like we needed your military experience.”

Cletus had been sent overseas back in 1918, but he hadn’t seen any combat. ‘Course, he didn’t tell the others that. To them, he’d killed nearly forty Germans, five of them by his lonesome holding only a knife. Now Cletus regretted those boasts for free beers over at Miller’s Tavern.

Before he could answer, though, Big Jim got all serious and asked if he’d had to deal with falling fireballs or aliens while fighting the Hun in France. Cletus just stared at the burly sheriff as if he’d fallen off his rocker.

Fireballs? “‘Course not. Why even suggest such a fool thing?”

“‘Cause that’s what we’re facing.”

“Who?”

“We are—all’s us. We’ve done being invaded.” The fat sheriff turned to gesture at the radio. “Radio folk say a ‘huge flaming object’ has dropped on a farm near Grovers Mills, and the end of this object’s screwing loose. Some Army General described the landing as some sort of goddamned invasion force from Mars.”

“They’re off their fool rockers!”

“Well,” Big Jim said, “if—”

“Something’s happening,” one of the farmers yelled. Most of the group had meandered back to the radio. Cletus and Big Jim joined them.

The radio said:

“Good heavens, something’s wriggling out of the shadow like a gray snake. Now it’s another one, and another. They look like tentacles to me. There, I can see the thing’s body. It’s large as a bear and it glistens like wet leather. But that face. It... It’s indescribable. I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it. The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent. The mouth is V-shaped with saliva dripping from its rimless lips that seem to quiver and pulsate. The thing is rising up. The crowd falls back. They’ve seen enough. This is the most extraordinary experience. I can’t find words. I’m pulling this microphone with me as I talk. I’ll have to stop the description until I’ve taken a new position. Hold on, will you please, I’ll be back in a minute.”

His voice faded and was replaced with soft piano music.

Cletus couldn’t help but shiver, and he struggled to find his voice. “Gotta be some kind of Halloween prank.”

“Ladies and gentlemen. Ladies and gentlemen, here I am, in back of a wall that adjoins Mr. Wilmuth’s garden. From here I get a sweep of the whole scene. I’ll give you every detail as long as I can talk, as long as I can see. More state police have arrived. They’re drawing up a cordon in front of the pit, about thirty of them. No need to push the crowd back now. They’re willing to keep their distance. The captain is conferring with someone. We can’t quite see whom. Oh yes, I believe its Professor Pierson. Yes, it is. Now they’ve parted. The Professor moves around one side, studying the object, while the captain and two policemen advance with something in their hands. I can see it now.

It's a white handkerchief tied to a pole... a flag of truce. If those creatures know what that means... Wait! Something's happening!"

"What's happening?" Jeb asked the others.

The others shushed him into silence.

From the radio's speakers sounded horrified screams.

"Why are those damn fools screaming?" Fire Chief Terry wanted to know. His words were immediately drowned out by hushes and hisses.

"A humped shape is rising out of the pit," the radio announcer said. The poor bastard sounded terrified to Cletus' ears. *"I can make out a small beam of light against a mirror. What's that? There's a jet of flame springing from the mirror, and it leaps right at the advancing men. It strikes them head on! Good Lord, they're turning into flame!"*

The screaming multiplied. The sounds chilled the listeners to the bone marrow.

"Now the whole field's caught fire. The woods... the barns... the gas tanks of automobiles... it's spreading everywhere. It's coming this way. About twenty yards to my right..."

"That ain't good," Sheriff Big Jim quietly whispered to the others. "Ain't no good at all."

Bulletins came in over the radio. The Martians were taking to the skies atop mechanical, three-legged machines. These machines were fanning out across the New Jersey countryside, sowing seeds of destruction and doom.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a new radio announcer said. Cletus moved to spike the volume. *"I have a grave announcement to make. Incredible as it may seem, both the observations of science and the evidence of our eyes lead to the inescapable assumption that those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of an invading army from the planet Mars. The battle which took place tonight at Grovers Mill has ended in one of the most startling defeats ever suffered by any army in modern times; seven thousand men armed with rifles and machine guns pitted against a single fighting machine of the invaders from Mars. One hundred and*

twenty known survivors, the rest strewn over the battle area from Grovers Mill to Plainsboro, crushed and trampled to death under the metal feet of the monster, or burned to cinders by its heat ray. The monster is now in control of the middle section of New Jersey and has effectively cut the state through its center.”

“Christ on a crutch,” one of the farmers growled. He gripped his pitchfork.

“Tarnation,” Cletus whispered in agreement. His face had bleached white when he heard about the destruction of the army divisions outside Grovers Mill. He’d hoped this was some sort of pre-Halloween hoax, but now he was convinced the unthinkable was indeed happening. “We’re no more than five miles from Grovers Mill—and those Martian bastards are headed this way.”

“What do we do, Cletus?” the Sheriff was asking him. “You being a fighting man and all.”

It took Cletus a few moments to speak. His voice felt that dry and thick. “I guess we should go out and meet the darn thing in battle.”

The others slowly nodded in agreement.

*

Women wept in front of their radios, so did their husbands. Everywhere, people ran into the streets, unsure where to go or what to do. Many took to their cars, speeding around like mad and covering their faces with wet towels to protect themselves from the gas. In Newark, traffic cops watched dumbfounded as dozens of automobiles careened through intersections, heedless of stoplights, pedestrians or other motorists. Panicked listeners tied up phone lines, calling their loved ones to warn them or just to say good-bye and jamming the switchboards or radio stations, newspapers and police headquarters.

*

An hour later, they were slowly moving across an open pasture, heading toward Grovers Mill. All of them had guns, except for the one farmer holding his trusty pitchfork. A pack of braying hunting dogs led the way.

“How long ‘for we get there?” the Sheriff asked, his face red and his breath hitched. He was gripping his police-issued pistol.

“Just over the next hill, I reckon,” one of the farmers said.

“You said that back at the *last* hill.”

“I’m right this time.”

“How do you kill a robot?” another farmer asked, clutching his .22 rifle close to his chest.

“Simple,” another said, “you hunt ‘em down like you’s would a deer.”

“Deers ain’t made of metal,” another pointed out.

“They got legs, dummy, and it’s the legs you go for. Take out the legs, and the bastards can’t walk and stomp.”

Another nodded. “Cain’t go invadin’ wit no legs to stand on.”

“You surely got that one right.”

Up ahead, the dogs pitched a howl. Seconds later, Jeb asked them what that sound yonder was.

“What sound?”

“*That* sound.”

They paused and listened. Cletus could hear it after a spell—a rumbling sound in the distance.

“Artillery,” the mayor said.

Cletus shook his head. “Sounds more like thunder.”

Like most October days in New Jersey, the night was overcast and gloomy, with a chance for rain.

“The boys are battlin’ the bastards,” one of the farmers said, spitting a rope of tobacco from his lips. He sounded strangely pleased at the prospect of humans fighting the steel bastards toe to toe.

It *did* sound like a battle, Cletus admitted to himself.

They continued their walk. At one point, Cletus pointed off at the horizon.

“Y’ll see that?” The eastern sky was puckered a pinkish glow.

“Reckon that’s a fire,” the sheriff said. “Y’ll reckon?”

“We reckon,” one of the farmers said, spitting.

“Could be,” another said.

“Fire from them alien fire guns,” the Mayor added. They could hear him gulping.

“Or it’s from lightning,” Cletus said. “There’s a storm brewing yonder.”

“There’s a storm brewing, all right,” the man with the hounds said. “That there’s probably their ray guns, laying waste to all that’s good and righteous in the world.”

“You got that right,” another chimed in.

“What do you think one of them metal things sound like when they be coming at ‘ya?”

“Thunder of the Gods,” one said.

“Earthquakes—or least little tiny ones, I reckon. Probably can hear ‘em coming from a mile away, I reckon, c’sidering how tall them news radioman made ‘em out to be. We’ll have time—”

They eventually came across a man atop a John Deere tractor, puttering down a muddy road. The man tipped them his hat, and then frowned.

“What the nine hell’s are you boys doing out there? Coon hunting?”

“Best you keep going south,” one of the farmers told the man atop the tractor, “Or the heat ray’ll get you.”

“Damn drunk fools,” the farmer atop the tractor said, moving past them.

They continued on down the path, until the path ended, and they fanned out across an opened pasture. A plane buzzed above them, heading south.

“Air Force?” one of the farmers asked Cletus.

“Could be,” he said. It’d been too dark to identify.

And that’s when the Mayor screamed. A farmer standing next to him was so startled that he blasted a chunk of buckshot at his feet, barely missing his toes. As if on cue, the others blasted the night air with bullets and curses. It took a while for the Sheriff and Cletus to rein the startled men in. Except for the Mayor, that is. He continued screaming, and was now pointing at something to the south.

“Shut up that wallerin’ you damn fool,” the Sheriff said with a growl, but he and the others followed the Mayor’s finger, which was pointing up at the tree line. And there, thanks to the splash of the moon high above, they saw.

Rising above the nearby tree line was a dark mass. It looked like a skinny tower—similar to what had been aired on the radio.

“It’s one of them!” a farmer screamed. He threw down his rifle and disappeared into the forest. The others scattered, cursing and sobbing.

“Watch out for the heat ray!”

“It’s moving this way!”

“Hide!”

“Run!”

“Think it got me!”

Cletus dove into a nearby depression, ignoring the muck at its bottom as he aimed the shotgun's barrel at the distant black lump. He thought he could see the thin black needle representing the thing's heat ray device. Without hesitation, Cletus pulled the trigger. He closed his eyes at the burst of light, and ignored the roaring blast or the sharp recoil against his shoulder. Seconds later, he heard the buckshot splatter against the Martian's metal, making tiny plinking sounds.

"Hog-tie that son-o-bitch!" screamed the Sheriff, emptying his pistol at the distant invader. Within seconds, the air sagged from spat metal, as aimed rifles and pistols and shotguns shattered the night's silence.

Cletus turned to the Sheriff. "Gotta move!"

"Why?"

"We're sitting ducks to the thing's heat ray," Cletus bellowed, pointing up at the black mass before them. "We need to flank its ass."

The Sheriff nodded. "Go left. We'll go right."

So far, the machine hadn't moved, though just seeing the massive size of it on the dark horizon yonder risked many a fainted spill. At any moment, Cletus and the others feared the kiss of its heat ray.

They kept up a steady fight, moving around until they had the inferno thing surrounding. They pumped slug after slug at the thing—most missing, some hitting.

Others joined them as the fight continued, rural strangers slinking in from tiny villages or lonely homesteads. They'd heard the sounds of battle, had seen the glow of the fire on the horizon, and had hastened to help fend off the invading giants of steel.

There was a scream off to Cletus' right. He and Sheriff Jim slunk over to the man, who was clawing at a bloody spot in his shirt.

"What happened?" Cletus said to the man, holding his hands against the spurting wound.

“Alien...” the man sputtered in pain, “alien done shot me.”

Cletus nodded. It wasn't a heat ray, thank goodness, but it was obvious this thing looming over them bore nothing but ill intentions.

The Sheriff turned and bellowed for the men to “keep up a steady stream of hell.” And they did just that, sounds of combat rolling deep into the dead of dark. And still the machine held sway, defiant, silent as a sentry, staring down at their hidey-holes from above the tips of the treetops.

And on the fight went, well past midnight and on toward dawn. At one point, Cletus led a booted charge against the silent Martian, firing a storm's hail of lead. One old-timer, who'd been a teen during the hey-days of the Civil War, even brandished a Confederate saber. They got up close to the machine, too. It loomed up in the sky, standing on three metal legs. The old fart swung his sword, but the thing shattered against the extraterrestrial steel of the enemy before them. That took the wind from their sails, and Cletus ordered a hasty retreat.

As dawn approached them, a cry went up along the southern fighting line that someone had seen a second Martian war machine in the woods behind them. Cletus' heart froze up. He gathered about him about thirty men and they all high-tailed it into the forest, hoping to outflank the Martian invader. But they came to a brick wall, and so they turned back. By this time, they were lost. All they could do was follow the sounds of battle. Stumbling through the forest, they came out behind the first Martian machine. They ducked, cursing, as poorly aimed bullets from the farmers over yonder hissed near their heads.

Cletus aimed at the Martian and fired, pumped and fired, pumped and—

He sat there for a second, shotgun poised in his arms. And then he cursed and threw the gun down at his feet. Cupping his mouth with his hands, he screamed at the men around him to cease their fire. He had to bellow it more than a dozen times before the distant gunfire slackened and then died away.

“That you Cletus?” the Sheriff yelled over to him. “What the hell, Cletus. Is the thing dead?”

“Ain’t no *thing*. Ain’t no—”

Before Cletus could answer, though, the men were lifting their voices in victory. With the pinkish sky brightening behind them, they raised their rifles and held them aloft, jumping up and down, men hugging men, men hugging dogs, men dancing drunken jigs in the mud and dew-covered grass.

“It ain’t no alien!” Cletus bellowed at the men.

“Eh?” yelled the Sheriff, who was slowly walking up to the alien standing between them.

“*Ain’t no alien!*” Cletus bellowed.

“What in the nine hells is it then?”

Cletus was too embarrassed to answer.

*

On the night of Oct. 30, 1938, more than one hundred Mercer County residents met a towering presence in the night, roughly three miles southwest of Cranbury. There, they engaged a lone Martian invader with an assortment of pistols, rifles, shotguns and muskets. In all, they fired more than a thousand rounds. Four men were wounded from self-inflicted or friendly fire, two of them seriously.

When the sun peeked over the rim of the Earth, the exhausted Cranbury and Mercer County residents discovered that what they’d believed was a looming, towering Martian riding atop a three-legged machine was in actuality a looming, towering three-legged water tower.

In all, the tower had received nearly three hundred “wounds,” and more than eight hundreds gallons of water was lost by Halloween night.

*

“It was a hoax,” Cletus’ wife said. She sat in her favorite chair, sewing, while a yawning Cletus searched through the *New York Times* for the story. It didn’t take

him long to find it. It was a front page exclusive, above the banner, with a 22-point headline.

“I know it was a hoax,” Cletus said. “But why do such a fool thing in the first place?”

“A Halloween hoax, I reckon,” she said simply.

Cletus just grunted, reading the story. After a while, he barked out a mocking cough of laughter. “Listen to this—it’s what that idiot Orson Welles said last night while on the air? Said what they’d done was a radio version of ‘dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying Boo! Starting now, we couldn’t soap all your windows and steal all your garden gates by tomorrow night. . . so we did the best next thing. We annihilated the world before your very ears. So goodbye everybody, and remember the terrible lesson you learned tonight. That grinning, glowing, globular invader of your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and nobody’s there, that was no Martian. . . it’s Halloween.”

He turned to his wife. “Can you believe such blind stupid gall?”

Cletus’ wife just clucked her teeth.

“Lost me a good night’s sleep ‘cause of it.”

The doorbell rang.

Grumbling, Cletus rose from the chair to open it up. He half expected it to be Sheriff Jim or even big dumb Jeb. Instead, it was four kids dressed up for Halloween.

“Trick or treat!”

One was dressed as a ghost, the second a witch, and the third a homeless bum. He couldn’t figure out what the last kid was. As he reached for the candy, he asked the fourth kid what he was supposed to be.

The kid puffed out his chest rather proudly and said, “A Martian. From Mars.”

With a growl, Cletus tossed the candy back into its bowl and slammed the door in the boy's face.

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HONORABLE MENTION

JR Ralls has studied in communist Cuba, painted Chinese characters at the top of Mt. Fuji, ridden a bicycle from Portland to San Francisco, and played with an African Spider Monkey named Gizmo. He also has a master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and would like to know if you want fries with that. This is his first published work of fiction.

First Night on the Job

by JR Ralls

Being head waiter isn't just my job, it's what I am. That may sound silly and a bit pompous to someone who's just started their first day here at Gallagia, but believe me, when a deal in the Senate of Sentients has to be worked out over a five-martini lunch, or an asteroid miner hits it big, or some schmuck wants to ask his gal of 10 years to finally tie the knot, they all come here. And it's my job, and now yours as well, to see that everything runs smoother than mercury on ice.

How do we do that? By reading people. Like that girl over there, the redhead. No, not the Remelian, the middle-age woman in the short black dress, the one visiting from Earth. Yeah, her.

See how she's working the guy on her right while at the same time making sure not to anger the guy on her left? She's going to ensure the guy on her right continues to buy her drinks and boost her ego even though she's already decided to go home with the guy on her left.

How can I tell that? I've seen her a million times before, just in different bodies. Oh for Pete's sake! No, she's not a shape shifter, I was just speaking metaphorically. Stop being so literal or you'll get very annoying, very quickly.

See, you've got to keep your eyes open in this business. Noticing body language is the difference between getting a tip that could pay for your kid's quantum downloads and having to stop a twelve foot tall gelatinous blob from eating the cook.

That actually happened to me. On my first day here in fact. Gods, I remember it like it was yesterday. Which in a technical sense it was, as our host planet's day takes twenty-two Terran years to make a rotation. But nobody likes a pedant so shut your yap.

Remember, I got the job in the traditional manner of my people—I lied my ass off. I mean, running a lemonade stand when you were seven is basically having extensive chef and waiter experience, right?

Well, the major-domo of the time saw through my pimply-faced exterior and knew I was full of it. She was a gigantic Litzock named Bertha. Man, her parents had a mean sense of humor, to give someone who looked like a 400 pound Gila monster with six legs, two arms, and four eyestalks that name—like a hillbilly giving his boy the name of Suzy. Because any Litzock with a Dirling name would have to be tough or they wouldn't be alive for long. Perhaps she saw potential in me... or perhaps she just wanted to jump my bones. She did that at a solstice party a few months later. I got a raise the next day, but my bones hurt like hell for a month. Damned odd lot the Litzocks.

Whatever it was, I got the job, was shown a training holo, put in a tux, and shoved onto the floor. Now Gallagia was a different place back then. We were still the nicest joint in the sector, but the sector was a lot looser in the earlies. More miners, fewer diplomats and if you wanted something done, well then you just did it yourself cause there were damn few paper-pushers around to give you a form to get GalGov to wipe your ass for you.

So there I was; shoved with hardly any training onto the revolving sphere. If you think the waiter's gravity tracks can get a little wonky today you should have seen it back then. Like every young whippersnapper I bounced myself up the curve with all my might and wound up in orbit around the sphere. I was spinning and wailing with no idea of how to stop. So of course the matron ran up and all the old time

regulars began to count off as I went around the sphere, each time failing to grab the safety ring. “One! Two! Three!” all the way up to nine with me grinning like a jackass. I flopped and flailed until I managed to grab the damned loop. Nine orbits... I believe that record held until... well until you broke it yesterday. How many was it? Ten? Oh right, twelve.

Anyhow, Bertha pulled me down and looked sideways and backwards at me as only a Litzock can. “OK Dirtling, you’ve had your fun. Now get back to work and get table seven’s order.”

If what I had been doing was fun, then I was perfectly willing to give work a try. I very slowly pulled myself up the gravity well and asked the guest how he was doing this evening.

“I’m doing great. How about you? Did you have a nice trip? Will I see you next fall? Haw haw.”

He was Terran too, but actually expected me to laugh at this... well I wouldn’t call it a joke. Perhaps it was an imitation of a joke as told by someone whose sense of humor had been surgically removed at birth.

I just smiled and chuckled as best I could. Being a nice little toady I asked if I could get him anything. He ordered a Supreme then pointed at the bar and in a lecherous voice said, “That humanoid over there... by any chance do you think she’s a Kokateza?”

“Yes sir, I believe it is.”

“Oooooooh... Is it true that they have two?”

The things people ask waiters has never stopped surprising me over the years. “I have heard that as well although I can’t confirm it from personal experience, sir.”

“Give her a plate of cold asparagus and invite her over to my table,” and as soon as he said that he got an urgent call, listened for a few seconds, then yelled “Charge everything to my room!” and took off.

Even though he wasn't there anymore an order is an order. I got the cold asparagus for the Kokateza and explained the situation to her. A saucy thing she was too. Eyelashes like butterfly wings and if her skirt was any shorter it would have been a belt. She purred thanks to me and brushed her hair in a way that could have caused a riot in a monastery.

I left her table and didn't give her a second thought, at least not a clean one, for the next half hour. It seemed to be going all right until I heard a gurgling faalumphant of great cacophony mixed with something that sounded vaguely like the Gal-standard word for "Betrayed of my emotional state!" Sigh. Standard is a lousy language. Far too diplomatic in my opinion. I've offered numerous times to create a Gal-standard lexicon of swear words but the council has never gotten back to me.

I turned and saw this gelatinous blob pointing his quivering tentacle at the sexy humanoid. She was twittering her ears, which is basically a blush for her kind. She had all the reason to be embarrassed and she had taken off a lot of what little she had been wearing, had two guy's hands on her knees, and was in the middle of doing a most interesting trick involving her tongue and a kumquat.

"Why? Why are you dishonoring my clan, my lineage, my great step-uncle, etc., etc." He loomed over what was quickly becoming a very lonely table for the gal and all I was doing was marveling how this was the first time I had ever heard someone shout 'Etc, etc.'

"Oh baby, it's not like that. I was just... just sitting here and having a good time when these men showed up and... well I couldn't be rude could I?" Her butterfly lashes were twittering so fast that I was surprised they didn't pop off and fly around the room.

"RUDE!" he bellowed. "DO I SOUND LIKE I CARE ABOUT BEING RUDE!"

The fifteen foot tall slime creature was disrupting the restaurant now and without me being consulted an impromptu consensus seemed to develop among all of the nearby waiters: Let the new guy handle the enraged gelatinous blob.

Someone shoved me forward and whispered/shouted in my ear, “Take care of it or you’re out of here.”

Getting out of there sounded like a pretty good alternative at that point but for some reason I stepped forward just in time to hear the gal plead, “But Baby! Baby... it wasn’t my fault! They... they served me asparagus!” She seemed to grasp onto that last word like a life preserver. “Yes, asparagus. They gave it to me. It’s not my fault!”

“Asparagus!” the green blob screamed. “Oh my poor angel! What fiend slipped you that aphrodisiac?”

That seemed as good a point as any to butt in, so as politely as I could I interrupted and said, “Sir, the lady was given the dish by a gentleman who left, but I assure you that our cook is well versed in species chemistry and—”

“The COOK! So he’s the one who is RESPONSIBLE!”

“No sir, that’s not it.”

“Then are YOU responsible?!”

“No sir!”

“The cook then!” And he bolted (as much as slime can bolt) for the kitchen.

Trying to grab him would have been futile so I racked my brains and hoped that wouldn’t be an equally futile maneuver. What could I do? The blob wanted someone to blame and it looked like the cook was first in line. What could get the blob’s attention fixated on someone who wasn’t part of my crew?

That’s when I remembered something: The lady had batted her eyes and flirted with me before I served her the asparagus. I dashed for her table in a mad hope, and there it was. I grabbed the plate and held it like a holy talisman. “Sir! She didn’t eat the asparagus! Look! Look!”

He turned (as much as he could turn) and asked the gal if this was true.

If she would have just lied he would have probably absorbed me for casting asparagus on her honor... I mean, for casting aspersions on her honor. But thankfully she didn't seem to be the sharpest crayon in the box and instead she pleaded weakly, "I... I smelled it."

A silence overcame the restaurant. Everyone was waiting for what the blob would do. He slumped, as if admitting something to himself that he had known all along. "You can walk home and breathe vacuum for all I care," he told her as he slithered out the door.

The restaurant returned to some semblance of normalcy and as a reward I was hired on full time. Been here ever since. But if I hadn't noticed that woman's body language who knows what would have happened? Granted her body language wasn't exactly subtle, but you get the drift.

It may sound silly, but I earned my uniform that night. Anything can matter and anything can be vital. So keep your eyes open and your mind sharp. It's a big universe out there and you never know what's going to be important. Now go give that Kokateza over there this plate of asparagus and tell her it's from me. That's a good lad.

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