



**A HOLIDAY OF SOME KIND, REAL OR INVENTED FOR
THE STORY, MUST PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN
EVERY STORY...**

Table of Contents

(No) Publisher's Note.....	3
Cartoons!	4
by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)	
The Transcendence of Pi.....	6
by Robert Mangeot	
Little Bone Joey.....	17
by Aaron Gudmunson	
The Gear Master's Wife.....	31
by John Burridge	
So Many Reasons to Celebrate the Season.....	38
by Steven E. Belanger	
Aplut.....	50
by Neil James Hudson	
Mister Yuk	63
by John P. Murphy	
The One Tree	70
by Merry Muhsman	

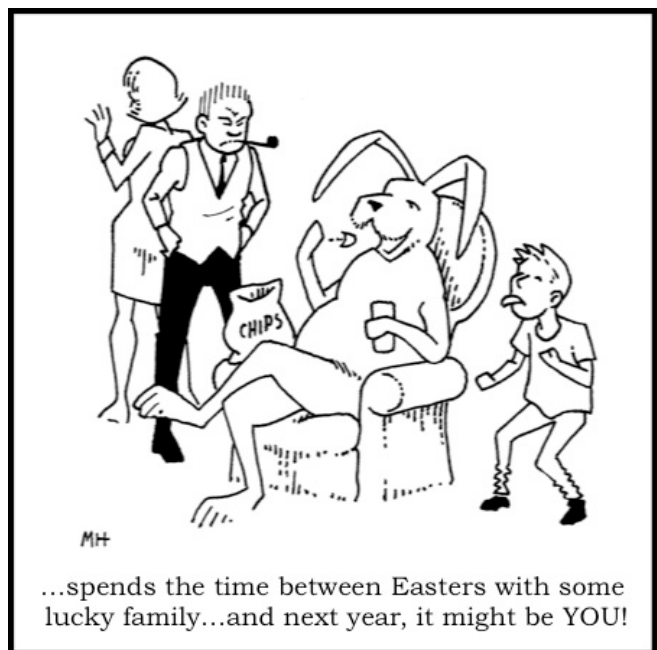
(No) Publisher's Note

There was no publisher's note in Issue #19, and we remarked that we might quit adding it. It's more work than you'd think and we've received less feedback about publisher's notes than any other aspect of OTP.

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #19 of On The Premises!

Keep writing and reading,

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



FIRST PLACE

Robert Mangeot lives in Nashville, Tennessee with his wife, one Pomeranian, and an undisclosed number of cats. His fiction has appeared in *Lowestoft Chronicle* and *OneTitle Magazine*. This story is his first sale to a paying market. In 2012 his novel manuscript won its category in the Colorado Gold Writing Contest and finished as a finalist in a contest sponsored by FinePrint Literary Management. When not writing, he is known to count things.

The Transcendence of Pi

by Robert Mangeot

Jon stood inside the wide circle embossed on his office floor. The gold leaf curled around him in an unbroken line, endlessly looping in on itself, but measurably finite, its circumference and diameter in constant relationship. Pi: the perfection of the universe made manifest. He wondered if there was time to add a fanfare, to let trumpets echo off the jagged Alps and ripple Lake Geneva announcing Dr. Jon Applewhit, the undisputed authority on perfection.

Then again, with so much of the mathematics world in Lausanne for the Pi Day symposium, he had the Applewhit persona to consider. That, and at a desk across the lab was something more improper and thus more irresistible: graduate assistant Izaka Rasemova.

Within the Institute Jon controlled an autonomous research team dubbed the Private Circle. His rivals, unable to match the subtlety and poetry of his algorithms, had long since drifted to other niches. In hours Jon would reveal pi had surrendered to him its secrets to the four-quadrillionth digit. In fact he had conquered its six-quadrillionth but had mastered too the art of milking grant money. With Jon at only fifty, the joke went that before he was done with pi

someone would need to name a bigger number, and they would name it Applewhitillion.

And yet he had been unable to solve Izaka.

She was sleeping with him of course, but in a pro forma sort of way, as if because nothing good was on television. He suspected other men shared her favors. The sheer absurdity of the idea drove him wild. Jon Applewhit, Nobel winner and definitive word on pi, was to Izaka not worth the minimal effort put into their fling. This from a woman who had passion in her depths, an easy confidence and low-heat smolder. Even now she poured over her presentation—something about interrelationships among his proofs—with quiet intensity.

For all the good rehearsing second fiddle did. After her on the agenda came Jon.

“Izaka?” Jon said. “I was thinking of some music to play me on.”

Izaka spun toward him on her castered chair. “The circle again, I see.”

“Around me,” Jon said, “the decimals wind into eternity. Each next number is unpredictable, a randomness in which repeats infinite patterns. I am standing within a perfect universe.”

Izaka shrugged, but then she often shrugged at him. Her time in the Private Circle demonstrated the mundane brilliance suited for government ministries or consultancies. He dreaded the day Izaka moved on, that he might never understand the indifference behind her ever-present grin.

“Come here,” Jon said, “and I’ll show you what else can be perfect about my circle.”

She stood and gathered up her papers. “Maybe after the reception. How do I look?”

Instead of her usual sweater and jeans Izaka wore a suit jacket and skirt, sensible but with a peek of skin and hint of form. With her styled hair, dark-rimmed glasses and flaring red lips, she looked just the cover academic to goose up mathematics journal circulation. When today she took the podium, Jon would share another piece of her with lesser minds.

“They will love you.”

“You mean it?” Izaka stretched out a leg sheathed in black satin tights. “Not a little racy?”

“More than a little racy. But you look beautiful.”

The compliment won him a peck on the cheek.

Laughter rose up from the courtyard, followed by the first strains of classical music. Out in the heated tent the Pi Day reception was underway—first wine with quiche and savory pies courtesy of Archimedia Software, and then it was into the MATHGEOM lecture hall for the symposium. Finally, after Jon had finished, otherwise sensible people would make fools of themselves. Prize-winning intellects charged with splitting atoms or with reducing spacetime to formulas would have cream pies thrown in their faces. They would race each other in pie-eating contests. They would drink themselves silly and sing cheers to 3.14159.

Tonight they would cheer Jon.

Department chair Roger Poundsworth entered the office, a Styrofoam pi symbol for a hat. His mere arrival earned the same dry kiss from Izaka.

She paused in the doorway before hustling off. “Thank you both for this.”

Jon sniffed at her scent lingering in the room. His nose unwound Izaka no further than citrus and lavender.

“What’s this look?” Roger said.

“Take that bloody thing off.”

Roger touched the pi symbol atop his head. “You should have one on as well. The students expect a spot of nonsense today.”

“I refuse. And I refuse advice from anyone in a damned foam hat.”

“He’s testy,” Roger said, working the rubber strap out from the folds of his chin. “You do realize you’re again about to redefine theoretical geometry?”

Jon looked out on the tent fluttering in the lake breeze. Another Pi Symposium, another Applewhit triumph booked. And when the music stopped tonight, Izaka would just as soon go home with the disc jockey.

“She won’t wait even five minutes to arrive with me at a pie-eating contest.”

“It’s like that, is it? Jon, must I again warn you off the grad students?”

Jon caught sight of Izaka swishing across the courtyard toward the reception. In the noon sun she left barely a shadow. “It’s all so casual with her.”

“Since when is that not your ideal situation?”

“It’s like she doesn’t care. How can she not care?”

“You haven’t shared the algorithms?”

Two human beings knew the deepest inner workings of their research, Jon and Roger, and Roger not the full sum. Jon had a pipeline going, the algorithms fed to peer reviews and academic journals, the drafts honed within the Private Circle, and there were the encrypted files banked for future withdrawal.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I wondered,” Roger said. “The way her paper has come together, I worried she had you contribute a bit much.”

Jon turned away from the window. “What’s that?”

“The paper she’s presenting. ‘Reslicing Pi: Proposed Changes in a Constant’s Application.’”

“It’s a rehash of my work. No more than introducing me.”

“Good Lord, Jon. What was the last draft of hers you reviewed?”

Her outline, Jon almost said, but he froze at the hard look Roger was giving. If Roger had tried that glower with the foam pi clamped to his round head, then Jon might have dismissed a growing unease. But the hat was in Roger's hands, Roger beginning to knead it, and Jon turned as cold as the snow-capped mountains outside.

"We discussed the work."

Roger blew out a sigh. "You'll want to get down there."

They headed out for the reception, down the marble hallway lined with odes to pi and Einstein's birthday taped on doors and pinned to bulletin boards.

"Of course her paper is good," Jon said. "It's a tribute to my proofs."

"It's a synthesis. And it's genius."

"Exactly my point."

"Her genius, old boy."

Jon processed that comment all the way down on the elevator and out into the courtyard. The March air shocked his skin and stung his throat. His work, her genius. Izaka, a genius.

"Better than four-quadrillionth good?"

Roger stopped them outside the tent. His breath steamed off in the wind. "More on the practical side. In a stroke, next generation supercomputing brought into view. Don't worry, there's reflected glory to go around. You especially."

"Me?"

"You really haven't paid attention, have you? We had excess baggage in the algorithms, it would seem. Your Izaka rooted out connections among the proofs and reached our conclusions in fewer steps."

"You're her advisor. You could have warned me."

“And you could have read her drafts, old boy. Or asked her on one of your weekends.”

Roger led the way inside through a quick round of glad-handing and up to the lead table, a round-top for eight. The others were already seated, sipping wine and showing no inclination to start on the salad and quiche. A centerpiece sprung forth with carnations and daisies. Chatting over it were Shu Yuan from Beijing and Newt Stamhold from Princeton; the Institute president beaming; a *Popular Science* reporter in a bad sport coat; and—deep in chummy discussion—Izaka and Archimedia CEO Howard Cully. Blood pulsed in Jon’s ears.

Jon settled into his chair, the debonair Cully on one side, Shu Yuan on the other. Shu was prim but attractive, a possible consolation prize if Izaka slipped away. Jon rarely pursued the married ones, but on Pi Day perhaps anything went.

Suddenly Cully wheeled and was upon Jon, all gleaming teeth and machismo. “Dr. Applewhit. *The* Jon Applewhit. It’s a pleasure—no, *honor*—to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“You have pi up to what, a quadrillion decimal points?”

“Three-quadrillion,” Izaka said. “Not to tease, but I think again this year he comes again with surprises.”

Preliminary speakers Shu and Stamhold went wide-eyed, as if happy that at least the great Applewhit would make certain they were grandly upstaged.

“Come on, doc,” Cully said. “You’re really going to keep us in suspense? Just a hint.”

Jon sipped his water, letting the heat of attention simmer.

“Never a hint,” Izaka said. “Not even to us. Such a showman. He knows how to create mystery.”

“Look at him,” Cully said. “So cool. That’s a man bringing more digits.”

Toeing the line of secrecy seemed to bring the table to a stalemate. The president motioned for everyone to eat.

After a bite of quiche Cully returned to Izaka. “He’ll have you reslicing a larger pi. And you’ll make it more efficient. This theory of yours sounds fascinating. Have you thought about possible software applications?”

“Have you thought about funding them?”

Her comeback brought dry chuckles from around the table. Jon expected Izaka’s poise in close-contact academics, but never had he thought of her work as fascinating as Cully did, nor of her as genius as Roger had. To Jon, Izaka was a tidy scholar and a languid weekend’s fun. Now Izaka, the tidy scholar, had all eyes on her. She probably had a satiny foot up Cully’s slacks.

“Pi,” Jon declared.

As expected, that had everyone setting down their forks. The reporter fumbled for pen and paper.

“If left to its devices,” Jon said, and no doubt Izaka recognized his lecture hall intonation, “the Rhone will seek pi. Where it bends the outer currents move faster, erode more of the bank. It is nature desiring a semicircle. Gravity makes the Earth round. The sun, like all stars, is round. Relativity we compute using pi. The more we know of pi, the closer we come to understanding the universe itself.”

It didn’t matter that Jon spoiled the best lines of his presentation. He had the discussion back in its proper frame of reference. Now everyone would see when Izaka spoke it was his genius coming out. Then later at the podium he would squash her with faint praise.

“So true,” Izaka said. “Jon is like a painter, but with millions of millions of decimals.”

Cully reared back in a laugh. “Millions? Stamhold here was just saying he could posit a whole frigging universe with pi out to fifty.”

Stamhold. The imbecile.

“An incomplete universe,” Jon said. “Not the one we occupy.”

“My top geeks eat this stuff up. They burn money on software we can’t sell just to crunch away on pi. Pisses the accountants off.”

“Fifty decimals in today’s calculus,” Izaka said. If I am correct, we can bring more of tomorrow into today. A clearer pi builds faster computers. That spawns industrial output with less waste, less pollution. Safer cars. Shorter time to Mars. Better programs for you to sell, Mr. Cully.”

Even Stamhold nodded at her spiel. Jon probed his quiche with his fork. If Izaka had wanted to be correct, then she would have presented the theory correctly as his. Here was his first glimpse at the real Izaka, the backstabber out to make her bones on his proofs.

Jon stood and folded his napkin. “Izaka, a word please.” He knew he rose too fast and spoke too abruptly. To squelch the whiff of impropriety, and to preserve Shu Yuan as a contingency, Jon added: “Symposium business. Back in time for the meat pies.”

Jon headed out of the tent, wanting to drag Izaka along but forced to let her come in her own agonizing time. The cold air of the courtyard did nothing to slow his shallow breaths. The first drumbeats of a headache thumped down.

Inside MATHGEOM they had the hall to themselves. Piled in the waiting seats were lecture notes and miniature fruit pies in plastic wrappers. The house lights were half-up.

Izaka’s grin, so elusive, faltered but held. It was her eyes that made the accusation: *what is wrong with you?*

Jon studied this specimen of duplicity, this fuller Izaka now playing out into view. Behind Izaka’s quiet intensity was naked ambition. “How could you?”

“What? Chat up an asshole for funding?”

“Steal my work. Co-opt my theories. I hope you at least credited me.”

Izaka took a hard step back. “How dare you!”

“It’s true, isn’t it? Oh, and the sex was your unkindest cut of all. You’re drawn to my work enough to steal it but not enough to stay out of other men’s beds during the theft. ‘Reslicing Pi.’ ‘Swiping Pi,’ more like.”

“Jon,” she said carefully, “I am presenting the outline we discussed. As much as you help me on anything. You half-listen, screw me and run off to play with your secret formulas. Since now you are interested, yes, I credit you fully. Glowingly. As a giant in the history of mathematics.”

Jon wet his lips. “Glowingly?”

“Go to hell.”

Never had fury like this vented from Izaka. Never had she spoken such sweet words of validation. Never had Jon craved her more. “Make love to me, Izaka. Please.”

“You really want that, don’t you? Seconds after you call me a thief and a tramp, minutes from the most important moment of my life, you want me to strip down with you in a broom closet. Just so you can feel good about yourself.”

“I’m sorry.”

The apology spilled out of him before Jon processed the thought. By her sudden gape, the words caught Izaka equally off-guard. Jon stared at her, and she back, as if what gurgled out of him was more likely a burp.

Izaka laughed once, grimly. “I believe you.”

“I’m a fool. So you forgive me?”

“Don’t come back to the table. I’ll make up a reason you’re detained.” Izaka stopped at the courtyard entrance, the alpine sun ready to swallow her up. “The basic equation set I’m presenting? I named it the Applewhit Function.”

*

From his spot backstage Jon watched Izaka, the soul of grace, tread the boards out to the podium. He had wished her good luck and offered speaking pointers she didn't need. There had been no peck on the cheek, no squeeze of his hand.

"Pi," Izaka said, grinning for the crowded auditorium. "Or as we call it here at the Institute, Applewhit pi." The pun drew a laugh from the only possible audience to find it amusing. She launched into a discourse on Jon's algorithms—Applewhitics, she said for another laugh—that drew a line from theory to simplified calculation to future potential. After Yuan's dry opener and Stamhold's rambling, Izaka was academic fresh air, charming but sharp.

"How did she do with Cully?" Jon asked pi-hatted Roger beside him.

"Romance is not in the air, if that's what you mean. He's much too little brain for her, and our Mr. Cully traffics in supermodels."

"She'll get a grant off him, I assume."

"We will, old boy. We will. More than just him, and you'll score us a raft more." Roger snuffled. "Bloody more than we need."

"I'm rolling out the five-quadrillionth, and that's that. I'm not going on after resliced pi without redder meat."

"At least you left us the sixth in case of emergency."

Onstage Izaka summed up by lauding the great Applewhit's proofs without a word about Applewhit the man. Her talk was, in all, his best break-up in some time.

Applewhit said, "I'm thinking, after a cocktail or two, of a run at a certain Chinese mathematician."

"I wouldn't. They say the husband is in with the secret police."

After polite applause, Izaka opened the floor for questions. Having come out so forcefully for the Applewhit Function, she faced the inevitable contrarians, but having presented so concisely, the questioning was minor. In thirty minutes she had made pi more relevant and possibly a little sexy.

Jon hefted his presentation binder. His opening slide showed the newest sequence of pi running on and on and on, his leap toward infinity more never to be understood.

Izaka called Jon to the podium. At last, to cap the symposium, came Jon Applewhit and his annual Pi Day keynote. He strode out dizzied with insight. Izaka had served to introduce him properly after all: as tomorrow looping back in on yesterday. In a real sense, Jon was all that stood between these people and the drinks.

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SECOND PRIZE

Aaron Gudmunson lives and writes in the Chicagoland area. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Northern Illinois University and has worked as a contributing writer and columnist for local and regional periodicals. Visit him on the web at www.coldbrood.blogspot.com and follow him on Twitter @AaronGudmunson.

Little Bone Joey

by Aaron Gudmunson

My name is Joseph Jacob Scala. I'm seven years old and I'm a skeleton. I don't know how I got this way. A while ago, I still had a bit of meat on my arms and legs. But that's gone. Now all I have is bones. Little Bone Joey is what Mia called me. I kind of liked that.

Mia was my only friend. We met one spring day back when I was still Little Meat Joey. She was playing in a meadow near the forest where I live. Sometimes I go to the meadow because wildflowers grow there, so pretty and colorful. Purple, red, yellow, white, and orange. And bluebells. I love bluebells best of all. If no one's around, I sneak out and pick some to take back to the tent that I live in deep in the forest.

Mia was there on a picnic with her parents. She was chasing a butterfly and came up to the trees and saw me peeking out. She didn't scream like some of the other kids who've seen me. She smiled. Mia had eyes that were bright blue, like my favorite crayon. I had crayons when I was really little and coloring books and a stuffed teddy bear named Burt. But I lost them when I had to run away. I wish I still had Burt to keep me company. It gets lonely in the woods.

I waved and she came closer. She wasn't afraid. She said, "Hi. My name's Mia. What's yours?" Her voice sounds sort of smooth and sweet like the way butterscotch pudding would sound if it could talk.

I told her my name was Joseph Jacob Scala and she giggled and told me that's a nice name. Then she asked me, Where were my Mommy and Daddy? I told her at home, I thought, but I wasn't sure because I hadn't been there since before Thanksgiving.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I scared them when I started to become a skeleton, so I ran away. I didn't like the way Mom screamed when she saw me."

"What's wrong with the way you look?" Mia asked. "I think you look cute."

My jaw creaked. "You do?"

She giggled again. "Little Bone Joey. Can I call you that?"

Before I could answer, her Dad called her to the car. Mia told me she'd come back to visit soon.

*

On the Fourth of July, I watched the fireworks shoot off in Flora Park. My woods come right up to the edge of the lawn and I got a good view. They were so bright and loud! I got scared at first, but then settled down. I remember watching them once when I was little, sitting in Mom's lap and clapping as they whooshed into the sky.

When they were over, I walked back to my tent and lay down. I can't close my eyes anymore (yes, I still have eyes) but can screw them up into my skull to cut out the light. I could still hear the pops of someone lighting off bottle rockets near the woods. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed about big bright flowers growing as tall as the sky.

*

I don't have to eat anymore. That makes things easier. Before, when I was in kindergarten, sometimes my tummy would growl before snack time. It made me ashamed when the other kids would laugh. But now, I never get hungry and that's okay with me.

I don't get thirsty either, but sometimes I go to the pond in the middle of the forest. I try not to look at my reflection. I like to watch the ducks. They're not scared of me either, just like Mia. Neither are the deer or raccoons or squirrels. Once I came too close to a mama possum and she bit me, but it didn't even hurt. Nothing hurts anymore, except my heart.

Yes, I still have a heart though it doesn't beat anymore. It just kind of hangs in my chest by a few wire-looking things. Veins, I guess. I could probably pull it out and toss it away, but I think I'll hang onto it for a while. I like the way it hurts now, like a deep hole waiting to be filled.

*

For the rest of the summer, I hung around the meadow hoping Mia would come back. Sometimes other families came. I watched them throw Frisbees and eat picnic lunches. Once in a while, a family would bring along their dog, which would come sniffing along the trees and find me. Mostly they'd leave me be, but one big shaggy dog tried to take my legbone. I had to scramble back into a thicket to get away. So now I climb a tree whenever I see a dog.

Mia finally returned. As her mom and dad were setting up picnic things, she came right over to the spot where we'd met the first time. I was so happy to see her, I thought I felt my heart beat.

"Hi, Little Bone Joey!" she said. Her blue eyes sparkled the way the pond does at dusk when the sunlight hits it.

"Hi, Mia!" I said. I felt like crying, but I can't do that anymore. "I've missed you so much."

She told me all about her school and what she did over her summer vacation and about a new baby growing in her mom's tummy. I listened to her voice. Oh, I was happy! Happy!

Mia stepped into the trees and hugged me.

"Listen, Joey," she said. "I want you to come stay at my house."

The idea sent a whooshing through me, kind of the way I used to feel when I rode a roller coaster, and I felt my heart quiver. "You do?"

"You could live in my room. There's only one bed, but you could stay in my closet. It's big and has lots of space."

"What about your parents?"

"They won't have to know. It'll be a secret. Like a game. A secret game." She smiled.

"How will I get there?"

Mia told me she'd leave a little map for me in the meadow when they left. Then her daddy called to her and she kissed me on my cheekbone and ran off to go eat her picnic. My heart did the skip thing again.

When their car drove off, I stepped out into the meadow and found a scrap of napkin with a map drawn in blue magic marker. In the corner, she had drawn a yellow circle with points coming off it. It looked like a sunflower or else maybe the sun.

*

It was another week before I got brave enough to try finding her. I waited till the moon was way up in the sky, then I slipped out of the trees and into the meadow. I passed a doe and fawn that were still awake and a family of possums out looking for food. They watched me until I got to the edge of the meadow.

I found the path that led back to the highway. I hadn't been on it for almost a year. I stayed close to the trees and stepped into them anytime I saw headlights washing my way.

Mia was right. It wasn't far to her house, and before long I was standing in her backyard and trying to figure out which window was hers.

I saw the soft glow of a nightlight in the one on the corner, so I peeked inside and saw her asleep in bed. She looked even prettier now with her mouth open and her eyes closed. She looked like an angel, or the sister I never had.

Carefully, I stood on my tippy toes and clicked a finger bone against the glass. After a couple minutes, she woke up and smiled when she saw me. She opened the window and hugged me tight. "Joey! I thought you'd never come!"

She helped me enter through the window and showed me the very back corner of her closet where she'd already made a place for me to sleep in a deep pile of blankets. She was right; the closet was big. Someone would have to really look to find me.

We sat in her closet with a flashlight and talked until her alarm clock chimed. Mia told me she had to get ready for school, but before she did she left me a pile of coloring books and a box of crayons.

"No one's home during the day, so feel free to walk around the house," she said. She kissed me on the cheekbone, same place as the first time, and there went my heart.

*

When everyone was gone and the house was quiet, I looked around. It was a very big house, a mansion. I guess Mia's parents were rich.

Mia's room was pretty. It had pink wallpaper with butterflies on it. She had a little lamp on a bedside table and an alarm clock. She had a collection of china dolls sitting on shelves above her dresser. *The Velveteen Rabbit* was face-up on her

bedspread. My mom read it to me once. There was a bookmark on the page where the rabbit becomes real and goes off with the other rabbits. I liked her room.

I walked around the house. I thought about putting on the TV to look for cartoons, but then decided not to. I didn't miss them.

I looked in the refrigerator, which was bigger than any I'd seen before. The food looked so good, but I wasn't hungry. I remember eating. My favorite food was grilled cheese and tomato soup. Sometimes my Mom would put a slice of bologna on the sandwich. I miss her cooking. I don't miss the way she looked at me the first morning after I started becoming a skeleton.

Something about Mia's house made me think of my house. They didn't look the same inside and hers was much bigger, but for some reason I thought I'd been here before. I know that couldn't be true, but the more I explored her house, the more it was. Like a dream I'd forgotten.

Before I went into her parents' room, I knew their bedspread would be brown and white. Winter colors. I knew there would be black and white photos on the wall of winter scenes: trees without leaves and a frozen fountain near a pond. I knew there would be family pictures there too; Mia and her Mom and Dad and...

I opened their bedroom door and saw the bedspread, the photos, the winter pictures, the portrait. I looked at her family. There were four of them. Mother, Father, Mia...and a little boy. He looked about Mia's age, maybe younger. I backed out of the room and down the hall because all of a sudden I was afraid.

*

I went straight back to Mia's room where I colored some pictures (the wrapper called my crayon *cerulean*) in the books she'd left me and tried not to think about the little boy in the picture. He must be her brother, but where was he now? At school, I thought...but I didn't really believe that. I set down the crayon.

In the afternoon, I heard the front door open and voices come inside. I scurried back to Mia's closet and lay still beneath the pile of blankets until she came in and

pulled them back and smiled at me. She asked if I'd had fun today and I told her I had.

"Mia, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, silly."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

It was the first time I'd seen my friend without a smile on her face. It dropped off like someone had thrown a switch and I wished at once I could take back my question.

"Why did you ask that?"

I shrugged a shoulder blade. "Just wondering."

Mia's bottom lip quivered. She said, "I had a twin brother. He died."

I thought my heart would beat at that, but it stayed still. "I'm sorry, Mia. That's very sad."

"He was sick. He had to live in the hospital for almost a year. The doctors thought he would...would...make it, but one day he just slipped away."

I reached out and took her hand in mine. She let me. She didn't get scared the way my mom did when I tried to hold her hand the last day I saw her.

"When did he die?"

Mia looked up as if seeing me for the first time. "Last year. The day after Halloween."

My heart gave a weird lurch. "What did you say?"

She looked at me with watery blue (*cerulean*) eyes. "Dennis died the day after Halloween last year."

"That's strange," I said. "That's the same day I started to become a skeleton."

*

I told Mia about last Halloween, how I dressed up as a goblin. My costume was neat. My mom made it for me. She and Dad took me trick-or-treating and then we came home and ate some candy, all of us together. The next morning, when I woke up, the skin of my hands and arms looked funny. Sort of gray-like. I tried to hide it from my mom, but she saw it and looked worried. She didn't call the doctor then. Not yet. That happened after my skin started to fall off. She called him, but never took me there. I ran away before she could. I ran away right after she screamed and backed away from me in the kitchen one morning. I knew then I couldn't stay.

Mia listened to my story and didn't say anything for a long time. Finally she said, "Do you think, Joey, that God makes mistakes?"

I told her I didn't think so. "That's why he's God."

"Daddy says that too. He says God's perfect and know everything. But what if He's not? What if God does make mistakes?"

"Like how do you mean?" I asked. My teeth clicked.

Mia looked up at me. "What if He accidentally hooked two souls to one body? You know, like Siamese twins? Siamese twins are mistakes that God made, aren't they? What if God, by mistake, attached your soul and Denny's soul and when Denny died, you started dying too?"

I didn't say anything for a long time. I knew about God because my mom and dad took me to church sometimes, mostly on Christmas and Easter, but from everything I'd heard God was perfect. Finally I said, "That sounds weird, Mia."

"Think about it, Joey," she said. "What else could be happening to you? Denny died on the very same day you started to become a skeleton."

I got angry. I couldn't help it. I shouted and waved my bony hand over my body. "This could be anything, Mia! My aunt died of cancer and I heard my mom say that she looked like a skeleton before she went. Or maybe I'm just a freak. Maybe I should just join the circus!"

Mia moved so fast I almost couldn't see her. She grabbed my jawbone in both hands, leaned forward and kissed me where my lips used to be. My heart pumped once, fast.

"Joey," she whispered. "It doesn't matter what happened to you. It only matters what we believe. And I believe you and my little brother shared a soul. Maybe a sliver of that soul is still in you. Is that such a bad thing? Okay, so you had to leave your house. But you found me. Isn't that a good thing?"

Mia was right. Finding her was the best thing that had ever happened to me. She would never look at me the way my mother did.

I couldn't stop the next words that came. "I love you, Mia."

She smiled her million-dollar smile, something my mom told me I had before I lost my lips. "I love you too, Little Bone Joey."

*

Halloween came and Mia got quiet. It was the anniversary of the night before her brother Dennis died. I was hiding in the closet when her mother tried to cheer her up by getting her to go to the school Halloween party. She had bought her daughter a nice costume. Mia didn't sound very happy at first, but then I heard a change in her voice.

"I'll only go if I can bring a friend with me."

"Of course, dear," her mother said. "Who's your friend?"

"He's a new boy in school. His name's Joey. I'll have him meet us here before we go."

"That would be wonderful, Mia," her mother said, happy that her daughter's mood had changed. Me, I was terrified. What did Mia think she was doing?

When her mother left the room, Mia came into the closet. She was grinning like a jack-o-lantern.

“Why did you ask your mom if I could come?” I cried.

“Because, silly. You already have the perfect get-up. You’re going to win the costume contest.”

*

At dusk, Mia had me climb out the window and go around the house to the front door. I rang the bell and waited, teeth chattering, for someone to answer the door. It was Mia’s mother, who looked me over carefully before smiling from ear to ear. I could see where Mia got her million-dollar smile.

“Hello, young man. You must be Joey,” she said. “My goodness, that is the most realistic costume I’ve ever seen. Where did you get it?”

“My, um, mom made it for me,” I stammered.

“Well, come in. Mia’s just finishing getting ready.”

I shook her father’s hand and he commented that I must not be getting fed enough at home before clapping me on my shoulder blade.

I was standing in the front hall when Mia came downstairs. She was wearing a sparkly green dress with matching boots and her hair was tied in braids down her back. A glittering star-shaped wand was clutched in one hand. Shiny wings fluttered at her back. My jawbone dropped.

“Well, what are you staring at?” she asked as she came into the hall.

“You look different,” I answered.

“Well, *duh*. It’s Halloween. I’m supposed to look different.”

I glanced at her parents who were standing side by side, watching us. “I mean, you look pretty,” I whispered.

"I didn't before?" she said, putting her hands on her hips. A few flecks of glitter clung to her cheekbones, just beneath her cerulean eyes. I started to stammer something, but Mia laughed and pushed me out the door. "Let's go, bonehead."

Her father dropped us off at the school and said he'd be back by 9:30. We stood on the edge of the lawn. This would be the first time I'd stepped back inside school in nearly a year.

"I'm scared," I said. As we walked up to the school, Mia reached out and took my hand and I felt better at once.

*

Mia was right. I won the costume contest easily. They gave me a blue ribbon and a grab bag of goodies. I beat a bunch of ghosts, ghouls, and goblins. I even beat a kid wearing a full Darth Vader suit. I would have given him first place, if it had been me judging.

The teacher in charge asked my name.

Mia came to my rescue. "This is my cousin Joe from Rockford."

The teacher said, "Well, cousin Joe from Rockford, your costume is quite impressive. I bet your admiring audience wants a glimpse of your face. Would you do us the honor?"

I clutched up my prizes and ran from the gym. My feet clattered across the basketball court and I could feel everyone watching me. I didn't stop until I'd found an empty classroom, where I slipped inside and closed the door behind me.

Mia followed, of course. She reached to flick on the lights, but I stopped her. "I don't want to be seen," I said.

She turned on the lights anyway. "Why did you run away?"

"They wanted to see me. The real me. None of them knew *this is the real me*. If they had, they would have all run screaming."

“Hey, you won the contest. Didn’t I tell you that you would?”

“I don’t care about the stupid contest!” I looked helplessly around and saw we were in a science class room. A model skeleton hung in one corner, grinning. If I could have cried, I would have. “I just want to be me again. Joseph Jacob Scala. Just me.”

Mia clipped the blue ribbon to a rib bone above my heart and then took my hand in hers again. The ribbon matched Mia’s eye color exactly. I waited for my heart to thud, hoped and prayed that it would. It did. A quick flicker. Then nothing.

We stood there quiet for a while, Mia rubbing my thumb bones with her fingers, before she whispered, “We should go. My dad will be here soon.”

*

Days went by and I stayed hidden in my pile of blankets in the back of my closet. I slept bad. I had nightmares. Most of them were about Mia’s brother Dennis. He was always standing in a grave with his ankles buried in the dirt, holding a bouquet of purplish flowers, while a classroom skeleton stood behind him with its bony fingers clutching his shoulders. They both just looked at me, Dennis with wet eyes and the skeleton with empty ones. The dream ended when they suddenly changed places.

A few days after Thanksgiving, the house was empty with Mia at school and her folks at work. I wandered the house, which had become my habit, when I found myself in a part of the house I didn’t remember visiting before. It was a long hallway with doors on either side. I walked down it and checked the doors, but they were locked. I stopped in front of one that was covered in finger paintings and scribbled pages torn from coloring books. In the middle of the mess was a simple sheet of cream construction paper that said “Dennis.”

This time my heart lurched against my ribcage.

I wondered why I’d never thought to look for his room. I guess I’d just thought he didn’t have a room anymore. The door was locked, of course. I had to get inside. Had to. I went in search of a spare set of keys.

It was after noon when I found them in a desk drawer in the den. The key ring was about the size of my fist and loaded with keys of all kinds. I hurried back to Dennis's room and started trying them.

By the time I swung the door open, the grandfather clock in the parlor downstairs was chiming two. I still had an hour to explore.

The room was like any child's, I guess. The walls were painted baby blue and were hung with pictures of clowns. A little music box stood on top of a dresser in one corner. The bed looked small and still had guard rails on the side. Some toys were on the floor, collecting dust. I picked up a teddy bear and looked at it for a while. It was Burt. It was just like the one I had at home. I let it drop to the floor again.

I didn't have to wind the music box to know it would play "It's a Small World," but I did it because the one I had at home always calmed me down with its silvery chimes.

I climbed into the bed and lay in it, looking up at the ceiling. I must have fallen asleep, because I was still there when Mia's mother came in and started screaming.

*

It snowed last night. I don't feel cold. I don't feel anything.

I was happy to see my tent still standing in the woods where I'd left it. That means probably no one has come this way since I left. That's good. I don't want to be seen anymore. Also, the bluebells I picked in summer were still inside, all curled up and black. I think they still look nice, even dead.

After Mia's mom found me asleep in Dennis's bed, I guess it was too much for her. Maybe she thought I was his ghost or something, I don't know. But her screaming scared me bad, way more than I scared her. It sounded like how my own mom had screamed when she saw me becoming what I am now. I ran away as quick as I could, out the door and back to my woods.

It's been a couple weeks. It's almost Thanksgiving, I think. I can't be sure. During the day, I wait by the gray trees that border the meadow even though the leaves are dead in the winter and don't hide me as well. I keep waiting for Mia to show up. Waiting for my heart to beat again. But it doesn't.

I keep watching out across the white sheet of meadow and wait. I touch the blue ribbon I won for best costume. It still hangs in the place Mia clipped it, right above my dead heart. It's the only color in my world.

I had this idea that since Mia's mom was going to have another baby, maybe this baby's soul was somehow attached to mine again. I thought maybe as it grew in her belly, maybe I would start to get some meat back on my bones and my heart would start up again and I could go home. But I'm still a crummy old skeleton haunting a deep, dark forest.

And if I'm not dead and I'm not alive, how long will I go on like this? Forever? That scares me most of all, I think.

Maybe Mia was right. Maybe God does make mistakes. That idea doesn't make me as sad as it once did. My mom always said I was unique. It was a word she taught me that I never forgot. She said "unique" means "one of a kind." Well, now I really am. I'm me. I'm Little Bone Joey.

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THIRD PRIZE

John Burridge writes science fiction, fantasy and horror. This is his second short story in "On The Premises." He is an active member and current co-chair of The Eugene Wordos, a professional writers' workshop. He has a writer's beard, IT job, and cat. He lives with his family in Eugene, Oregon. You can read more about John at <http://johnburridge.blogspot.com>.

The Gear Master's Wife

by John Burridge

The last automaton had to be finished by tomorrow.

For the last five winters, every Longnight season, Maxwell's toys of ice were the centerpiece of the town's Eden Folly and the pride of the county. He made wonderful toys. He knew the cantrips of the Colossus of Rhodes and had studied copies of scrolls from the Library of Alexandria outlining the devices of Heron. Instead of a heart and lungs, Maxwell's mannequins had a stone crucible filled with quick-ice. As the frigid liquid within turned to mist, the frozen cogs spun and his automatons moved.

He'd already formed the gears and finished three of the four figures: the Father, the Mother, and the Son. But before he'd finished the Daughter, Jane, his wife, was struck with lung fever. Within the week her lungs were filled with fluid and she was dead.

Maxwell worked, ate, and slept in his home in the base of the town's clock tower. He had never minded the sounds of the clockwork before. He missed Jane in his cold workroom, singing and keeping him company while he carved the ice. The Daughter, with Her copper scales weighing the choices of mortals, was Jane's

avored aspect of the divinity. She always lingered to see how the Daughter's figure was progressing.

Maxwell brought a bottle of brandy into his workroom. To compete with the clock above, he sang their favorite song, "Drink To Me With Thine Eyes." But there would be no kisses in his cup tonight, or any night, he thought as he sipped.

He was drunk when he carved the head for the last automaton. Not so drunk, at first, that the ice could not speak to him through the chisel he used. But later, drunk enough that he burnt a fingertip on the irons as he smoothed features into the head's icy facets. The liquor helped the familiar words slip over his tongue as he sang the spells to charm the heat away from the air and gather the resulting condensation into the automaton's stone heart. The rest he couldn't remember.

The next morning, the Guild of Bakers came to collect his ice statues for the Longnight Folly. Still dressed in yesterday's clothes, head pounding in time to the chimes of eight o'clock and with hands over his eyes to keep out the daylight, he waved the apprentices and journeymen to where the finished works waited in his cold workroom. He chewed a bit of stale bread, sipped some water, and assured himself the shop's "Closed" sign hung in the window. Then he fell back into his empty bed and covered his head with a pillow.

Hours later, his friend, James Baker, shook him awake.

"Maxwell," he called. "Maxwell, you must come to the square." He scowled at the empty bottle on the floor.

"Can't it wait?" Maxwell asked through his cottonmouth.

James straightened himself, crossed his arms across his coat and looked at him with a neutral stare, his mouth set in a firm straight line.

"Humph," Maxwell said. "Don't look at me like I'm one of your boys." But he pulled himself off of his bed. The base of his head ached.

Something must be wrong with the Longnight Folly, Maxwell thought as they walked through cobblestone streets blanketed white by snow. But when he asked, James would only say, “You must see for yourself.”

A procession of little girls, women, and gammers ambled toward them. It was Crone Day, when the parish women went out caroling for money to keep the poor. One little girl was dressed as the Daughter; her balance held a soul cake in one pan, and a gold coin in the other.

Among their number, Maxwell recognized Gammer Levitt, an old gossip who had known his grandmother. As the high voices began singing for soul cakes on Longnight, her rheumy eyes gazed at him and she shook her head. She stopped singing. “Nay,” she said. “I’ll not take a boon from him.”

A shock of recognition—widening eyes, tilted heads, and whispers—jumped through the group of singers. The song faltered, but James took up its tattering chorus. “A soul cake, a soul cake for the Daughter on Longnight eve...” He put a large coin in the hands of Gammer Levitt. Then he hooked Maxwell by the arm and they continued to the square.

Nearing it, Maxwell noticed his neighbors quickly found other places to look.

“James,” Maxwell said, “tell me what is wrong.”

“We’re here,” James said, and pointed to the four ice figures in the Eden Folly.

“By The Four,” Maxwell whispered. Under the Tree of Ice, the Daughter presided over Her feast with the rest of the four-fold deity. Mist filled the mannequins—making them translucent—before it fumed out of mouths and noses like his own smoking breath. Soft hisses issued from them as they moved. The Father read His Book; the Mother hammered with Her Tongs; the Son cast His Runes; and the Daughter—her carved face unmistakably Jane’s—raised Her Scales of Judgement.

His headache momentarily forgotten, he watched the Daughter pantomime weighing choices. Jane’s family would have sharp words for his presumption in carving her likeness onto the deity’s face. The only thing more blasphemous would have been if he made himself the Father.

James gently patted his elbow. “Have you got a replacement for the Daughter?”

Maxwell frowned. “You mean Jane’s head? No. Not without replacing the whole body. The last few weeks have been... hard. Besides, the Daughter has to look... like... somebody.” He knew his excuse was a poor one.

“Maxwell, the Daughter moves like Jane. It is not well to make images of the recent dead. Folks will think it’s necromancy.”

“It’s not. I was drunk,” Maxwell whispered. He couldn’t take his gaze from the Daughter’s figure. “Jane used to watch me carve the Daughter. We’d sing together....”

James said, “I wish there was something I might do to help.”

His head throbbed. He turned toward James. “‘Blessed are they who wish,’ eh?” The traditional blessing was ashen in Maxwell’s mouth. “Then I must be the most blessed person in Albion. The figures are working?”

“As your figures always do.”

“Then let this be my tribute to my late wife. Longnight is tomorrow; by Secondnight the mannequins will have worn down.”

James said, “Folks would understand if—”

“This I so choose.”

At the scriptural phrase, James made the sign of The Four.

*

Snowfall and the early winter sunset plunged Maxwell’s shop into gloom. The last of his few customers trickled out. That night, Longnight eve, he did not drink, but went to bed. He lay awake for a long time, staring at the shadows of toys hanging from ceiling pegs, and listening to the ratcheting clacks of the town clock’s escapements and cogs above him. He woke with the hazy sound of bells slipping

through his memory. Then the door latch rattled. Fully awake, he sat up in bed. The latch rattled again.

“Who is there?” he asked.

There was no answer.

The latch rattled a third time and a breath of cold air stole into the back of the shop where his bed was. Through the window by the door, he made out a woman’s form against the swirling snow. Then hoarfrost rimed the pane over.

Maxwell darted across the shop to the window. By the time he had scraped the glass clear, all he saw was a night watchman in the street peering toward the town square. The man’s lamp turned snow into a mix of falling fluffs of white and shadow.

*

The next night was Longnight. Maxwell went to midnight mass to hear the story of the Daughter’s feast and the homily of the Tree of Ice. Then he went home and stoked the stove. He sat at his table, waiting for the thing he’d called to himself by choosing to drink while he worked and by choosing to carve Jane’s face onto the Daughter’s automaton. He wished the Daughter worked in mysterious ways that he could ignore.

The town clock struck one. The door opened and James stood in the threshold, dressed as the Charlatan in a black-and-white checkered cloak and harlequin mask. “I have brought the bird for the feast,” he said, pulling a white marzipan dove from his bag. He recited the next of the mummer’s lines: “I’ve only put in the good wishes.”

“No,” Maxwell sighed, not adding the rest.

“Oh, here, then. You want this.” Instead of pulling out a dark chocolate dove, James held out a large clay bottle. He stepped in and closed the door behind him.

He pulled off his mask. “I’ve brought some hot spiced cider.”

Maxwell snorted. “Come in. I suppose you have the Charlatan’s astrolabe in your bag, too?” He waved in the direction of his case of astronomical devices—real ones and holiday toys representing the Charlatan’s excuse of blaming the stars.

“No,” James said, “I gave the last one away to my nephew. Where are your tankards?”

“You should be with your family,” Maxwell said, “rekindling the hearth fire.”

“Then come home with me.”

Maxwell paused. James’ offer tempted him, but tonight, the hinge of the year, was the night for reversing enchantment. “Tomorrow night. Drink a cup with me tonight, then go. Tomorrow night, Secondnight, I’ll feast with you then.” He got tankards and they drank each other’s health.

“You’re sure?” James said before he left.

“Yes.”

“Well, then Good Longnight to you.”

“Good Longnight to you and your family,” Maxwell said.

James closed the door. The town clock’s ratcheting filled the room.

Later, a draft heralded the two o’clock hour. As the carillon sounded, the door latch lifted. The automaton wearing Jane’s face stood in the entrance. She still held the Daughter’s balance scales. She paused the way Jane used to, basket in hand, awaiting a morning kiss before going to market. Waves of cold and vapor wafted from her.

Maxwell looked at her as the sounds of the bell faded. He wanted to kiss her, but knew he shouldn’t. His carving wasn’t Jane.... But... the night *was* good for beginnings as well as endings. He could keep her in his cold workroom, sing the freezing spells over her mannequin that would keep her moving as long as he had breath.

He stepped toward her and she turned her cheek as if to receive his kiss. Fog hissed through her mouth and nose. He stopped. She'd be a hissing clockwork presence haunting his workroom. But if—If he could give her a voice, she could sing again. He'd have to take off her head... and carve her a new working jaw.

He imagined himself working like some resurrectionist over her icy body and it sickened him. Listen to yourself, he thought. This isn't Jane. He shouldn't even think of her—it—as a living thing. He looked at the automaton, and wished it really was her.

He needed to dissolve the spell before any more wild schemes came into his head.

He poured a tankard of cider. He started to bring it to her—its—mouth, but couldn't. He placed the handle in the mannequin's hand, instead. But it did not drink.

Of course. It was acting like Jane. He'd been singing and drinking when he carved her likeness, and somehow invoked a part of Jane into his work. It wouldn't drink until he sang their song.

"Drink to me only... with thine eyes," he sang, "and I will pledge with mine." The mist from its mouth puffed out in time with his words as if she'd joined into the song. Only years of singing spells over ice allowed him to master his voice. "Or leave a kiss within the cup and I'll not ask for wine...."

It lifted the tankard. The warm pewter rim of the tankard bit into her mouth. The hot liquid poured down her insides and over her stone heart, which shattered. The remaining reservoir of quick-ice shrieked away through her broken form and filled the shop with thick fog.

When the mist cleared and he could see, all that was left were stone shards and the balance.

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HONORABLE MENTION

This story was a product of John Cheever's "Christmas Is A Sad Season for the Poor" and "The Season of Divorce," from *The Stories of John Cheever*. Steve's recent publications include a speculative-fiction story, a short piece about how adopting a greyhound improved his psyche, and a poem about staring down death to live a worthwhile life. When not writing, submitting, or paying The Man teaching high school English, Steve blogs philosophic at www.stevenebelanger.blogspot.com.

So Many Reasons to Celebrate the Season

by Steven E. Belanger

-1-

John Clearwater tried to read *Topsy-Turvy*, a paperback thriller, on the flight home from New York. *A thick book with a thin heart and a transparent soul*, he thought in his erudite, book critic's voice. The plane hit slight turbulence. He contemplated the book's contradictions because to contemplate the turbulence would've been very, very bad. And ever since his mother's breakdown of many years before, he'd tried to stay away from negative, unproductive thinking patterns.

But he couldn't help himself. Thick book: wafer-thin pages. Largesse on the outside: small ideas within. No contradictions to contemplate. A bestseller with nothing good to say about it. Except that it was a bestseller. (John was still altruistic enough not to be impressed with a bestselling author solely because his books were bestsellers.) The author on the back cover, who John thought should've felt trapped in the small, bordered square, instead looked proud and happy. *If money can't buy happiness*, John thought, *apparently penning a bestseller*

can. The author wore a thick brown mustache, a brown suit jacket with dark tan elbow patches, wavy brown hair and a magnanimous smile.

Brown on the outside, brown on the inside, John thought. One of his favorite sayings, but unnecessarily negative and therefore unproductive. He imagined placing the thought quietly and efficiently from the desktop to the recycling bin in the lower right-hand corner of his mind. That didn't work, so he put it into a manila folder and placed that folder into his filing cabinet at home. And shut the drawer. Hard.

At the thought of home, the John Clearwater in his mind—Mental John—yelled once and awoke groggy from sleeping in his favorite chair, the Lay-Z-Boy recliner in the living room.

Out the window: the sky blue, the clouds white and puffy. Still some slight but consistent turbulence, so John once again contemplated the bookmark he'd found in the terminal. Thick paper. Red background; thick green letters; small white holiday lights around the letters. Cute moniker: So many reasons to celebrate the season! Sponsored by a vodka brand. The thought *Holidays are always happy for stockholders in alcohol companies* pushed past his defenses, but was captured and silently done away with. Two shots into its negative midsection.

He'd tried to nap while waiting for the plane. His cell phone had buzzed politely in the terminal, a word that struck John as terrible for someone afraid of flight.

"John, it's Bruce." Bruce Greenway, his agent and Sometime Friend.

"Hey, Bruce, what's up?"

"Yeah, hi. Listen. The book tour went well. Management's happy. Viking's happy. Japan, China, Egypt are happy. I think France was happy."

"Well, if they're happy, I'm happy," John said, feigning seriousness into his phone. *I'm actually having this conversation*, he thought. As he remembered this, he zoned out the window, where the sky, sun and clouds seemed like a greeting card waiting to happen.

Sunsets are great, John thought, *except for the fact that the sun is going down*.

“Great. Listen: I’m happy that you’re happy.” Bruce was always serious, which also made him a Sometimes Friend.

“There are so many reasons to celebrate the season,” John had said, inserting the bookmark between two forgotten pages. Mental John lay in his Lay-Z-Boy, startled at the ease John had blended the phrase into the conversation.

“Hey, you bet, buddy. Have a nice holiday. Tell Janice hello.”

“Will do,” John said, but Bruce had already disconnected. But, then again, so had he. A long time ago.

Mental John stood, wide awake and a little frightened.

He hadn’t napped in the terminal, so he tried again on the plane. An unquiet mind kept him awake. He peered again out the window. John always looked for a flying monstrosity on the wing and never saw one. Occasionally this disappointed him—a problem would at least be something.

He thought of the Christmas gifts he’d bought. A white and pink dress for Mary—his elder daughter, the seventh-grader—in Cairo. Another dress for Jennifer, his independent little fireball, in Shanghai. A red and white dress for his wife, Janice, in Tokyo, with red slippers and a red nightie. Ever the optimist.

He needed to get home.

He didn’t want to go home.

Before boarding, he’d called Janice for their sizes. They missed each other, they’d said. The daughters were doing fine and missed him. Would he be home soon? He would.

Jennifer. Mary. Janice. A wonderful but bittersweet two-month book tour through exotic lands (but still not home). *Our Pride and Joy* was expected to do well. It had been smooth writing. John rode a solid, unspectacular career. A dependable contract. Reasonably good health. No airplane crashes during several long book tours over the years. The skies blue, the clouds white and fluffy, and nothing at all tearing apart the wing jutting beneath his window.

So many reasons to celebrate the season.

The wheels of the plane touched ground with a smooth fluidity that troubled him.

Christ, I'm never happy.

The plane stopped. John rose with the others and shuffled with them to the brilliant whiteness bursting through the open doorway.

-2-

"You're John Clearwater, aren't you?" gushed a mid-thirtyish woman as she stood over him, clapping her small, puffy hands. She wore a ruffled blue, red and yellow skirt that brushed the tops of her feet. The skirt and the woman's tremendous size made him think of an umbrella, or a parachute.

He would have to answer the woman. "Yes, I am," John said, attempting to rise so he could offer his hand. But the woman would not back up, trapping him as he sat there in the small, red-cushioned chair.

"Oh I just knew it! I just looked at your picture on the back of your book in the airport bookstore, and then I looked at you again as I stood across from you over there"—she jerked a thumb at the square entrance to the bookstore behind her—"and I just couldn't believe my eyes! I had to look again; I'm so sorry if I was staring; I just had to make sure before I made a complete fool of myself. You know, I do that all the time, I talk to people thinking they're someone they're not, and then I get so embarrassed. Don't you just hate that? Goodness, listen to me, I'm babbling, I'm so sorry, you probably get this all the time, huh?"

"Sometimes," he lied. He finally managed to rise and stand beside her, a pleasant smile painted on his face. Normally he enjoyed this. Recognition made him feel better about himself.

And why was that? he wondered for the first time. *Why do I always have to feel better?*

But the woman was loud and unpleasantly pleasant. And he realized that he had worn a brown sport coat and tan slacks in his picture on the back cover of his newest book.

Brown on the outside, brown on the inside, he thought again. This time the thought did not go away. It was a Viking warrior and it clamored as it attacked.

“I bet!” the woman bellowed. “Imagine, me talking to a writer! And at Christmastime! I can’t wait to tell my family! My friends! This is the best Christmas present I could ask for!”

“The cynics forget that there are so many reasons to celebrate the season,” he interrupted, before he could stop himself. Mental John, sipping from his second martini, reclined again in the Lay-Z-Boy, shaking his head, frowning with worry.

To make himself feel better, John envisioned himself as Jack Nicholson with the axe, but when he swung it and the blade sank deep into the woman’s large, drooping stomach, no blood spurted, and she’d continued babbling:

“Yes! Absolutely! I read your stuff all the time. I’m still waiting for your next one to come out in paperback. I’d love to buy your hardcovers, but I have three kids. Well, I know you have two girls of your own, right? You know how it is.”

“Yes, they are expensive, aren’t they,” he said, waving at his wife from across the lobby, realizing that he sounded like he was talking about his kids and not his books.

His wife saw him and walked over, much slower than usual, staring at the red, diamond-patterned carpet.

“Oh, fuck, that’s not good,” said Mental John. His voice was like John’s, but an octave higher. He gulped the rest of the martini.

His Jack Nicholson character put the axe down and asked him, in a voice more guttural than John’s own, if he knew how creepy it was that this fan knew how many kids he had. And their gender. “I’ll betcha she knows their names and ages, too,” he said. “Isn’t that nuts?”

I'm seriously escaping, John thought.

He realized that he would have to speak again with the woman. "I always wish for lower prices on my books, but at least the major chains discount thirty or forty percent, right?"

"You're right, that's true," the woman murmured, watching John's approaching wife. John's escapist imagination went into overdrive. Jack Nicholson disappeared and this woman took his place. *Shit*, this woman, a new character, said in his head. *I wish Gary would come back. Why's he always such an asshole to me?*

John knew wistful looks when he saw them, and this woman had just given one to his wife. *If you only knew.*

Dread finally broke through the weak resistance of his struggling thoughts as Janice stopped beside them. She looked fresh, spirited. No black streaks or bags. Hazel-colored eyes, wide and energetic, a brighter shine in her blonde hair, the black roots gone, the forehead unfurrowed, the taut lines gone from both sides of her mouth.

She'd lost weight. Ten, fifteen pounds. Maybe more. She wore a professional suit, light-brown, with tan heels.

She looks beautiful and happy, John thought. *Goddamn her, she's done it.*

Jack was back, and he said, "You know she's fuckin' someone, right?" Mental John lay in the recliner, his feet up, a joint in his mouth and an open bottle of Dewar's on a little table beside him.

He reminded himself again that this fan would have to be dealt with.

"Would you like my autograph?" he rasped, clearing his throat and offering the book he'd brought for his wife. He saw himself again on the back cover and became lightheaded. He nodded so slightly that even his wife didn't notice: he had indeed worn brown in the picture.

Brown on the outside, brown on the inside. I am full of shit.

“Yes!” the woman shouted. “That would be wonderful!” She burrowed through a large black pocketbook hanging from her thick shoulder. “Here’s a pen,” she said, handing him a black Bic.

Janice, his wife, stood aside, a small smile appearing and disappearing. Patient.

“Who should I make this out to?”

“To Paula,” the woman said, casting a glance and flicking a smile at his wife. “And Gary,” she added. “Paula and Gary.”

How the hell did I know about Gary?

Mental John stared at him, wide-eyed, the burning joint forgotten between his fingers.

“That’s so freaky, you don’t need me here,” Jack said, and grabbed his axe and left, as John wrote: *Paula and Gary: Thanks for being fans. I hope you enjoy this. Best of luck. John Clearwater.*

“Here you are, Paula. Thanks for being a fan.” He clipped the pen to the cover of the book and placed them between her quivering hands. He forced his to remain calm.

“Oh thank you! Thank you so much!” She backed away, clutching the book tightly against her chest. “Thanks for the book. I’m sorry to have kept you. It was very nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” John said, leaning over to pick up his suitcases. “Bye-bye.”

Paula walked away, happy. She became a character in a John Clearwater novel, immediately, in his head. She’d see Gary again and they’d be all right. She would. She’d do it. And they would celebrate the season together. She would have so many reasons to celebrate the season.

John and Janice watched her, silent. Then Janice hugged him tentatively and they left the airport.

-3-

The cold air was a solid presence that invaded his winter trenchcoat, tunneling into his armpits and billowing into his socks and feet. The sky, a solid curtain of darkness unbroken by stars or moon. He walked through his own exhalations as he followed his wife to her car, watching her hips sway like he'd never seen them before. She unlocked the back door and he placed his suitcases inside. He closed it and joined her inside the Infiniti.

Janice handed the ticket and five dollars to the man in the booth. "Mom and Dad are over. I didn't expect them until early afternoon tomorrow. I put them in the spare room. And the girls put the tree up. They also decorated the house and placed the presents. And your father called. He said they'd be over early tomorrow morning."

She'd said this without looking at him. For a moment, the man in the booth had thought she'd been speaking to him. Her voice was very, very distant. Mental John asked him if he wanted him to call Jack back. Did he want him to bring the axe?

John waited, surprised at his patience. She'd get to it eventually, probably near Hoxie Four Corners, maybe even as soon as the crosswalk light on Airport Road.

And she's wearing tan, too, he thought. Right now. "The Middletons will probably be there when we get back, and maybe Connie and Robert. I know how the outfit and pillows make you sneeze, so I unpacked Santa for you and I had it washed, and I took down some pillows from the closet and banged them out in the garage so you wouldn't sneeze again this year like you did last year, like you do every year, every single, solitary year—"

The sniffles came when she first mentioned the outfit and pillows, the tears when she said the word *garage*, making it a three-syllable word. She erupted into hiccup-sobs. She bit her lower lip to stifle them. The Infiniti drifted in its lane. Throaty pouts escaped and she let go again. This time the car did not swerve.

John stared out the windshield. The storefront windows were decorated a festive red and green, as were the trees in many of the windows, all of them matching the street lights.

Janice turned right at Hoxie Four Corners, onto Warwick Ave. Santa, standing in the corner of the parking lot, surrounded by harried Dave's Fruitland shoppers, looked directly at John and waved happily at him. John watched his own hand wave back, slowly, as if unsure, thinking that his hand was separate from him, that it had a will of its own.

"I've fallen in love with someone else," she whispered, almost to herself, between sobs, pausing at the Lake Shore Drive light. "A pharmacist. Henry Blake. At the Rite-Aid up the street. He's divorced. It—it—started months before your tour. He's been at the house since you left. The girls think he's my—my—my assistant at the office. That—that—that we're working on the next case together. He's in the B-B-Bahamas. I'm—I'm going to join him next week. I told the girls that Mommy's going away for business for once."

They passed the Rite-Aid at an even thirty-five and kept going. Church Avenue and its lights did not impede them.

"I'm sorry, John, I really am. I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

Brown on the outside, brown on the inside, he thought. She's so good at lying that she's successfully lied to herself. And I'm the fiction writer.

"Well?" she said, louder, the tears gone. "Aren't you going to say something? Don't you want to scream at me? Yell at me? Swear at me?"

"Do you want me to?" he heard himself murmur, as he peered, steadfast, into the darkness. "Do you want me to scream at you and call you names, Janice?"

He knew that she did, but he thought he would ask anyway because she suddenly seemed like a woman he did not know.

Janice stared straight ahead. The light turned green.

"Yes! Okay? I said it. I want you to be angry. Tell me what a bitch I am. Scream at me! Say something!"

"Why? So you can just feel better? I don't think so. Turn around and take me to one of the airport hotels."

Mental John looked up, his face almost hidden by the roach smoke. “Holy shit, dude,” he said, impressed. But he was a little concerned by the sudden distancing.

“What?” Janice asked. The car swerved a little.

“Pull into the gas station near Sandy Lane, turn around in it, take me back to one of the airport hotels.”

“What? Why? My God, John, my parents are over and the tree’s all decorated!”

“Brown on the outside, Janice. So your parents are over. So it’s Christmas. So the fuck what? What do you want from me, Janice?” Approaching headlights blurred his vision and stabbed him behind his eyes. “I return from a two-month book tour expecting my wife and kids to be happy to see me”—though he was still honest enough to realize that this was a lie—“and instead you tell me that you’ve been sleeping with a fucking pharmacist for the past several months. That you’ve probably been sleeping together in our bed.”

She sniffled and sobbed.

“You tell me that my life as I know it with my family is over. You’ve lied to me for the past several months. You’ve lied to me on the phone for the past two months. You’ve deluded yourself into thinking that a twelve-year old girl and an eight-year-old girl don’t know an affair when they see, and probably hear, one. You tell me that I’m on my own with two young girls after Christmas because you’ll be with your fucking pharmacist in the Bahamas. You’re pissed off that I’m too shocked, disappointed and exhausted to be incensed with you right now. You won’t drive me back to the hotels. And you expect me to give a shit that your parents are over? Did you actually expect me to go through with this because it’s Christmas?”

Left onto West Shore Road and a quick right onto Warwick Neck Avenue.

“But what am I gonna tell everyone?” Her knuckles glowed a sharp yellow and white as she clutched the wheel. “And who’s gonna be Santa? Goddamn it, who’s going to be the fucking Santa?”

“Turn around, Janice.”

“No. Absolutely not. We’ll carry through with the holiday as best we can and then we’ll see what happens. We still have plenty of reasons to celebrate Christmas together.”

That startled him to silence. She pulled into their driveway off Warwick Neck Avenue and shut off the engine.

-4-

His daughters exploded from the house and bounced down the stairs beside the driveway and into his waiting arms. John hugged them ferociously as his wife hastily re-applied make-up, using the visor’s mirror, and then walked in a daze up the same stairs and into the house.

After she’d gone inside, John told the girls that he had a special present for each of them, but they’d have to rummage through the large suitcases in the back seat to find them. Jennifer and Mary squealed and climbed into the back seat, where they attacked the suitcases’ zippers.

John entered the house. The Robertsons, cognac in hand, exchanged pleasantries with him as he bent beneath the tree and located the wrapped watch and books he knew his daughters were giving him. He took the stairs two at a time and entered his bedroom after passing the bathroom—he heard his sobbing wife splashing water on her face. He returned downstairs with his copy of the key to his wife’s car.

That’d be faster, he decided. I’d never have time to put the suitcases in my car and then coax the girls in there. Mental John stood in horror at his logical attitude.

“How’ve you been?” Arthur Robertson asked him, swatting him on the back.

John opened the front door. “Not bad, Art, thanks.”

“The tour go well?” he asked, a little drunk.

“Very well,” John heartily replied, “especially when you consider that your daughter’s been fucking the pharmacist down the street for the past two months.”

The door slammed.

He drove away, in a better mood than he would’ve expected. Maybe he was going hysterical inside. Maybe he was in shock. But then he considered:

I’ve still got my kids. Probably I’ll just take them out for ice cream right now, like I just told them. They seem okay with that, though a little confused. We’ve got the presents we’ll exchange together. I’ve got a solid career. I’ve got okay money. I’ve got fans. And I’ve got my bewildered in-laws in my house with my temporarily miserable wife. All three are probably drinking too much.

And I’m not wearing brown today.

Red and green were everywhere, matching the traffic lights, and no more browns, no more browns. And the night was a solid, handsome darkness, befitting more than just a melancholic. People were joyful but harried. Mirth, everywhere. John Lennon’s “Happy Xmas” would play.

It’s not that bad, he told himself. There are still so many reasons to celebrate the season.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Neil James Hudson last appeared in On The Premises with "A Brick Wall" in March 2011, and took first prize with "John Comes Back" in March 2009. He lives in Yorkshire in the UK, where he runs a thrift shop and is a slave to his cats.

Aplut

by Neil James Hudson

I've never had a Father's Day card. I shouldn't want one: I should feel that it would be an empty gesture, a way of adding to Hallmark's profits without any kind of emotional involvement or thought whatsoever. And yet, it seemed to matter. I wanted the card this year, more than ever before. Now that Beth had gone, and it was no longer possible for me to be a good husband, I desperately wanted to be a good father.

I lay awake for some time, still on my side of the bed even though there was no one on the other. And then there was a knock on the door.

"Happy Father's Day," said Charlotte, walking in without waiting for an answer. She was holding a card and a coffee.

I sat bolt upright. "I've got a daughter?" I said incredulously.

"Relax, it only cost a dollar. You're not being bribed. And I fixed you some coffee as a freebie."

“You made coffee,” I said. “It wasn’t broken.” I tore open the card and looked at it. “Thank heavens I don’t have to feel guilty about the amount of effort you put into it,” I said.

“I put even less into the coffee,” she said.

In fact I was more touched by the card than anything I could remember. Charlotte had always been a bit of a mystery to me. We’d never had any real trouble, none of the growing pains that I’d been dreading, but she’d always been closer to Beth and sometimes that appeared to shut me out altogether. It had taken the death of her mother for us to get really close. Almost everything I think about Beth’s death fills me with guilt, and my relationship with our daughter is one of them.

Somehow, she seemed to know what I was thinking about. “You blame yourself for it, don’t you, Dad?” she asked.

“What?” I said. “Of course not.” We both knew I was lying.

“Everybody does,” she said. “I’ve been talking to someone at school. Every time someone dies, whoever’s close to them blames themselves. But it’s never their fault, there’s nothing they could have done about it.”

“I could have stopped her from driving,” I said. “Offered to take her myself.”

“No you couldn’t,” she said. “You didn’t know what was going to happen. None of us did. What I’m trying to say is... I know you’ll keep feeling like this, but it’s natural. Don’t beat yourself up for beating yourself up.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Charlotte was thirteen, and shouldn’t have been dealing with thoughts like these. She installed herself in the bathroom and I didn’t laugh.

*

I tried to gather my thoughts. My memories seemed to be random: I thought of the holiday we’d taken in Rome, how we sat in the car while driving around (Charlotte, of course, would usually be in the back seat, only sitting up front if Beth was absent for some reason) or the way I would intrude upon the two of them in

Charlotte's room, to see them both sitting on the bed, and Beth would tell me kindly but firmly that this was "girl talk" and that I would be no help.

Something was still nagging at me. I could still remember what I'd been dreaming of, but I didn't care much for dream interpretation and it wasn't a particularly exceptional one.

It had been the exam dream again. I didn't recognize the room I was in, and I couldn't answer any of the questions because I couldn't read the question paper. But I recognized the exam's proctor: it was Beth, sitting behind a huge desk, a desk that seemed designed to separate us rather than to serve any practical purpose. There was nothing on the desk except a small gold paperweight, the size of a marble.

I lay in bed thinking. Something about that paperweight was nagging at my mind: although I didn't recognize it, it seemed familiar. I was sure that it had got into my dream because I'd seen it recently.

Finally I worked it out. I hadn't seen it at all: I had remembered it. It had been on Charlotte's bedside table when I'd remembered her talking with her mother. Why had it stuck in my mind, staying in my dreams?

I finally went downstairs, tipped the coffee away and put the card on the mantelpiece. I heard Charlotte finally leaving the bathroom, so I made some more coffee and took it up to her to show her what it should taste like really. I knocked on the door and waited to be allowed in.

She was sitting on her bed, texting. On her bedside cabinet was a coaster and a book. I put the coffee on the coaster, and pointed at her cabinet. "Didn't you use to have a paperweight there?"

"What?"

"A small, gold paperweight. I'm sure I remember seeing it."

"I don't have paperweights. I don't have papers. This is the digital age, remember?"

“Sure,” I said. “E-mail me when you’re ready, and I’ll mend some breakfast.”

“Fix,” she said, and went back to her thumb exercises.

*

I wondered if it were a sign that I was having a breakdown, but I found it impossible to get the paperweight out of my mind. When I thought back to what had just happened, to Charlotte’s bedroom and the cup of coffee, I had a very clear memory that the paperweight had been on her bedside cabinet. But I knew that when I had been there, I hadn’t seen it.

I sat at the kitchen table and warmed my hands on the mug. Perhaps I should have changed my habits: the first coffee of the day was a moment that I always shared with Beth. I couldn’t stop myself from imagining that she was still with me, sitting opposite.

“You always make it too strong,” she said to me in my imagination. I knew that I would never hear this voice again in reality.

“No, you always make it too weak,” I said. We had had this conversation numerous times. Suddenly I stopped, having finally noticed something that I should have seen earlier. In the middle of the table, slightly to the right, was the gold paperweight. “What on earth is that?”

“It looks like a paperweight,” she said. “I’ve never seen it before.”

I came to, back to the reality of the kitchen. I was alone at the table: and it was empty. There was no paperweight.

My thoughts drifted back, inevitably, to my wife. “It’s still there,” she said. She was right: I couldn’t help imagining a gold marble on the table. When I looked for real, there was nothing.

“What is this?” I asked, and imagined reaching my hand out towards it. It was cold to the touch, but wouldn’t budge. Momentarily, I forgot about Beth altogether and concentrated on the imaginary object in front of me.

“You aren’t real,” I said, but not out loud. “I’ve imagined you. So why can’t I move you?”

In my mind’s eye, I pictured myself moving the table from underneath it, like a magician pulling the tablecloth from underneath a spread of crockery. The marble remained exactly where it was, suspended in the air. I tried to move it again. I failed.

“Deep thoughts?” asked Charlotte. I hadn’t heard her come downstairs, and I immediately came back to reality. I had, after all, resolved to look after her.

“Shallow,” I said. “Bacon?”

And so we shared burnt bacon (I explained that fathers were trained to burn food in order to get women to do the cooking instead, and she explained that the trick wasn’t going to work as she would simply eat the burnt food until I took the hint and cooked it properly) and a few jokes, and I think we both quietly understood that the other had needs that we weren’t going to fulfill in these few seconds. I forgot about the marble until Charlotte offered to do the washing up in exchange for certain concessions, and I imagined how her mother would have handled the situation, and almost without conscious effort I imagined her saying, “I think it’s got bigger.” And I looked at the gold sphere on the table, the imaginary table in my mind’s eye, and I had to agree with her.

*

I didn’t mention this to Charlotte. I didn’t want to alarm her. I was alarmed enough for both of us. I knew, rationally, that I was under a lot of stress and that some kind of mental aberration was virtually expected of me. But I didn’t like the form it was taking. Although this object was present only in my imagination, it seemed to have the qualities of a physical object. I couldn’t imagine it away, or even imagine it moved. And I couldn’t imagine it any smaller. When Beth—or my memory of Beth—had pointed out its increase in size, it had become a golf ball. It was now a basketball. As stupid as it seemed, I had to consult a doctor, and I was able to get an emergency appointment by using the word “tumor.”

The doctor was a bearded man who seemed to have no imagination of any sort whatsoever. “Why do you suspect it’s a tumor?” he asked.

“It seems to be solid,” I said. “And it stays in the same place. Whatever I imagine, it’s in front of me, slightly to the right. It’s always the same color and shape, although it’s growing. And I can’t imagine it away. It feels so real.”

“And this object, is it always in your peripheral vision or direct vision?”

I shook my head, as if to displace the ball. “It’s not in my vision,” I said. “It’s in my imagination. Whatever I’m thinking of, there it is: completely involuntary. It’s always in the same place in my dreams, fantasies, memories, whatever. And it’s growing. It feels like a real object: I feel as if there’s a real object in my head, which I’m somehow picking up on. A tumor.”

“I could refer you to a neurologist,” he said, not really caring as long as I stopped being a problem to him personally. “But this sounds more like a psychological problem. A piece of unconscious obsessive-compulsive behaviour. Are you under any strain at work?”

“I’m off work,” I said. I was going to leave it at that, but I knew that it was silly not to cooperate. “My wife died in a car crash. Two weeks ago.” I bravely fought my battle against tears, and won.

“I see,” he said, nodding. “I’ve never heard of a tumor presenting like this. But obsessive thoughts that won’t go away are quite common. They don’t last, and are treatable in extreme cases. I’ll prescribe you some sedatives which should help, and do you want me to refer you to a psychiatrist?”

It was an admission of madness to say yes, and I nearly just took the drugs, but I knew that I needed help of some sort. “Yes,” I said, wondering how on earth I was going to explain this to Charlotte.

*

But it was a discussion that we needed to have. I wanted to seize the opportunity to have an open, honest and mature relationship with her, and I needed her support.

“You’re mental!” she cried when I told her. “That is so cool! Wait till I tell everyone on Facebook.”

“Charlotte, please don’t—” I began, then saw her pained expression. “I see. This is part of that ‘sense of humor’ you keep telling me about.”

“So you see this ball everywhere?” For a second I had imagined her telling the internet about my problem: the ball had taken up half of her laptop screen.

“Dreams, memories, imaginings, fantasies. If I think about going to make coffee, the ball is floating in the kitchen. Nothing I can do will dislodge it. I thought it was a proper, manly, physical tumor, but you’re right, the doctor decided it was a soft, girly, weedy neurosis.”

“Doesn’t it get in the way?”

“Oh yes. Hans Gruber ran into it while I was in the waiting room. It spoilt things a bit.”

“Hans Gruber being....?”

“Alan Rickman’s character in *Die Hard*.”

“Didn’t he blow up the tower block?”

“He tries to, but I keep stopping him.”

“Woah!” She held her hands up. “You have *Die Hard* fantasies?”

I had to admit, this was possibly getting too honest. “Which would you rather have: a weedy liberal father who fantasises about being Bruce Willis, or an East End gangster who thinks about kittens? And by the way, that was rhetorical.”

“You know what it is,” she said, looking thoughtful. “It’s symbolic. We both have thoughts that we can’t get rid of. But you won’t admit to what it is, so you see it as a gold ball. I lie here actually remembering Mum.”

I sighed, wondering when she’d started reading books about pop psychology. “Look. If I close my eyes and try to remember what you look like, I can’t see you. There’s a gold ball in the way. It’s only there in my imagination, but I can’t shift it. I don’t care what thoughts I’m repressing: I just want to know what they are so they’ll go away. Yes, I feel guilty about letting Beth drive: no, I’m not repressing it, I feel it every day. Whatever I’m repressing, I don’t know what it is.”

“I know,” she said with some sympathy. “That’s what repression means. Does the ball seem to grow consistently, or at different rates? Does it ever appear to go down?”

“I think it’s growing at a constant rate,” I said.

“Even when you’re not thinking about it?”

“I never think about it. It’s just there. Have you ever considered how much of our lives is spent in fantasy? I don’t mean serious daydreams. Even if you’re just intending to open a door, you picture yourself doing it. I see a solid ball in the way. Whenever I stop looking and start thinking.”

“And you can’t imagine it moving or going away. Do you think it might be a disguise?”

I gave in and closed my eyes. I couldn’t see Charlotte in my mind’s eye: the ball was in the way. “A disguise for what?” I asked wearily.

“It’s the nature of fantasy to be malleable. Anything is possible in your dreams. But you’re saying it isn’t—you have something that you can’t move or control. That’s not typical of fantasy; it’s typical of reality.”

“So you think it’s a tumor?” I still hoped so myself. A tumor would mean I was ill, not mad.

“You’re sending a message to yourself. Part of you is avoiding a piece of reality, and another part of you is trying to make it obvious to you. This ball is reality. You need to find out what it is.”

I was grateful to her for trying to help, but I thought that most of this was gibberish. There was only one part of what she’d said that I found convincing.

The ball was real.

*

Charlotte was due to go back to school tomorrow and she couldn’t wait. She felt that she had a support group among her friends, as well as the sheer activity filling her days. It didn’t so much take her mind off things, but gave her a sense of purpose, made life seem a little more normal.

I was not so keen to get back to work. My colleagues were hardly as close as school friends, and it was their clumsy attempts at sympathy that I was dreading. The school war zone presumably left no room for such gaucheness. Neither did I have any great sense of purpose at work, although time-filling certainly presented itself.

But the real reason that I didn’t want to return to the office was that I couldn’t remember what it looked like: or rather, I couldn’t remember it without my golden spherical friend, growing larger by the hour and obscuring everything I thought about. I tried to imagine myself at my desk, but I had to sit a meter or so away from it in order to avoid the ball, and I simply couldn’t make out anything on the desk itself. I knew that if I were actually to go there, I would have no problem, but my own imagination scared me. And if I tried to picture myself driving, I couldn’t see the road.

The sphere was starting to crowd me out. By late afternoon, it was taking up half of my imagination, and showed no sign of stopping. I had no idea what this could possibly mean, or what would happen when there was finally no room for myself. Would I simply stop fantasising altogether and become an unconscious automaton?

Finally, Charlotte burst into my bedroom, brandishing a device which had evolved from the illicit union of a mobile phone and a computer, so up to date that I didn't even know what it was called. "Aplut," she said triumphantly.

At first I thought she was talking about her device. Then I realized what she meant. "I've never heard the word," I said.

"I know," she said, and sat down next to me, scrolling text so fast that I could scarcely identify its language. "I just made it up. I've been looking on the internet. Some occultists believed in tulpas, thought-forms that could be made into reality. You concentrate on part of your imagination and stay so focused, it actually becomes real. What you have is the opposite: a piece of reality has taken root in your imagination. You need to get rid of it."

"And does this interconnected network of which you speak give me any clues as to how you can do this?"

"Occultists believe that you can dismantle a tulpa by the same act of imagination that led to its creation. Usually they think that tulpas are more trouble than they're worth, and that the real problem is with subconscious ones."

"So with an aplut...."

"The same. Somehow you created it, even if it was subconscious. You need to work out how and why you did it, so you can reverse the process."

I thought about this, then hugged her. It was all I had to go on.

*

We both knew that I'd be gone by morning.

I had gone to bed early. I felt unable to get out: I could not work around the gigantic golden sphere that now engulfed the whole bedroom. I desperately kept my eyes fixed on the ceiling, a white expanse which seemed to anchor me—whenever my mind wandered, I found myself crushed by the sphere. It had now expanded to take up my entire head, and there was no room left for me.

Charlotte brought coffee in for me, and placed it down next to the sedatives. I did not take them, but was grateful for the coffee.

“I guess this is it,” she said.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to me,” I said. I was trying to be brave for her sake, but I felt only terror, coupled with a desire to laugh. I didn’t know why I was at the wrong end of such a bizarre fate. “There’s only the ball inside my head,” I said. “It’s like being in a physical space when the walls close in.”

“It’s going to kill you,” she said. “You know that.”

I nodded, still lying down.

“You need to focus,” she said. “You need to remember what happened when it got in there.”

“But I don’t know,” I said. “Yesterday it wasn’t there, this morning it was.”

“You do know, Dad. I told you about it. You know, and you know what you have to do to get it out.”

I shook my head, my eyes full of tears. “No,” I said. “I can’t imagine how to get rid of it, because I can’t imagine. I’m being crushed in my imagination, and by tonight I won’t be there anymore.”

“It’s an aplot,” she said patiently. “It’s a piece of reality that replaced part of your imagination. Why would that happen?”

“No,” I said desperately. “Don’t do this.”

She ignored me. “Because part of your imagination got out. You don’t get an aplot without a tulpa. Call it the conservation of reality.”

I was unable to control myself. She took my hand.

“You have to free yourself,” she said. “You have to do it for my sake. It’s going to kill you, and you can’t look after me when you’re gone. There’s only one way you can keep me safe.”

I swear, I absolutely swear that this was the argument that convinced me. It took nearly an hour of cajoling, persuading, and occasionally just leaving me to think about it, but Charlotte was right. I cared nothing for my own survival and safety; I would happily have died if it would have protected my daughter. But once I was dead, she wouldn’t survive either.

At about half past eleven, I kissed Charlotte goodbye, then closed my eyes. All I could feel was the weight of the aplit pressing me into the ground. I couldn’t breathe; it was crushing my chest too much. But then I felt a strength that I hadn’t felt before. It wasn’t a macho strength, or an anger, or any kind of physicality. It was just the strength that everyone gets back sooner or later: the strength to carry on.

“Happy Father’s Day,” she said. And then I threw the aplit out of my fantasy world, and took Charlotte back in.

*

“It’s disgusting, leaving litter around like this,” said the slim young woman next to me. “Disrespectful.”

I thought she was quite attractive and then felt the familiar guilt for thinking of women in this way. In front of me lay Beth’s grave: it was the last place where I should have been sizing up her successor.

“I’ll get it tidied up,” I said, and then for no reason, “this is my wife’s grave.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s bad enough leaving rubbish in the streets. You’d think they’d leave the graves alone.”

I hadn’t recognized the objects strewn about in front of me at first: they were scattered around like peelings or wrappers. But they were solid, and golden, and

very slightly curved, and it looked as if they had originally formed an object which had exploded.

“My biggest regret,” I said, “was that we never had children. Too late now.”

She clearly didn’t want to comfort the recently bereaved and retreated to her own grief.

I picked up one of the shards from the grave. It was only about half a centimeter thick, but was surprisingly solid. I couldn’t break it in two.

I thought of Charlotte.

“You’ll always have me,” she said, and looked up at her mother. “You’ll always have both of us. Every time you think of us.”

“I know,” I said. Then I focused back on the world in front of me, empty of them both.

I began to gather up the shards, and wished, desperately wished, that one day somebody would be there to tidy up my own grave.

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HONORABLE MENTION

John P. Murphy is an engineer and writer, working in network security and writing science fiction, fantasy, and mysteries. He's a graduate of Viable Paradise, and his fiction has appeared in *Crossed Genres* and the *Drabblecast*. He lives in New England with his fiancée and two cats, and blogs at johnmurphy.wordpress.com.

Mister Yuk

by John P. Murphy

While we walk, I want to tell you a story from when I was a kid. No, there aren't dinosaurs in it. I was exactly your age come to think of it, back when we lived in California. In fact, this is why we had to move.

I remember it like yesterday. It was Halloween. Me and my friends were going trick-or-treating, just like every year, and we met up by the Y. Jimmy was a ninja turtle, just a green sweatsuit and two spray-painted garbage can lids. Jenny was a cat; she had her face painted and everything, with little ears on a head band. Katie was a mad doctor or something; she had a white coat and a lot of fake blood. Andy was a tyrannosaurus. He had this big get-up his mother made—Yeah, OK, there's dinosaurs in it. Just let me tell the story. Let's see... oh that's right, I was Lion-o from "Thundercats," I had that plastic mask and that poncho-looking thing that went over my clothes, it crinkled when I walked. It was *totally* awesome. Shut up.

We knew it was going to be a good night for trick or treating because we saw an ambulance right off the bat. Somebody dies, that's exciting, a good Halloween. We were demented kids.

It was a pretty good haul that night, too, at least the first twenty minutes. We went to the big houses first because they gave out whole candy bars. We'd just skipped the dentist's house, and we had ourselves a fine haul. We could've gone home and eaten ourselves sick. But Jenny just had to say, "Let's see what Mr. Yuk's got." He'd given us quarters the year before, you see, which—no. You couldn't buy a car for a quarter. When did you get to be such a wise-ass?

We went down Prater Street, filling our plastic bags with more candy. Mr. Yuk's house was on the end—Mr. Romanyuk, excuse me. We marched up the walk, but even though the porch light was on, the house was dark. On the porch next to the door was a big bowl full of shiny red apples.

"Apples?!" Andy picked one up and chucked it up the street. It hit the pavement like a little grenade. He banged on the door for a solid minute, but nobody came.

"This is bull crap," Jimmy said. We all agreed: apples on Halloween? That's just wrong. Even if we wanted apples, our parents would never let us eat them, because they heard from someone that they'd heard a story from someone else about someone putting razor blades in apples in Ohio or something. Which is complete...ly true, so don't eat unwrapped stuff, OK?

Andy was a planner—he'd stolen a dozen eggs from his parents' refrigerator and hid them in the woods behind his house. It only took us a couple minutes to go find the little pink styrofoam egg crate and run back to Mr. Romanyuk's house. It was still dark inside.

We stood off to the side of the house, in the shadow of the big tree, and dared each other to throw the first egg. By that time, I was starting to get nervous that someone might see us, or hear us arguing. So I picked one up and threw it. I missed, but that wasn't the point. It got things going—thirty seconds later, all the eggs were gone, mostly splattered on the ground.

Nothing happened. We were all ready to run. We had that tense electric feeling like something's going to jump out and grab you right... now! But the lights stayed off. There wasn't any noise. Jenny said a naughty word, and then she yelled it.

Then we all yelled bad words at the house, until a pair of headlights lit us up from the road and we got real quiet again. And nothing happened.

I don't remember who went for the garden first. There was a low picket fence in back, but it was kind of a half-hearted thing, waist height even for us. I guess it kept dogs out. I remember Katie climbing over, getting her lab coat stuck on one of the white pickets, but she wasn't the first one. It was late in the season, but this was California, so the tomato plants still had some fruit, and there were squashes and beans. Wilted, but edible, probably. By the time I made it over the fence, they'd already started kicking the vegetables. I'm ashamed to say, I got into the act too. I stomped on the plants and picked up a mushy tomato and threw it at the back door.

That's when the porch light came on. I don't know why he didn't hear us before; maybe he was deaf. Jenny yelled "Run!" and they ran. I, on the other hand, had a mask on that I could barely see out of, and I tripped and fell. They went over the fence, and by the time I tore my mask off and got up, there was Mr. Romanyuk staring down at me, right into my eyes.

If he'd done anything else, I'd have run for it. Yelled, called the cops, running or shooting—I'd have been out of there. But he started to cry. The scary old man who sounded like Dracula just slumped his shoulders and cried. I didn't know what to do. I tried to say something, but it was like I wasn't there. So I picked up the tomato stakes, the ones that weren't too broken, and kind of put them back. It was a mess. *I* was a mess, I had tomato pulp and pumpkin guts on me and I'd landed on my candy bag so there was mooshed chocolate on my knees.

But I kept trying until he stood over me and cleared his throat. I looked up at him. His eyes were all red, but he was smiling.

"Never mind that. Come inside," he said with his thick Slavic accent.

I asked him, "Are you going to call the police on me?"

He said, "Maybe yes, maybe no. Come inside."

I went inside. Now, I shouldn't have, not without my parents, and you should never go into a strange person's house by yourself. Got it?

OK. Where was I? Oh, I went inside. I'd been there before, with my parents when they brought him food after he was in the hospital. It was a tiny little place, really, and it smelled like soap and detergent.

"Put the kettle on," he told me. I pulled off my plastic costume, filled the kettle from the sink and put it on the stove.

"Good," he said. "Come sit down."

I sat down on an ottoman with a flower print and he settled into the big matching easy chair. The phone was off the hook and making a noise, so I put it back for him.

We talked. It was weird, because he talked to me like I was a grown-up, asking about your grandparents and your uncle Frank. Then he started talking about when he was a kid. His parents were farmers in Ukraine, back in the 20s. They grew a lot of stuff, he said, but mostly wheat. He told me about their fields full of gold stretching out under clear blue skies, rippling in the wind.

But things got bad. People starved, and Stalin accused them of hoarding food. So he took their wheat and then turned around and demanded more. Well, what was the point of growing food if someone would just take it? Everyone was angry. People murdered each other. Finally, Stalin took the farms and turned them into collectives. Mr. Romanyuk's family got away and came to the US, he said, to California.

They refused to grow wheat. Ever since he was a little boy, though, his family had a garden. He held out his hands like picking up a laundry hamper, and said that sometimes the garden was that small and full of rocks, but always they grew something.

That's what we'd smashed that night. He'd just gotten to that when the kettle whistled. I was so glad to hear that shriek that just as he started to ask, "Why?" I jumped up and went to the kitchen.

“There are teabags on the counter,” he told me. I found them in a little crockery jar and made him a cup of tea and brought it in. I burned my hands a little holding the mug, but I didn’t want to drop it.

I put the tea down on the table and my little head was spinning, trying to figure out what I could say to change the subject. But I couldn’t think of anything. So I said, “I’m sorry.” I meant it. If I could have taken back that last hour, I really would’ve.

He watched me for a long time, until the steam stopped coming off his tea. “Tell me why you threw eggs at my house and yelled bad words and stomped on my tomatoes.”

Well, I felt awful, but I told him. He put apples out on Halloween, I said, like that was justification, so we played a trick. “We just thought you hated kids,” I said.

“Maybe I do,” he said. He leaned his head back and his eyes looked glassy. “Is not the first time my house is hit with eggs, or kids ring my doorbell and run away, or leave notes that call me Mr. Yuk and say I poison people, or leave bag of dog poop on my porch, on fire even. Maybe I do hate kids.”

We sat there quiet for a while longer. Even as a grown-up, I don’t know what I’d say to that. Finally he said, “I accept your apology. Did you eat an apple?”

Of course I hadn’t. Nobody had.

He just nodded and said, “Go out to my porch and take the top apple.”

The door was unbolted. Nobody had bothered the neat little stack of apples since I’d seen them. I took the one on top and came back inside. He peered at it.

“Take a bite,” he told me, and I did. I bit down on something hard. And there, where I bit, a gold coin stuck out of the apple. Big as my thumbnail and gleaming. I felt amazed and horrible at the same time. It was probably worth five bucks, but I thought I was a millionaire. And he just gave it out on Halloween?

“Go home,” he said. “Do not talk to your friends, do not ring bells for more candy. Do not tell anyone. Is important: just go home.”

He didn't need to tell me twice, that's for sure. I ran like crazy out that door, down the street—straight into my friends. The minute I saw them, those last words he'd said to me went right out of my head.

I was a hero, after all. I'd gone into the lion's den and emerged unscathed. He didn't call my parents or the police or anything, and it was dark so nobody saw that I'd been crying. I had won, and I had a trophy to prove it.

I think that I had some idea that it would make them feel guilty if they saw the coin, that they'd realize that he hadn't been giving out just some cruddy old apples but something really cool. They clustered around me, under the streetlight, and I showed off my treasure.

And then they all ran away from me. For one guilty second I expected to see a police car, that Mr. Romanyuk had called the cops when he saw I'd disobeyed him. No, they were headed for his house and raiding the big bowl of apples. I didn't feel like running, not back there, so I kind of strolled up the walk and stood there in the street. I kicked something on the ground, and it made a slushing sound. I looked down, and there was that apple that Andy threw. I felt bad all over again, so I bent down to pick up what was left. I didn't see a coin in it, but I didn't feel like biting into something that had been on the street.

The other kids came back my way, then, and they were pretty ticked off.

"I didn't get a coin!" Someone said around a mouthful of apple. "What a gyp!" They said I was a liar, told me to show them the coin again. I didn't understand it. Then they got quiet.

"I don't feel so good." If I close my eyes, I can still hear Andy saying that. The sound of my friends groaning, throwing up. I ran down the street until I found a house with a light on and told the lady there that my friends were really sick and needed a doctor.

No, they weren't OK. They died. Jimmy, Katie, Andy, Jenny. They all died before the EMTs got there.

They didn't throw Mr. Romanyuk in jail. No, sir. Oh, they wanted to, but they couldn't — he was dead. Remember that ambulance I told you about? That was him. Heart attack. I know I said I saw him—I did see him! Sure I'll pinky-swear, whatever you like, I promise you: I saw him and we talked just like I said and he gave me that apple with the gold coin and everything.

Oh hey, isn't this Mrs. Cortland's house? Huh, it looks like someone trampled her rose bushes over there. That's a real shame. Didn't you come home all scratched up yesterday?

Hmm.

I see.

Well, those other kids aren't here right now, are they?

I don't know. What do *you* think you should do?

I think that would be very nice, yes. Sure, I'll wait here.

Oh, hey—if Mrs. Cortland offers you any cookies, you'd probably better give them to me. Just to be on the safe side, of course.

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GUEST WRITER

At a young age, Merry Muhsman began writing on Sunday afternoons beneath a tree on her parent's farm in Nebraska. The tree is gone, but the passion for writing stayed stubbornly strong. She was a monthly contributor for the on-line magazine *Fantasy, Folklore and Fairy Tales*. She was accepted into The Odyssey's on-line program twice based on short stories she submitted. She is working on revising her fantasy book and starting the second in the series. She is also working on rebooting her website so people can find her.

SPECIAL NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #18, "Time"

The One Tree

by Merry Muhsman

She remembered how it felt to burn.

It was a strange sensation that should have hurt, but Yggrasil did not recognize pain. She knew of the feeling only from her time with these Norse gods.

She tingled as each piece of her lit with hot embers then fell off in ash slivers. The sheer imagery of her bark curling and peeling off reminded her of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon layer by layer. Helpless to stop it, she became fascinated by the power of the flame. Inch by delicate inch, the bark peeled to display smooth curves of wood—lines of age for each year she oversaw the paradise she called home.

All seemed lost. The women who once swept clean the rainbow bridge lay on the ground; their blood mingled with the dulling colors. Warriors attacked each other

with a fury fueled by desperation. Immortal blood stained the white marble courtyard.

Yggrasil shivered. A branch snapped. Sadness saturated her, and one by one, her leaves fell. She watched them burn off without much care. They had grown quite heavy anyway.

The snake grew fat and grotesque as it sank its fangs into her roots. Earlier it had slithered up to wrap itself around her great trunk, as if meaning to choke her. She bristled, and it slithered away through the flames, its belly full of sharp splinters.

The snake had come the day one of her three caretakers was exiled. Such a foolish, petty reason for exiling the girl. All because she fell in love with a god, but he mated with a valkyrie—Odin’s favorite valkyrie. Humiliated, the girl sent the valkyrie to another realm. The caretaker was banished to Earth. The gods argued amongst themselves until Odin died. Now, they killed each other.

No one seemed to notice the pile of dead leaves around her trunk until they burst into flames that crept up her torso. Then they truly began to wail. Women, men, warriors, spirit-walkers, gods—they all wailed at the end of Yggrasil.

When they died here, they would not remember they shall be reborn. She pitied them, for it must be painful to not remember. Yggrasil knew she still existed. She was the world tree.

“It is not the end,” Skuld had said. “They cannot see their beginning.” She had said all of these things, Yggrasil remembered. Now Skuld’s body lay with the others. Someone had sunk their blade into her chest—someone who did not approve of her intentions. Skuld not only saw the future; she could alter the present to change the future. Skuld had killed children to stop them from someday becoming a killer of thousands. Some believed the child had a choice; Skuld believed the future was set and could only be altered by her. She had been the most powerful of the three caretakers. Still, even Skuld could not escape *this* end.

A thousand crows suffocated the sky with their dark shapes—black feathers, black beaks, black eyes. They screeched in vain for their master Odin. They toppled from the massive cloud to the realms below.

She sensed sadness, like the thrum of a harp string. Yggrasil sought a respected friend—the loyal valkyrie. Ashlide stood at Yggrasil’s base, her frosty blue eyes gazing up at flames. Crackling and roaring, the flames spread higher. Ashlide’s armor shimmered in sapphire and amethyst shades. She shined brighter than the star dust that streaked the sky at her passing.

Two gray wolves panted at her side. Ashlide stroked the head of one. In the wolf’s yellow eyes, the flames echoed, burning as intense as his spirit. “Great tree, what can be done?” Ashlide asked.

Yggrasil knew Ashlide could not shed a tear. Death was part of a valkyrie’s life, and Ashlide understood the path to redemption beyond death. There truly could be no death for the Norse. They would live on and Ashlide understood that.

It took all of her remaining strength to fracture her trunk. A movement so sharp it sounded like a human bone cracking. Her soul, her golden seed, oozed forth in a wave of sticky, yellow sap. The corners of the world closed in on her, even as Ashlide bowed low and cradled the seed in her cloak. She fled with the two wolves following her. Ashlide would not die here; therefore she would remember who she is and what she must do.

*

Fingers touched her gently. She heard Ashlide’s voice. “This tree must be tended carefully. Only water her with honeydew. Watch for insects, and especially snakes for she attracts them. Do not let creatures nibble on her.”

Another woman’s voice answered, soft and gentle like spring rain. “I understand my lady. Do not fear. I can see she is special. I will plant her in our holy grove.”

Ashlide’s voice grew stern. “Only women can care for her. Choose the women carefully for they must dedicate their lives to caring for her. And always, she must have a caretaker. If one dies, another must immediately take her place. Do you understand?”

“I will see to it myself. My people are the caretakers of many trees.”

“She must have a special one for her alone,” Ashlide reminded.

“My lady, it shall be done. I assure you.”

“I will return to check on her. Do not disappoint me. It is an honor to be a caretaker of this tree.”

The sound of hooves somersaulted across the sky. Yggrasil would have thanked Ashlide, but her voice had not formed, yet.

Several days passed in darkness, until one day, new hands cradled her and blessed her in the blinding sunlight. Her new caretaker planted her in the moist ground. Curious worms wiggled away from her. The caretaker called her Reidunn. Yggrasil knew it was not her true name, but it suited her for now.

Reidunn shimmied in the ground, stretching and breaking free. The sun here was so warm, so bright, so beautiful. Day after day, she grew a little taller.

It took a long time.

The caretaker never spoke to Reidunn, but she took care of every need and want, much like caring for an infant.

Still, it made Reidunn sad. Her people spoke to her once. She remembered their conversations, their songs, their laughter. They were full of strength like a crashing wave and brassy boldness like autumn leaves.

Time passed like the flow of a river. Caretakers came and went. Doing their duty, but never truly understanding. They still did not speak to her, and then one day, they did not come as often.

Now, she towered above the meadow, bright and beautiful, almost like before. She kissed the heavens; her roots sank deep into the ground. Her canopy of leaves rivaled any other.

Then more time passed. The caretaker’s hand lingered a little longer on her trunk. She looked so much older now. How much time had passed? Time was so different here.

The caretaker shuffled away.

The sun boiled the sky in one direction until the darkness overcame it in the opposite direction. Again and again. She lost count of how many times the pattern repeated itself as she waited for her caretaker to return.

Reidunn grew lonely again. Her leaves grew heavy. Soon they fell from her branches. She did not care.

*

Shadows flitted beneath the grove of trees. The other trees did not speak to Reidunn. Too stiff. Too proud. Too snobbish to converse with her.

Reidunn wondered about these figures dressed in a pale pink. They did not seem a threat. They yanked weeds from the base of the trees, trimmed branches, raked dead leaves from the ground and sang to the trees. All received their nurturing. All but Reidunn.

They moved around like ants, synchronized with a purpose. One broke away and skittered over to Reidunn. Something dark crossed over the girl like a shadow of a circling vulture, something that almost made her feel shame.

“Contessa, this one looks like it has been neglected,” a voice said, more of a question than a statement. The voice sweetened something Reidunn thought died long ago.

“Sister Maeva, leave that one alone. It’s dying. There is nothing more we can do for it.”

The one they called Maeva stared at Reidunn with liquid blue eyes. The color startled Reidunn. Suddenly, her leaves did not feel as heavy. Reidunn quivered and focused all of her energy, all of her power, all of her memories into one single branch. She forced it to grow from her trunk and blessed the branch with a single leaf, uncurling to Maeva’s fingertips.

The girl gasped. Her fingertips grazed Reidunn's trunk. Electricity raced through every crack and crevice, spreading warmth and life. Her leaves budded, small but green. Alive.

She is—She is Skuld. Not Maeva. Skuld.

Reidunn sighed as the girl's hand slid away. She did not remember. Maybe in time.

"You are not as hopeless as they believe," Maeva said as she bowed low. "I feel your strength. I will return to care for you."

A chorus of gasps escaped the mouths of the others, but Reidunn did not understand their surprise. Warmth flooded her core, racing down to her roots.

She had a caretaker again.

*

For many human days, Maeva returned to Reidunn. First she watered her roots with special sweet water. Not honeydew, but something thicker, sugary like honey. When she waved her hand around Reidunn's trunk, a soft blanket of grass rose to her fingertips. She scattered seeds around her trunk that attracted birds. Reidunn rewarded Maeva with golden apples.

And Maeva's power grew. Others came with her most days now.

"I don't believe it," someone said to Maeva.

Maeva's mouth made the most devious line. "I can do it."

The other girl made a nasally sound. "If it's so easy, then why don't you snap your fingers and give me an apple."

"Oh that is just a magician's trick. There are so many other things I can do." Maeva waved her fingers and a branch flourished with leaves. The other girl let out a slight squeak, as timid as a mouse.

“But if you insist,” Maeva said. A snap of her fingers caused an apple to grow and ripen. Not a blemish on its perfect skin. Maeva handed it to the girl who was thankfully at a loss for words or sound.

Other women soon followed to see Maeva’s tricks. Those days became difficult and exhausting. Maeva’s magic made Reidunn tire so it took a few days to recover. She felt docile like in winter, but she did not sleep quite so deeply.

On those days when Reidunn became too tired, Maeva wrote poems and stories beneath her tree. Reidunn often thought her memories gave Maeva the inspiration; their bond was that strong. She reminded Maeva of the original caretakers, but mainly of Skuld. She visualized Skuld’s actions, but they seemed to scare Maeva.

Still Maeva did not remember her true name. How many times had Skuld been reborn? The years were but a flicker of a butterfly’s wing or so they seemed to pass that quickly. She could wait, she decided for Maeva to remember. What is time to a tree?

*

The day came when Maeva seemed to shine brighter than the sun.

Maeva approached the tree on a pure white horse. A small group of young girls in their petal-pink robes followed Maeva carrying branches of white flowers. A group of women walked in front of Maeva, chanting and singing.

Maeva’s face was covered with a veil, and she wore a blood red dress. This concerned Reidunn. Ceremonies such as these often led to sacrifice. The humans believing a soul could appease the gods. Her branches rustled with anticipation and her roots swished under the ground, sending soft vibrations up above.

The women paused before her at the vibrations, their unease clear as they glanced up at the tree. Their chanting softened and they bowed in reverence before her.

The old one called Contessa—one that never seemed to fully appreciate Reidunn—rose and motioned for Maeva. The young girl slid from the horse and knelt on the

ground before the old crone. Maeva bowed her head as a crown of twisted branches of orange berries and emerald leaves was placed on her head.

Tall and skinny like a sick sapling, Contessa whispered over Maeva. The tree could make out “honor to become priestess.” Then Contessa stretched her hands to the sky.

“Bless this child oh great sun goddess. Cast your rays from the heavens to bless her body, bless her words, bless her future. May her words and actions please the goddess. Bless her as she leads our tribe.”

Maeva rose, her face turned toward the sky. Thunder lurched in the sky, and the clouds split as a single ray of light cast down on the girl.

A crow flapped its black wings and landed in Reidunn’s branch. It scolded her with its caw. Somewhere a wolf howled. In all her years on this fragile place, not once had the crow and the wolf called to her. She could almost hear Odin coming. First, Skuld must remember.

Something tugged at her roots. She drew herself down into the earth. A snake had started to nibble. She shrugged him off with a jerk of her root. Maeva must be told of this intruder.

*

The ground choked and cracked. The ancient snake had returned several days ago to chew on her tender roots. No matter how many times she jerked away, it returned.

Maeva had not returned. Reidunn’s wood had grown dry. She had extended a root toward the priestess’ sacred well. It was not honey dew. It tasted drab in comparison.

It had not rained in weeks. The blistering sun reigned over the cloudless sky. Soon, the precious herbs and healing plants would turn yellow and brown. The world moved this way—a rhythm that humans could not understand. Reidunn knew it was just the earth shedding its skin, making room for new growth. Nothing to fear.

Hooves thundered on the plain. The dust rolled as if a stampede of horses charged into war. The horse skidded to a halt beneath Reidunn's trunk, and the rider staggered to the tree. He removed a winged helmet and knelt before her.

"Oh great one, I have finally found you." He extended a trembling hand to her trunk.

Lightening flashed within her trunk. She knew his mother. The great Ashlide. *Your mother. A great valkyrie.* She remembered Ashilde with her ashy gray hair and fierce blue eyes. The same color of eyes that her son bore.

The man shuddered beneath her words. "I can hear you great tree. My mother said I would be connected to you."

Maeva still did not understand that Reidunn spoke to her. Reidunn could not understand why.

"Great and powerful tree, I have come to you to offer my sword, my life if you shall desire it. My name is Eske. I am a son of a valkyrie, born to a human father."

A rare thing indeed. She sent you, Reidunn finished for him. Did he not understand that simply by his touch she knew far more than he could possibly share in human years? She allowed him to speak regardless.

"This realm has aged my mother. She cannot travel this far. I promised her I would find you. I have followed a wolf to the end of the green meadow, and a crow brought me here. Odin himself must have directed my paths. How may I serve you?" His arm waved as he knelt deeper.

Return Skuld to me.

Eske narrowed his eyes, as he stared up at Reidunn's canopy of leaves. "Skuld is missing?"

She is here. A high priestess. I need her care.

Eske blossomed like a flower in spring. His love for Asgard burned his soul like wildfire. He had never experienced the other realm, but he wanted to be part of it

so strongly, he would do anything to even have just a piece of it. “Growing up, I heard stories of Asgard, of the nine worlds, of Valhalla. If Skuld is alive, then a future is within our grasp.”

Peace settled upon her like a gentle mist, kissing each leaf with its precious moisture. *Someone must remember. Skuld does not know.*

Eske’s mouth twisted into—perhaps a frown. “I do not understand. She does not remember?”

She is priestess, Reidunn repeated. *Speak to her. Help her remember.*

Eske nodded and bowed low. “Whatever you ask of me, I shall do. Where can I find her?”

Reidunn struggled to move her branch. When had it gotten so difficult again? Inch by agonizing inch she swayed her branches toward the East. Eske nodded and mounted his horse.

“When I return, I shall have Skuld at my side, oh great one.” He turned his horse toward the village. The dust cloud rose again as he drove his horse hard.

Reidunn relaxed a bit. She wished for a winter dormancy. She had grown so tired.

*

Gray clouds separated the Earth from the heavens. A spit of moisture fell, just enough to settle the dust, but not enough to puddle. Maeva did not come for several days.

Reidunn fought the loneliness creeping up her side like a choking weed. When she finally came, she shuffled like an old woman. Reidunn’s leaves shook with anticipation.

Maeva wore a darker dress. A deep ruby dress and a golden yoke. Some called it a necklace; it reminded Reidunn of a yoke to break an ox to submission. Maeva knelt near the base of the tree, sobbing. The wet, salty drops stung Reidunn, and her inner core smoldered.

Reidunn remembered their gods' words as their world crumbled around them. *It will all be fine. This is not the end.*

Maeva lifted her swollen face. "The end of what?"

Reidunn struggled to remember other words. *The end of days.*

"You—speak to me? I can hear you. That man, Eske, he said I was hearing you all this time, but I—understand now." She smiled, a half-hearted curl of the lips. "No, this is not the end of days, but—. I am afraid."

No fear. Show no fear. Hadn't the spirit-walker said that to the great warrior? It seemed appropriate now. Maeva finally acknowledged her voice. It was but a thread in a greater tapestry. Reidunn knew that simply hearing her voice was a celebration as small as a tiny centipede. Interesting, but not worth the energy.

"I try, great tree. I had a dream that I shared it with my sisters. I dreamt the trees were burning. A man came and set fire to the entire grove. Everything was lost. My sisters—they believe I can see the future. I have had other dreams. I dreamt a storm came. Too much rain fell and the streams flowed out of their banks. People lost their homes. Do you remember, great tree?"

I remember the time. The streams swelled for weeks, swallowing up villages beneath their merciless waves. The water did not reach the trees for Maeva held it back with magic. The powerful spell drained Reidunn for nearly a month.

"They have made me their high priestess. At first, I thought it was because of my power to heal trees. But now, I think it is so they can use me for my dreams. I am frightened of this dream."

Do not fear who you are. Reidunn's leaves rustled, the sound echoing in the soft areas of her wood. Maeva dreamt of the future. She must remember. It could not be wrong to help remind her. She was so near.

"Great and beautiful tree, I have to share with you—I am no longer able to serve as your caretaker."

Her words crackled like lightning.

You are Skuld.

Maeva recoiled as if she had been burnt. “Eske said the same thing to me. No, I am Maeva.”

Memories. The stories you write. A time as Skuld.

The young girl quivered like a rabbit. “I don’t understand what you are saying, tree. You gave me those memories through the bond we share.”

Skuld sees the future. Skuld is you. Reidunn thought an ant must be digging too deep into her trunk. Something hurt. Her branch peeled and cracked. The snap of the wood startled Maeva to a standing position.

“I can see the future, but it does not make me this person. Contessa tells me of the caretakers who tended the world tree. They were horrible, conniving gods. They played with the past, present and future of men. Skuld was the worst. Contessa says Skuld once murdered an entire family and stole their future. She killed innocent children, simply because she did not like their parents. No, I cannot be her.”

In future, family evil. Family starts war. Destroys civilization. Skuld saved people. Skuld misunderstood.

Maeva shook her head, a dismissive shake Reidunn had seen before. The gods could see the damage when she grew ill, but they did not believe. Maeva did not believe.

“I have upset you today. I am sorry great tree. You are just confused. I am not one of these caretakers. I was born to a farmer and his wife, but I am a priestess now. I lead the tribe, and soon, I will be married to another priest.” She paused, color staining her cheeks. “He’s a handsome man—we love each other. It’s something I have always wanted. Please, be happy for me. I will still visit you, but my duties as priestess and soon as his wife, are just too many. I do not have time to be your caretaker. Another will care for you, much better than I. I will—”

Another branch snapped. The wood splintered and wept. It throbbed, and pulsed, and hurt. The branch fell to the ground at Maeva's feet. *You are Skuld. Nothing else matters.*

The girl picked it up tenderly and cradled it. Maeva's face contorted into something of dismay and disappointment. "I thought you would be happy for me. You're just being selfish. I—"

A horn blew. An alarm. Reidunn trembled. It was happening again. The warning horn.

Reidunn saw Maeva's face, and it reminded her of the watchmen who saw the end coming. "I must go. I will return with a new caretaker," she said. She turned, taking the branch with her. "I will bring my husband to meet you. It is love, just like the stories I wrote."

Reidunn trembled again. *Selfish*. The word skittered up her bark like a squirrel. Another god called Odin selfish when he banished one of the caretakers. Why would Maeva call Reidunn that word? Being a caretaker is an honor. The caretakers never complained.

Perhaps—Maeva was not ready. She is happy. Is that what the banished caretaker had desired when she fell in love?

Maybe in the next life, Skuld would be ready.

The thought of giving up on Skuld cracked her bark, exposing her soft wood pulp.

*

"Look what you have done!"

Voices broke through her fog. A dreamless sleep had fallen upon Reidunn. No, winter had not come.

"She is ill. Her new caretaker will bring her back to health."

“YOU are her caretaker! You must use your magic to heal her. You don’t understand what is happening to her. This is how she dies.”

It is not the end. Reidunn told them both in as firm a tone as one can command in a human mind.

“Oh great tree, I have brought the one they call Maeva.”

Reidunn spread her awareness to Maeva and Eske. She felt a tremor in her core at the carnage before her. How many days had she slept? A pile of brown leaves blanketed a mixture of dead and greenish grass. Sometime it had rained, but not enough to replenish.

She became aware of splintered branches around her trunk. Sticky sap dripped upon the ground. So, it had begun again. Her root wiggled in the ground, dislodging the fat enemy snake once more. She sought the renewing energy of the well, but found nothing but dusty, dry dirt.

It is an end.

“See what you have done!” Eske stomped the ground. He held a torch as dusk began to steal the light from the earth. The torch’s orange glow crackled and sizzled.

Maeva stood like a stiff, proud oak tree. “The damage is great, yes. The storm did more damage than I realized.”

“This is no storm!” Even his eyes looked wild, like a starving dog. “She is dying. Dying because you won’t remember who you are. She is the One Tree.”

Maeva shook her head, wetness plain on her cheeks. “She is a great and beautiful tree, but the One Tree—the world tree—died long, long ago.”

Find another, Eske. Find another caretaker. Reidunn knew he could not recognize the caretakers in their current form, but he needed to be hopeful again.

“No, great tree. We are so close,” Eske replied. “Maeva, you must try to remember who you are. Can’t you see that she’s dying without your care?”

“She is just damaged. She needs time to heal and proper care. I have doubled the caretakers. Now there will be two with her every day.”

“No, only you can heal her.”

“I know it’s difficult to understand. I want what’s best for the tree, too. But I have other responsibilities now. I have a tribe to lead. There are many brothers and sisters counting on me.”

“They are not immortal. You are immortal. My mother was a valkyrie. She survived the death of Asgard. She planted the tree here.”

It gave Maeva pause, but not for more than a human breath. “Are you certain that she was not just as caught up in the legends? Your helmet is just a relic. There was a time when they were popular among warriors. Many have them.”

“No, she was a valkyrie.” He bristled, clutching a pile of her leaves. They crumbled in his hand. “Why can’t you stop for one moment and consider that I might be telling the truth?”

A brown leaf with spots of green fell unceremoniously to land on Maeva’s shoulder.

“See. She gives you a leaf. She wants you to believe.” Eske’s chest heaved.

Reidunn felt a singular thought pulse in Eske’s mind like a heart beat. He meant to do anything, believe anything, say anything to bring about the place his mother had known.

“This tree is special, I agree with you. She is my friend. But she is ill, and her caretakers needs to pay more attention to her.” Maeva’s tone softened.

Eske clung to her words as if she came around. Reidunn knew she had not. She only pitied him. “Listen to what the tree has to say. She talks to you. You hear her voice as clearly as I do.”

Maeva glanced up at Reidunn. Her eyes glossy, her hands trembling. She might have wanted to believe, but could not. Maeva could not give up the life before her. She could not comprehend her true power.

“All the trees talk to me,” Maeva admitted. “All the trees share stories with me. Reidunn’s stories are just—more colorful.”

Something snapped beneath the ground, and Reidunn knew others had joined the snake. Only a matter of time now.

An orange glow caught Reidunn’s attention. Eske’s torch seemed to strengthen with his youthful ambition. Desperation shook his bones, overtaking his better judgment. Reidunn inclined her branch, wishing to touch him, to stop him, to tell him to let it all go. Her branches would no longer reach that far.

Eske stumbled toward the other trees. He waved the torch in a large arch, slicing the encroaching darkness with his flames. He had gone mad, like the ones who ran around at the end, shrieking, burning, still seeking to find escape.

“If you will not listen to me, then I will make you believe.”

He dipped the torch to the ground.

Maeva screamed, “Please. Stop!”

The flames screeched like a living being. Flames shrieked up the tree. Fueled by the dead growth, the flames ran mad like souls escaping death’s realm. Reidunn watched the flames spread to her pile of leaves.

She was burning again.

*

Maeva fell to the hard earth, the glow of the tree illuminating her, even as she gasped for air and wetness covered her face.

She drug herself across the ground to the burning tree. The wood crackled and popped, spitting ash onto her skin. Light flickered across the cracks of the tree,

snapping the trunk, bearing open the tree's inner cavity. Light spilled from the hole, shooting golden rays into the darkness. There lay a seed.

A blackened root grazed her skin, the deception slid from Maeva's vision. The girl named Maeva melted toward the ground like a shade broken from its body. Suddenly, things came into sharp focus.

And the girl remembered.

She reached for the seed, cradled it like a precious child, wrapping it in the folds of her dress.

The valkryie's son Eske crawled across the ground, his soul spent and shaken. He pleaded with her to end his life. "I have failed the great tree. I have failed," he wept like a child.

The girl rose, feeling the power of the seed in her palm. "Yggrasil is your name," she told the seed.

A crow cawed and lit on her shoulder. Its claws pressed into her skin.

"I am Skuld," she replied.

A wolf howled.

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