



 **THE  
PREMISES**  
A Good Place to Start  
**ISSUE #22**  
**MARCH 2014**

**FOR THIS ISSUE ONLY, WE CELEBRATED SEVEN  
SUCCESSFUL YEARS BY LETTING CONTESTANTS  
SEND US A SHORT STORY BASED ON ANY OF OUR  
FIRST 21 CONTEST PREMISES.**

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## FIRST PLACE

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# Spring Cleaning

*by Siobhan Gallagher*

*NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #15: Myths and Legends.*

Spring had arrived, which only meant one thing: cleaning. Lord Yama summoned a broom from nothing and began sweeping out the demons from Hell. Many of them tumbled into the dark pools leading to Earth, but one little demon clung to the broom's bristles.

"I don't want to leave!" it cried. "It's cold and cruel there on Earth."

Lord Yama sighed, his breath coming out in a thousand winds. "I need to make room for the new souls, and you demons are cluttering up the place. Now no more of this."

He plucked the little demon from the broom and tossed him into the dark pool.

\*

Rain poured hard and fast. The little demon's scrawny legs were knee-deep in mud as he trudged forward. He found a palm leaf to use as an umbrella; it was quickly ripped to shreds. He crawled into a log, but was shoed out by a grumpy old spider.

The best he could manage was squeezing himself into the crevice of a large stone, and even then, water trickled down onto his head.

As expected, Earth was a terrible, terrible place. At least in Hell, he was dry and warm.

By morning, the rain had stopped. The little demon went exploring, urged on by his growling stomach.

He came upon a village, where homes with grass and tile roofs were built along a lone dirt road at a slight incline. Pale telephone poles contrasted with the bright greenness of the surrounding growth, yet didn't feel all that out of place, as if the jungle forest had accepted the poles by growing around them. One particular home drew his nose's attention with the aroma of steamed rice and jasmine. He trotted over to a festive-looking altar in front of the home, adorned with the freshest hibiscus and morning glories, a big bowl of rice mounted on top. His mouth watered, drool dripping down his chin.

Just as he reached up...

"Hey! That's not for you."

A girl, no older than thirteen, stood in the open doorway, wielding a stick of bamboo. He froze, claws still reaching. Maybe he could grab a few grains and run before—

Nope.

Her stick came down swift and hard. Barely missed his hand. He hopped, sporadic, eyes locked on the stick and where it might land next. She swiped, nipped him in the pointy long ears. Ow, ow, ow!

No rice today, no rice ever! He retreated, fast as possible, into the forest where he hid behind the trunk of a dead banana tree. After a few moments, he peeked his head around the trunk.

“I know you’re out there!” the girl said.

He quickly withdrew from sight.

He waited what seemed like hours, chewing on bark, which was neither tasty nor satisfying. In Hell, no one ever went hungry—except for the tortured souls. Maybe this was what the souls experienced; although he was certain they never had to deal with the likes of a girl and her stick.

When he thought it might be safe, he tip-toed back to the altar.

“Nu uh. No you don’t!”

He shuddered at the sight of the bamboo stick and pulled his ears down. And he must’ve looked pathetic, because the girl’s expression softened.

“You keep coming back. You hungry?”

He nodded timidly.

“I have a lot of chores to do. If you help me, I can feed you.”

This sounded fair, so he agreed. Because of his small size, she had him clean all the tight spaces: behind the stove, underneath the furniture, corners of the closets. She even managed to put him on the end of her stick, and held it up so he could polish the light fixtures. Bleah. In Hell, all he ever had to do was poke souls.

After they were done, the girl stayed true to her word, gave him a heaping bowl of rice and a strip of dried meat, which he wolfed down with a hunger he’d never known before. She watched him eat, an amused smile on her face.

“You’re very helpful, you know that?” the girl said.

He wiped rice from his face, but said nothing. *Of course* he was helpful; which was why he should've never been swept out of Hell in the first place.

“Do you have a place to stay?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“What’s your name?”

He shrugged. Demons didn’t have names.

“Hmm...” She tapped her chin. “If you don’t have a name I will call you Bantu.”

“Bantu.” The little demon tested the word out around a mouthful of rice.

“I’m Kade.”

Hmm, Kade. A popular name in Indonesia, many spirits of women came into Hell bearing that name.

She continued, “You’re welcome to stay here. There’s more cleaning to be done tomorrow.”

Ugh, cleaning. But he supposed it was better than sleeping in rock crevices.

They retired early, and Kade read to him a book of his choosing. He liked best the one with a beautiful mermaid on the cover. It was the tale of Nyi Roro Kidul, the Spirit-Queen of the Southern Sea, and how she was driven from her kingdom as a young girl and made the sea her new home.

He went to sleep, thinking how good it would be to be home.

\*

The little demon woke early, a growl in his stomach. He wiggled out from under Kade’s bed covers and headed for the kitchen.

A large man sat at the dinner table, drooping bags under his eyes and a hunch in his shoulders from a long night's drive. The man gave him such a glare, it would've sent Lord Yama fleeing from the room.

He yipped and scuttled back to the safety of Kade's room—only to smack into her legs.

“Father, you're home!” Kade ran to the man and wrapped her arms around his barely distinguishable neck.

“I'll brew some strong coffee,” she said, making her way to the kitchen counter.

“What is *that* doing here?” Her father pointed at him.

“That's Bantu. He helped me clean.”

“That's a demon is what that is.”

Kade's father said that like it was a *bad* thing. The little demon snorted, puffed out his chest.

Her father said, “You can't let it stay here. It'll anger the spirits and bring bad luck upon us.”

Kade turned to her father, arms crossed. “I told you, he's helpful. Why would the spirits take offense to that?”

Bantu also crossed his arms and gave a stiff nod of approval.

“Why bother cleaning for spring when you're going to let impure things into the home?”

Her father then stood, a great colossus of a man. Bantu danced around the man's boots as the man tried to stomp him flat. Kade tried to stop her father, but it all turned into a chaotic mess of yelling and shouting.

Bantu wasn't sure what happened next, though the sheer pain in his side told him the boots had won, as he was sent flying into the air, and out the door. He skidded across the dirt, and thankfully his thick skin kept the damage to a minimum. He got up, dusted himself off.

Nasty, nasty human. If ever a soul deserved to roast in Hell, it was Kade's father.

Bantu wandered the village in the hopes for some edibles, resorting to trash-digging for some chicken bones. Dry and brittle, splintered in his mouth. Barely worth the effort. To top that off, he was chased away by an old woman carrying that dreaded thing: a broom.

How could Lord Yama subject him to this? Then again, he was starting to understand why Hell needed the space, considering all these horrible humans.

Not Kade, though. She was kind, even if she made him clean. He returned to her home and found that Kade had left the window to her room open; he crawled inside. Waiting for him was a bowl of rice. Cold, but still delicious.

Kade entered, quietly closed the door behind her. She sat on the bed and said: "Father went to bed early. He works long hours in the city, so he'll be gone again for a few days."

Good riddance, Bantu thought.

For their nighttime entertainment, Bantu turned the lights low and gave Kade a shadow puppet show—a popular thing amongst demons. Although their stories were much more gruesome, he toned it down to a few mutilations. Kade was fascinated into silence, then broke into questions about the underworld, Lord Yama, and where she might wind up.

It took several nights to answer her questions, but he assured her that Lord Yama would delight in sending her to the upper realms.

But several nights of staying up took their toll, as they slept in...

Bang! Bang! at her bedroom door.

“You let that demon back into this home, didn’t you?”

Bantu ducked under the bed before Kade’s father burst in, dragged his daughter out of bed and into the kitchen. She gasped and cried, and he soon realized why: all their valuables were gone. The thief stole the rice cooker too!

Between sobs, she said: “I didn’t even hear anyone come in.”

Neither did he, and he had the ears for such things. But there was an odor in the air, sick and greasy. He inhaled deeply. Yep, unmistakable: corpse oil. He knew his fair share of black magicians reeking of the stuff when they entered Hell. Which meant a *tuyul* was employed.

Bantu left through Kade’s bedroom window. He would’ve comforted Kade, but her father was too busy berating her, and he didn’t want to meet her father’s boots again. But he’d show that stupid human it wasn’t his fault by finding the stolen goods himself.

He followed the scent of corpse oil, and it became clear Kade’s home wasn’t the only one that had been robbed. They couldn’t *all* possibly blame him. Black magicians were known for these get rich quick schemes.

Where the scent ended, he found the mud tracks of a pickup truck. Oh how he loathed going for long walks.

Luckily, one of the neighbors kept goats. Surely they wouldn’t mind him borrowing one. He snuck a doe out of her pen and with a good pinch, got her running. Though this speed would only last for a few yards before it became a trot, then an attempt to graze on the side of the road. Troublesome beast. He took a lesson from Kade, getting a stick to whack the goat on the nose whenever she went off trail.

A lot of drivers going to and fro gave him quizzical looks.

Half a day and much struggling later, he arrived at the next village, and quite to his relief, the tracks ended there. He roped the goat to an old post where she could graze, then darted from home to home, sticking to the shadows,

sensing nothing out of the ordinary. Of course the magician's *tuyul* wouldn't be out and about by daylight, but there *should* have been signs of magic use. Nope. Just a sleepy little village.

He did, however, narrow down the pickup used in the robbery, from the fresh mud on the tires to the lingering stink of corpse oil. The pickup was parked in front of a vacant, locked home. Peering inside, he saw the place was cluttered with junk—probably being used for storage. There was an empty spot beside the home where a car had been parked. The thief would be back for the goods. In the meantime, Bantu unplugged important looking things in the pickup's engine, collected pretty pebbles, then decided all this hard work was deserving of a nap.

He awoke to a *rrrrrr-rrrrrr*, followed by a man cursing. It was just after sundown, red-orange glow barely illuminating the horizon. Not that he needed the light to see. Bantu collected the pebbles and crept out of the bushes. Corpse oil curdled the air around the pickup.

The man slammed the driver's side door, ruffled his hair in the pickup's headbeams before popping the hood—and Bantu knew that was no magician. The whole reason magicians had minions was to leave the hands-on work to them. Plus the man didn't smell like the type; he sweated anxiety.

Which meant he bought or was renting the *tuyul*. Idiot fool.

Bantu oh-so quietly made his way up the side of the pickup, the pebbles clutched in one hand. The windows were rolled down, corpse oil overwhelming, and sitting in the passenger side was the creepiest toddler he ever did lay his eyes on. It had mottled gray skin, bright red eyes far too big for its face, a melon-sized head. It was playing with a toy car in its pudgy little hands, and it was hard to believe this thing could lift objects three times its size.

“Pssh, hey,” Bantu whispered, rolling a couple of pebbles between his claws.

The *tuyul* looked up at him, mouth open in silent surprise. Its gaze focused on the pebbles, the toy car fell from its hands. Forgotten.

Bantu jumped to the ground. The *tuyul* followed, phasing right through the door, hands reaching. He teased the *tuyul* for a moment before tossing the pebbles into the darkness. The *tuyul* waddled right after them. No one ever said magicians made *smart* minions.

“Hey, where ya go— Ah!” The man rubbed the back of his head.

Now to deal with this idiot.

Bantu hid behind the front right tire, stretched his long fingers into the headlights. Shadows formed, a big ferocious demon with many horns and many wings—what Lord Yama liked to send when it came to fetching a human’s soul.

He threw his voice out, loud and authoritarian-like. “Human!”

The man spun around, looked wildly about. Bantu wiggled his fingers, the effect made the shadow-demon jump off the ground. The man stifled a gasp.

“Human, the pact you’ve made has rendered your soul mine to take.”

“Pact? I didn’t make—”

“Human! You should know the costs when dealing with black magic.”

“I didn’t! I mean... the guy, this guy, said it was all harmless.”

“You are a fool then.”

The shadow-demon lunged forward, the man jumped and sunk to his knees.

“No! Please!”

The shadow-demon straightened up. “Perhaps I can be persuaded if you make amends. Return all these things you have stolen before dawn breaks.”

The man nodded vigorously.

“And if you don’t, I will drag you before Lord Yama and *all* twenty-eight Hells.” In a flash, the shadow-demon was gone.

The man heaved a sigh and pulled himself to his feet. Bantu snuck out from under the pickup, watched from a distance as the man rounded up the *tuyul* and started loading the truck.

\*

It wasn't till late afternoon when Bantu returned to Kade's village. Lazy goat. He was expecting some sort of cheer, instead—

“Hey! There's my goat!”

Bantu leapt off and made a run for it.

Kade had once again left her window open, and as soon as he crawled onto the ledge, he was swept up in her embrace. He struggled... Actually, it was kind of nice, and he let her soapy jasmine scent envelop him.

“No one believes it,” she said, “but I *know* you're the one who got our stuff back.”

His stomach growled loudly then.

She set him down on the bed, smiling. “I'll make you a big feast.”

After she left, he snuggled under the covers for a quick nap. It may not have been Hell, but at least he was loved.

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## SECOND PLACE

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# Grandmother Winter

*by Alison McBain*

*NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #6: Revelation.*

“In the forest lives an old woman,” said Ellie’s mother. “She will eat you if you are bad. Mind me or else.”

It was hard for Ellie to take her mother seriously. She was old enough to know the difference between the village superstitions and her mother’s tales. But still, she said yes. She would watch her brother.

Once she agreed, her mother tied on a scarf and left Ellie standing in the doorway holding baby Jackson. The girl watched her mother walk out through the front gate without a backward glance at the two she left behind.

Jackson was especially fussy today. He cried as Ellie fed him sloppy porridge; he stole the spoon and threw it on the floor. Then he spit his meal up all over Ellie.

“Shh,” she tried to soothe him. “Shh.” His face brightened and swelled like a birthday balloon. She wanted to pop him, to deflate his puffed-out cheeks and

screwed-up fists that batted at her. She wanted to leave him crying by himself and go off to play. He would cry whether she was there or not—she couldn't soothe him.

The sky darkened outside. Mother could take hours, wherever she went to. Ellie had asked several times if she could come along, but had been told no. "It's grown-up stuff," she was told the first time. "When you're older," the next time. Finally her mother screamed, "No! Stop asking!"

So she stopped.

Jackson wailed as she bounced him up and down in her arms. She pleaded with him, but he ignored her. She changed his diaper, but he peed on her. She sang a song while he hit her in the nose.

Her mother's words boiled up inside of her and she shouted, "No! Stop crying!"

This only made him squeeze more tears out and scream harder.

Finally, she put him in his crib and covered him in a blanket that he immediately kicked off. That was it—she couldn't take it anymore. She walked through the door and shut it behind her.

The air outside was still and heavy with electricity. The wooly clouds were dirty with potential, low and grey and grimy. Guilt filled her throat as she walked away, but she did not turn around. The back of her head crawled with the wrongness of Jackson left behind, alone and crying in his crib.

Ellie slunk into the trees, but didn't go far. Of course, she promised to some nameless entity inside her head, she would return in a minute and obey the summons of her brother's cries. Of course, she wouldn't leave him alone for long.

But she lingered at the edge of the woods. The trees leered at her with twig teeth, and she idled beneath them in a tortured mix of freedom and shame. Another minute and she would return to the house, rescue Jackson from his

crib and hold him until their mother returned. She would be good, after this next minute.

Or maybe this one.

Perhaps a couple more.

She watched the clouds swing over their house in the small clearing as she leaned her head back against the base of a large and knobby tree. The sky roiled like boiling soup and she huddled in her coat against the growing winds of the storm. Her coat was old and warm, too large for her by far. It had been her father's, her mother once told her, but would say no more about it.

Ellie closed her eyes against the wind and snuggled down inside the coat. She felt comforted by it, sheltered in a cocoon of her father's long-ago protection.

When she next opened her eyes, it was to darkness and wailing. She jumped to her feet. A confusion of thoughts tumbled through her head, until she remembered Jackson left alone in the house. Her mother would be livid at her for abandoning him, no matter that she had never left sight of their home.

Except... how could she have gotten so turned around? She looked left and right, but there was nothing but forest and more forest. There was no clearing, no small and familiar cottage. The branches of the trees loomed out of the darkness like the tales she had heard about sinister creatures of the woods, and Ellie remembered her mother threatening her before she left with the idea of the old woman of the forest.

The wailing was louder now, and Ellie was frightened until she realized it was the wind moaning through the branches. A rumble echoed through the sky, and the first cold drops fell down, white as the trees were black, the stark colors of nighttime.

She had no choice but to walk or freeze. Choosing a direction at random, she shuffled her feet forward, huddling inside her coat. The snow fell down, an endless kaleidoscope of sky demons dancing over her head. Her toes hurt, then numbed, and her feet lost feeling next. Still, she walked and the snow fell.

Her head was tucked down below the collar of her coat for warmth, and she was not sure what made her look up, but when she did, she saw a light flickering in the distance. *The clearing!* she thought gratefully. *Home.*

The idea filled her with longing, a visceral tug that sped her numb feet and spurred her to a careless speed. She tripped and sprawled on the ground, knocking away her breath. She lay flat on a bed of snow and struggled to take air in and out. The cold of the hard earth seeped up her arms and into her chest so that she coughed convulsively when she had recovered from the shock of the fall. *Can't lie here,* she thought, and pushed to her feet. There was the light, her only hope of safety, and she walked forward again to follow it.

The light led her deeper into the woods. The trees were thicker, and the ephemeral brightness receded before her so she never got closer. In despair, she thought of will-o-the-wisps and what it would mean to be lost in the forest during a winter storm.

As if sensing her ragged emotions, the light flickered again and coalesced into a stable image. Ellie stumbled, fighting with the entwined branches that blocked her way. It seemed there was a clearing on the other side, but the trees were rooted fast and held firm against her numb fingers. She beat at them with her useless hands and shrieked wordlessly into the night.

At her cry, the branches suddenly gave way and she fell forward into a small, open area where the trees curved like a roof and bent around the sides of the space as tightly as a thicket. In the heart of the opening was a small cottage, just about the size of her home. Lights shone from all the windows but, oddly, the house looked like it was perched on a nest of dried sticks that elevated it up from the ground.

The wind howled and the snow blew against her back, urging her forward. Fear beat through her skull as hard as the fingers of the wind, yet she still hesitated despite the impetus of cold. Finally, she walked forward until she reached the door and knocked. It was a timid rap, but she could hear the echoes inside as if she had smote upon the door with all of her force.

Quite clearly, she heard a voice say, "Enter." The tone of the voice was as cold as the wind and chilled her through, much as the winter storm had. But she had come here and had no other choice, so she pulled the latch and stepped inside.

The warmth of the fire inside was overwhelming after the cold, and she felt the sting of heat on her face like a slap. She quietly closed the door behind her, her eyes drinking in the simple room. A trundle bed sat in the far corner by the fireplace, and in between the two was a scarred table and chairs. An old woman sat in one of the chairs and she had a knife in her hand. It was as long as the woman's arm and she held it pointed at the door. No, pointed at *Ellie*.

"It's a cold night for a cold heart," said the woman. Then she laughed, splinters of ice edging through it. "What are you doing wandering the woods on such a night?"

"Please, ma'am, I got lost," Ellie said. She waited next to the door, dripping with melting snow, afraid to venture further. The woman put down the knife and smiled, but the smile brought no comfort. Her face was a nest of wrinkles and her mouth had few teeth. Around her neck was a string of long, off-white beads that tinkled strangely as she moved. "I beg of you, please let me stay here until the storm ends, and then I can be on my way."

"You beg for my care? You must have a kind heart to expect favors from a stranger. Do you care for others when they need you?"

Ellie's mind flashed back to her brother and her eyes pricked with guilty tears. "No, ma'am, I do not. My brother needed me, and I left him behind."

"Aha," said the old woman. "Well, I am not you. For the truth of your words and the regret in your heart, you are welcome to my fire and to share my meal."

Stunned by the generosity, Ellie blinked her eyes and the tears fell down. "Thank you." She swiped the back of her hand across her cheeks. "I will do whatever I can to repay you."

“Not a wise promise to give to a stranger in the woods,” said the old woman. She stood, and Ellie could see that the old woman was small, no taller than herself. Perhaps the woman had once been larger, but her back was bent with age and her fingers gnarled with it. Still, she moved lightly across the floor to the fire and dished stew into two bowls from a pot suspended over the flames. She thunked them onto the worn surface of the table, and Ellie sat down across from her, feeling as if she were floating in a dream. Her fingers tingled with returning life.

“What is your name, girl?” asked the woman, giving her a spoon. Ellie told her and took a mouthful of the stew. It was so hot it seared her tongue. “Where is your family?”

After a hesitation while she took a bite and chewed it, Ellie told her this also. “So your mother left you alone? Where does she go when she is gone all day?”

“I don’t know,” said the girl. “She will not tell me.”

“Hmm,” said the old woman. By this time, Ellie had eaten her fill and she felt warm and drowsy. Her eyelids began to droop and she had problems listening to the woman, despite trying to be polite.

“Come,” said the voice. “I have blankets in that chest, there. You may sleep before the fire.”

Ellie went where she was directed and curled herself into the blankets. Now warmed through, she fell asleep.

\*

When she woke, Ellie was in her own bed at home. She blinked sleep-furred eyes and glanced around. There, in his crib, was her sleeping brother. Her mother was in the bed next to her, also fast asleep.

Had it just been a dream? She sat up as gently as possible so as to not wake the baby, but was startled by the loud thud of something dropping to the floor. She froze. A rustle of cloth was followed the next minute by a thin wail as Jackson woke.

“Ellie!” grunted her mother, and the girl went and picked up her brother. As soon as she touched him, he quieted and looked at her. His blue eyes crinkled and he smiled. She felt her heartbeat racing in her chest and she held him tightly in her arms in apology for leaving him the day before.

But there had been the thump when she rose. Ellie turned her head to look at the floor, and bent to pick it up. It was heavier than it should be for something so small, and she stood there, Jackson propped on one shoulder, holding the item in her left hand. It filled her palm and glowed with the morning sun streaming through the windows.

Her mother stretched and said, yawning, “What have you got there?”

“A golden heart,” Ellie answered in a whisper.

“A gold—what?” Her mother jumped to her feet and came around the bed. She snatched the object from her daughter’s hands. She tested it with her fingernail, and then her teeth. “Where did you find this?”

Ellie told her about the old woman in the woods. About how she had fallen asleep there and woken here, holding the golden heart in her hand. “An old woman,” murmured her mother. “And she obviously gave you this—but why?” Ellie didn’t know.

“Where there is one, there may be more,” said her mother. “But I don’t trust that you’ll know how to get them. Watch Jackson. I’ll be back.”

So Ellie spent the day watching her brother. Whatever had ailed him before was gone, and they played with the golden heart, which he seemed to enjoy. She would roll it along the carpet, thumpety, thumpety, and he would laugh and clap his hands.

When darkness fell, their mother returned. “A waste of time!” she said, picking twigs from her hair. “I couldn’t find the old woman’s hut. Well, no matter, I will take the gold to town tomorrow to sell.”

“You can’t! It’s mine,” argued Ellie.

“No matter that it was yours. It’s mine now. This means that we can live well, better than we do now. Give it to me.”

Ellie refused, but her mother overpowered her and snatched it away. “You wicked child!” she scolded. “The old woman of the forest will eat you for being bad!”

The girl said nothing. She got little sleep that night, knowing her mother would be selling her heart tomorrow.

Her mother was gone early and stayed away all day. When she returned, she was furious. “No one will buy it! When I showed it to them, they just took one look at me and threw me from their store. Maybe they thought I stole it, or maybe it isn’t gold after all. See, look at my hands. They have turned red from handling it, so something has rubbed off on me. But, no matter. If they won’t take it from my hands, maybe they will take it from yours,” she told Ellie. “Tomorrow, you will come to town with me and sell it.”

“I won’t,” said Ellie, holding Jackson. Her mother moved to take the baby, but Jackson howled and clung to his sister.

“Fine then, see how you like going hungry!” snapped her mother. “If you won’t sell it, then you both can starve.”

The next morning, their mother packed up all the food in the house and carried it with her to town, not once glancing back over her shoulder at the two children standing in the doorway watching her leave. As the hours passed, Jackson cried and Ellie could give him only water from the well to fill his belly. With her own stomach snarling at her, she warmed the golden heart between her hands, and an idea suddenly came to her. Quickly, she bundled up the baby and herself and walked into the woods carrying Jackson.

The trees seemed to bow down before her as she walked and Jackson became quiet. He watched the winter sky, which showed clear blue through the sere branches. Before long, they were at the house in the heart of the woods and Ellie knocked on the door. “Enter,” said the cold voice.

The room was much the same as before. The old woman lowered her knife and put it on the table when she saw them, but said nothing in greeting. "I have returned with my brother," explained Ellie under the watchful eyes of the old woman. "And I come to thank you for the gift."

"What gift?" asked the woman guilelessly, then laughed. "I see you are both hungry. Come, there is much in my stew pot today." She put bowls before them and watched as Ellie fed her brother the soft vegetables in the broth first before touching her own stew. After Jackson was done eating, he played on the floor with the wooden spoon from the pot.

The girl ate steadily and looked at the old woman's necklace. It was yellow and made of long, thin beads, as if it were made from bones, and the image reminded her of her mother's threats about the dangers of the woods and old women who ate children. Before she could scare herself, Ellie looked away from the necklace and tried to think only of the warmth and the comfort of the food which filled her empty stomach.

"You have a long journey home," said the old woman when she was finished. "But you are always welcome here."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Ellie.

"Call me Grandmother," said the old woman.

"Thank you, Grandmother," she said dutifully. Smiling, the old woman gestured them on their way.

The trip back didn't seem so long and the trees nodded at them as they passed. When they got home, their mother was waiting and her face darkened when she saw them. "Where have you been?" she demanded. When Ellie told her, their mother ripped at her own hair in frustration. "Show me this path in the woods!"

So Ellie pointed to where she had walked through the forest, and watched her mother run off into the gathering twilight. The girl put Jackson to bed, rekindled the fire and waited. Eventually, her eyes grew heavy and she fell asleep.

When she woke, the first thing she saw was a kettle hanging over the flames of the fireplace. The pot gleamed as bright as moonlight and the smell coming from it made her mouth water. Jackson must have smelled it too, for he was sitting up in his crib, clutching at the bars and staring at her. She took him out and fed him broth from the pot, and then ate herself. She had never tasted anything so wonderful. The meat was tender and juicy, the vegetables as flavorful as if they had just been pulled from the earth. Jackson laughed and clapped his hands.

The door opened just as she finished eating and her mother stormed in, her hair a rats' nest. There were scratches on her face, as if she had tried to claw her way through branches and been clawed in return. Her palms were still bright red from when she had touched Ellie's golden heart and she sniffed the air until she located the silver pot on the fire. The woman let out a shriek and advanced on the stewpot. "Where did you get this?"

Ellie told her about waking to find it there. Her mother dipped a ladle of it into a bowl and began to eat, but she spit it out after several mouthfuls and went gagging to the door. Ellie glanced in the bowl – a wriggling worm bobbed to the surface and then dipped back down into the soup.

"What trick is this, you nasty child?" said their mother on her return. She hauled the silver pot out the door and dumped its contents in the woods. "I will take the pot to town to sell," she said, straightening her hair.

Ellie stayed silent. She was unsurprised when their mother returned that afternoon, ranting and raving and still carrying the pot. Her mouth was colored a bright green that she swore came from the stew she had eaten and vomited. Between her red hands and green face, she looked like a holiday decoration.

"Tomorrow morning, I will follow you into the woods," she said. "And we will see how that old biddy does, then."

And that is what happened. Morning came, and Ellie carried Jackson into the woods. The trees let the two children through easily and their mother pushed in behind them, even though the snarled branches tried to block her way.

When they came to the clearing, Ellie almost hoped that the house would be gone or some other such magic, but there it stood, perched upon its pile of twigs. The old woman's voice called out when the girl knocked and the three of them went into the house.

"Hello, Grandmother," said Ellie.

"Don't 'Grandmother' her," said her mother. "I want answers."

"Answers, hmm," said the old woman. "I will answer your questions. But, for each you ask, I will ask one also."

"Fine," her mother said shortly. "Why have you given Ellie such wealthy gifts?"

"Gifts?" said the old woman. "I have given her nothing from my hands except food and shelter when she was lost and hungry. You may have the same, if you wish."

"But what about the heart and the kettle? Where did they come from?"

"I think," said the old woman, "it is my turn for a question."

"Very well."

"Where do you go when you leave the children?"

"That is none of your business!" said their mother.

"Answer the question. Speak truly." The old woman's voice was cold.

"I go nowhere."

"Hmm," said the old woman. "Now it is your turn."

"Why will no one buy the gold and silver?" she asked.

"Because they are not yours to sell."

"But how would they know that?"

"My turn," said the woman.

“Ask, then!” shouted their mother.

“Who is the father of these children?”

“I don’t know,” answered their mother, growing pale.

“Hmm,” said the old woman. “Now ask your last question.”

“This can’t be my last question! I have a lot more questions to ask.”

“Nevertheless, this is your last one. Choose it carefully.”

“Fine.” Their mother stared at the old woman, as if she could divine her secrets with the force of her gaze. “Then this is my question. What can I do to get your riches?”

“You can’t,” said the old woman. “For I have none. I already told you that I gave no gifts. All my possessions are in this room that you see. Now, for my last question. Who is the mother of these children?”

Their mother turned the color of the snow outside. “I am. That is enough, old woman.”

“You are right. It is enough.” And with one quick movement, the old woman threw her knife across the room and straight through their mother’s heart.

Ellie screamed and nearly dropped the baby. Jackson, feeling his sister’s distress, started to sob, while the impaled woman hit the floor with a noise like stones falling. Ellie turned horrified eyes from their mother’s body to the old woman, who had not moved from her spot in the chair. The girl cried, “Is this my punishment for leaving Jackson? I promised not to do it again! How could you take our mother from us?”

“Hush, child,” said the old woman in the voice of winter. “I have taken nothing from you. That woman was no mother of yours. Not one word she spoke in this room was true.”

“But... she raised me. She brought Jackson home to be a brother to me,” Ellie said.

“If you were older, you would know that children are not brought home, like a parcel from the marketplace. She stole you away from your real parents and kept you hidden so that she could gain money by promising to return you. You are not the child of that woman. You have a mother and a father who have never stopped wishing to see you again. And your brother is no brother to you. He was taken the same way from his parents.”

“No,” Ellie sobbed. “Why? Why has this happened?”

“It is the way of wickedness,” answered the old woman. “The wicked shall fall before the just. Now, you must return to your family and the baby must return to his.” She got to her feet and made her creaking way over to the two of them. Ellie clutched Jackson fiercely to her.

“No! You can’t take him away from me. He’s mine.”

“Child,” said the woman. “He belongs to himself. You must let him go.”

“I love him!” she cried. “He’s my brother. He’s all I have.”

“Aha!” And with that, the old woman bent over and dipped her finger into the blood pooling under the dead woman. She raised her hand and touched a dot of the blood to each child’s forehead. Ellie was too shocked to resist.

“*Stupay s Bogom,*” said the old woman. And then the room swirled up around the two children, a whirlwind that encompassed them. When the winds died, the children were gone.

The old woman looked down at the body on the floor and knelt beside it to retrieve her knife. She used the blade to make the first cuts, cleanly and clinically. She had to steady herself as the house stood up on its large and spindly feet, stretching legs like an oversized fowl. Then the cottage shouldered its way out through the grasping trees, taking steps that shook the forest with their power. Using a direction known only to itself, it headed for the place they would be needed next.

She worked as quickly as she could. By tonight, there needed to be more meat for her stew pot.

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## THIRD PLACE

J.A. Parente is the author of numerous short stories which have inexplicably remained grossly under-appreciated...until now! In more recognized endeavors, his consulting career has centered on workplace research and organization assessment. He holds graduate degrees in Psychology from CCNY and the Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies at Adelphi University. Mr. Parente is optimistically completing work on his first novel along with everyone else at Starbucks.

# Saint Greta the Chickenhearted

*by J. A. Parente*

*NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #4: Goodbye To All That.*

St. Greta appeared at Our Lady of the Ascension Church on Sunday, April 8, 1951 at 10:22 AM through totally fortuitous circumstances that left more than a few local families to make do with a mundane *Aglio e Olio*, #9 thin-spaghetti dinner, not the more exotic, semi-obligatory, Sunday chicken cacciatore.

\*

It all began innocently enough when Antonio Benito—the local “Chicken Master” as he dubbed himself—was about to fill Mrs. Palacio’s customary order that Sunday morning. Unfortunately for him, he failed to note a certain cunning “Mediterranean” breed of chicken lurking near the crate’s door amidst flailing wings, fluttering feather bits and piercing cackles of her fellow poultry-death-row inmates. As Mr. Benito reached into the wooden crate to snatch up a juicy victim by the neck, St. Greta (that was not her name yet) seized the moment and chomped down with as much vigor in her beak as she

could muster on the less-hairy inside of his bare forearm and tore out a cricket-sized chunk of her captor's flesh. Whether the chicken aimed for this particularly sensitive piece of human landscape through crafty forethought or just plain luck remains up for debate.

“Yeow! *Pollo stupido!*” Mr. Benito yanked his throbbing arm back out of the crate. Greta immediately trailed behind the afflicted limb and shoved the jail's door wide open. She and a dozen other frantic, confused chickens surged out around Mr. Benito, creating a colossal ruckus. St. Greta was the only escapee with enough presence of chicken-mind to bolt for the polleria's slightly ajar front door.

She headed left and scampered full tilt down 23rd Street, flapping and clucking riotously, leaving a scant trail of white fluff in her wake. When the wayward chicken arrived at Our Lady of the Ascension she made a hard right turn and flew up the Church's 13 concrete steps to the welcoming heart of Father DiPatria who, moments before, had opened the ponderous front doors for the 10:30 AM Sunday Mass.

Father DiPatria clasped his hands in delight and smiled broadly when he spotted the wayward chicken. As fate would have it, Father had had a treasured pet chicken just like her as a boy on a small farm outside of Pisa, Italy, and the priest almost instantly fell in love with this white-as-pristine-Alpine-snow apparition.

Mr. Benito had followed the chicken-feather trail in hot pursuit of his escapee as fast as his own skinny chicken legs could carry his huge protruding pot belly. The truncated shadow of the profile he cast in the early rising sun resembled an ass-backward Centaur.

“*Santuario! Santuario! Il pollo ha santuario nella mia Chiesa!* (The chicken has Sanctuary in my Church!)” Father DiPatria yelled commandingly, physically blocking Mr. Benito, who by now was fuming, from entering the vestibule to recapture his errant prey. St. Greta had taken strategic refuge amidst the posterior folds of Father's long black robe and repeatedly poked her pure

white head out to mock Mr. Benito. You could practically hear the clucking taunts: “Bring it on, belly boy!”

“*DiPatria! Lei - e - mio!*” (She - is - mine!), the “Chicken Master” shouted between grindingly clenched molars. But Father was not budging, not an inch.

“*Basta! Non lei tocchi!*” (Loose translation: “Enough! If you touch her I’ll wring your miserable neck like you do with those other innocent chickens!”). Father had yelled so fiercely that Mr. Benito, realizing there was more going on here than an AWOL chicken, stopped dead in his tracks and gingerly backtracked down the Church steps.

“*Pazzo sacerdote,*” (loony priest) he blurted over his shoulder at about the same instant the back of Father’s fingertips slid up from his Adam’s apple and flicked off the edge of his gray-stubble chin.

And so exactly one minute and forty-three seconds after her unexpected arrival, the self-liberated chicken was canonized by Father DiPatria as St. Greta. “*Io corona ti St. Greta,*” he announced ceremoniously and grinned as the chicken bowed her head in reverence, or because she spotted remnants of the stale bread Father had scattered about for the local pigeons. But Greta’s newly-bestowed sainthood came with significantly more baggage than her tiny chicken brain could comprehend.

Father DiPatria had named her Greta after his childhood sweetheart, the one true love of his life, who, also unmarried and childless, now ran a small children’s nursery school somewhere in the northern reaches of Puglia. Both were deeply nurturing souls, he with his plants, she with other people’s offspring.

Their parents’ small farms lay adjacent to each other along the border of Piemonte and Lombardia. Giorgio’s family grew a modest assortment of crops for their own consumption and to sell, or often give, to others; Greta’s family tended limited batches of livestock and more than a few chickens that provided eggs, as well as more chickens. Between the two families’ ceaseless

backbreaking labor, bartering for goods, and long days at market, they all lived precariously close to the bone but remained relatively self-sufficient.

The two young children would giggle shyly at each other through the rails of the weather-battered split-rail fence that acted as a perfunctory division between the farms. Then as they each sprouted taller, she a bit more precociously than he, they secretly admired one another over the fence. One bright yellow morning when they were about 10 and 9 years of age respectively, Giorgio had gathered a diligently selected collection of wildflowers, and Greta had purloined a lovely albino baby chick from a recent brood, their faces flushed in anticipation as they approached their usual meeting spot at the fence where they exchanged their precious gifts, and, on this warm, sun-drenched Lombardia morning, their hearts.

And so it remained, even now across the years and the ocean, with him naming this silly chicken, not Greta, but *Saint* Greta, and her spinning tall tales for her students at story time of Giorgio the magic farmer who could make sunflowers reach as high as the clouds and grow peppers bigger than houses.

Since Mr. Benito had given up on his quarry, Father DiPatria turned and ushered St. Greta down the Church aisle, through the Sacristy and out into his garden wonderland where she quickly realized she had *almost* died but *had* gone to Heaven here on earth. While Giorgio DiPatria was now a dedicated priest, deep in his soul there remained the devoted son of a calloused-hand, stoop-shouldered, life-long worker of the land. God had graced Father with a green thumb, and an even greener brain possessed of a Jungian collective memory for growing just about anything.

His mini-Babylonian empire behind the Church sacristy garden was laid out in geometrically precise rows. The obsessively and lovingly tended plants and vegetables lay in raised plateaus of dark, richly composted soil, thanks in no small measure to the culinary remainders from Sister Virgil's school cafeteria. The pathways had been layered with four levels of newspaper then covered in thick scatterings of straw and mulch to discourage weeds. From these underpinnings, Father DiPatria successfully grew some obscure varieties of

flowers that prospered elsewhere only in the remote hills of Uruguay. His eggplants were the size and perfect blue/black color of bowling balls fresh off a Brunswick assembly line. The priest could plant a feather in late autumn and have a muster of peacocks popping up at springtime.

\*

St. Greta quickly settled in as self-appointed guardian angel of Father's floral and vegetal domain and became his dearest friend on whom she imprinted and subsequently followed just about everywhere. And every now and then in Father's confessional late on a quiet Saturday afternoon, one could sometimes hear a muffled cackle which the priest quickly tried to mask with an unconvincing cough.

Father doted shamelessly on St. Greta, giving her full run of the Rectory, even allowing her to sleep in his bed, perched most uncomfortably for both of them, atop Father's compost-smelling feet. The chicken/priest pair looked ridiculous... and heart-wrenchingly sweet. He even concocted his own special chicken feed mixture of corn, parsley, a dash of oregano (he swore Greta was of genteel Italian heritage), eggshells (cringingly cannibalistic but needed) and some repulsive mashed bug concoction.

This accidental pair, rescuer and rescued, spent many tranquil days enriching each other's lives through more than a few planting and harvesting seasons in the plot behind the rectory. For his part, Father assured vegetal provisions for the rectory diet and highly unwelcome supplies of beets for the school cafeteria while St. Greta maintained a tick-free environment and an appropriate balance of other various and sundry bug populations.

So it went over time... until, alas, one early Tuesday morning Father strolled out into his little tract of paradise and St. Greta did not follow, except with her beady, adoring eyes. And the canonized chicken wilted slowly in the weeks that followed, like a daffodil in early June, then began failing more rapidly until she took her final leave of Father's Babylonian empire and his companionship forever for another grander piece of acreage. Father tried in

his mind to accept St. Greta's passing as a natural part of life, but in his heart his grief led him to look around to assign blame.

"God knows what she endured at that cursed polleria before she escaped," he muttered, except in Italian.

As personally wrenching as he found it, Father DiPatria presided over what was probably among the most ornate, if not impious, Christian burials... of a chicken, ever. Angelo Carbone, the choir baritone, flaunted his stellar *a capella* interpretations of "Ave Maria" and "Amazing Grace." Pastor Marino's heart beat in tune with Father DiPatria's in his love for all creatures, well, almost all—he could not abide possum snouts and three-toed sloths, and he recoiled from anything with more than four legs. The soft-spoken Pastor offered up some specially edited prayers for the deceased.

"O God, grant that the souls of thy servants, thy handmaidens, and thy faithfully departed... uh... chickens, especially our beloved St. Greta, may be numbered among the redeemed," Pastor Marino prayed without a hint of irony as Father DiPatria sobbed quietly.

Two of OLA's senior altar boys, the same two who helped Father wrap his fig tree in layer after layer of burlap every fall, obligingly did, well, the digging, then the refilling. A full complement of Our Lady of the Ascension School's nuns was in respectful, even though requisite, attendance, including Sister Virginia the school cook, who had quietly expressed severe reservations about the appropriateness of all this to Madre Superiore and, one could sense, entertained certain unseemly culinary ruminations involving extra virgin olive oil and paprika.

And so, St. Greta departed from her loving flock of humans, and left Father DiPatria to retreat into his flora sanctuary, trying unsuccessfully to fill the aching void in his heart, and handing out excessive penances to every unfortunate penitent who visited his confessional, unaware of his grief.

Approximately ten days after the tender farewell to St. Greta an article in the local newspaper reported some vandalism at Mr. Benito's "Chicken Master's" polleria. It read in part:

*"No money or valuables were taken from the store, but the wooden crates that lined three of its walls had all been emptied of their occupants, leaving the formerly-doomed poultry free to flee out the suspiciously ajar back door and scatter about the immediate neighborhood, which they gleefully did. Most have yet to be recovered."*

And in Father DiPatria's confessional the following Saturday, parishioners' lists of recurring petty sins were intermittently interrupted by multiple muffled cackles which the priest quickly tried to mask with pathetically unconvincing 3-pack-a-day cigarillo coughs.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Melinda Brasher loves visiting alternate worlds through books and exploring this world through travel. She's currently quite obsessed with Alaska, and has lived in Poland, Mexico, and the Czech Republic, teaching English as a second language. Her short fiction appears in *Enchanted Conversation*, *Ellipsis Literature and Art*, *Spark Anthology*, and others. Check out [Far-Knowing](#), her YA fantasy novel, or visit her online at [melindabrasher.com](http://melindabrasher.com).

# Stalked

*by Melinda Brasher*

*NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #16: Home.*

Takumi shoved the slimy thing in Victoria's face, his eyes wide as his smile. "Look, Mom. It likes me."

Victoria laughed. This was a far cry from Takumi's first eight years of life, growing up in Tokyo, where his feet had touched the ground maybe twice, where the potted plants in the sky bridges had a rubbery look.

"Did you ever see a slug back on Earth?" Takumi asked.

On their yearly vacations, they'd taken him to the sea, the Peace Gardens, and even the protected forests of United Europe. They'd spent three days on a working farm once as part of an ecotour. Still, none of that had rivaled the wild emptiness of New Eden, where you didn't have to stay on trails, where pesticides and repulsion fields hadn't cleaned up the outdoors for all the gawking tourists.

“I don’t think that’s a slug,” Victoria said. Half of her wanted to reach out and touch the squishy blue-black mess of living matter squirming lazily between Takumi’s fingers. Probably she should tell him to put it down. It could be poisonous. Full of germs at the least. But she didn’t have the heart. Instead she looked over her shoulder to see if her husband had any biological theories to share.

Kiyoshi wasn’t even looking at them. He’d stopped between two trees, his head twisted back, his body completely still.

“What is it?” she asked, instinctively lowering her voice.

His head snapped back toward them. “Nothing.”

“Look, Dad. I found it.”

“That’s nice,” Kiyoshi said automatically, his eyes on the forest ahead.

Takumi’s face fell.

Victoria tried to ignite that wide-eyed wonder again. “You’ll have to describe it to Miss Elizabeth when we get back. It could be the next species in her log. She might name it after you.”

He beamed, just as Kiyoshi stopped again, finger flying to his lips. Takumi, oblivious, began chattering about his new discovery.

“You hear something?” Victoria whispered to her husband.

He nodded.

“Maybe we can call it a Taki slug,” Takumi prattled.

Victoria wished they had a gun. But Peter hadn’t given them the passcodes to the arms locker. One of many things the “governor” had denied them. Anger quaked through her again. She grabbed Takumi’s hand—the one not holding the slug—and bent down. “Honey, let’s be quiet for a minute.”

Birds. A slight background rustle of leaves in the breeze. Their own unnatural breath. No one moved.

It could have been one of the small bear-like creatures they'd found evidence of several kilometers back, but which no one had seen. And wild canines frequented the bluffs, but they weren't aggressive. The trouble was, Elizabeth had only logged a couple of hundred species so far. No one knew what lurked beyond their knowledge.

Victoria scanned the forest floor and found a fallen branch thin enough to lift, undecayed. She picked up the makeshift weapon.

"It's probably nothing," Kiyoshi said. "Some squirrel or something. Let's go."

This was the first time Peter's schedule had set all three of them free for two days in a row. They'd set out after work the evening before, on foot, telling no one where they were going. They'd hiked until dark. Besides, Takumi had been begging them to go camping ever since they landed. He deserved this trip. They all did.

"You know," she'd whispered to Kiyoshi the night before, wrapped in his arms in the thermal bag while Takumi breathed his raspy sleep breath beside them, "we could just keep going. Leave the colony entirely. Set up our own home."

Kiyoshi sighed into the darkness, a darkness so complete she wouldn't have believed he was next to her if she hadn't felt his chest rising and smelled the strange outdoorsiness that clung to him. The night was alive with insects and crazy nocturnal birds.

"We wouldn't survive alone," Kiyoshi said.

"We might not survive *with* them," Victoria countered. "Peter's taken everything from us."

"Not everything," Kiyoshi said.

"He took your dream."

Back in Tokyo, Kiyoshi had worked as a city planner, which mainly involved deciding on sites for new sky bridges, issuing zoning permits, and monitoring water, electrical and communication systems. In his free time he drew out whole cities on coordinate systems, in rings, along natural contours of rivers

and hills. He sketched vast roadways and contained communities. Some of them looked like villages from the old folktales he told Takumi—in Japanese—though Takumi, like Victoria, hardly understood a word. His dream was to plan a community from the ground up. Something no one on Earth had done for a long time. Before the colonization project was announced, he'd talked about razing some country town in order to start from scratch. The moment he heard of the colonization, he'd talked of nothing else. The day of the launch his happiness had been palpable. Then the accident. The rest of the convoy gone. The passengers in the other compartments dead. She and Kiyoshi had voted to return to Earth. Kiyoshi had his dreams, but he was also a realist. He didn't want to plan a ghost town. Peter had declared they would forge on. All twenty-five of them. In the end, she and Kiyoshi were the only ones who dared stand against him. They'd been paying for it ever since.

"If we don't make Peter mad, he might let me plan the rest of the colony when the second wave arrives."

"Maybe," Victoria said, not because she believed it, but because she liked it there in Kiyoshi's arms, just as it had been the first few years. She didn't have the heart to crush his dreams again, but she knew Peter would never relinquish his power over them—not until he gained something better. He would dangle the community planning carrot in front of Kiyoshi until the stars all went nova, while he did the planning himself and relegated Kiyoshi to building roads and digging ditches and using his hands and his back and his arms as he'd never done before.

His new muscles tensed now, defining themselves against his sleeves. "Let's head for higher ground," he whispered. They'd been following a sort of valley—more like an indentation in the surrounding low hills. "Higher ground" couldn't be more than five meters of elevation gain. She wasn't entirely sure how that would help, but she grabbed Takumi's hand and followed her husband.

They were almost to the top when she heard it: a low crash, then another. *Thud, thud, boom*, like a rock tumbling down a hill. She swung her stick toward the noise, but all lay motionless. The buzzing in her ears nearly masked the

next sound—a tentative crunch, then another and another—too regular to be anything but the paws or the hooves or the feet of something living.

Victoria tightened her grip on Takumi’s hand and yanked him up the hill, away from the noise. They ran, slipping over and over on last season’s fallen leaves. They scrambled to the top of the hill and followed the wide crest.

Fear was carving holes into her lungs when Kiyohsi grabbed her arm and pulled her into a cluster of tall, rounded rocks, where they crouched, hidden between the crevices. Colors swam before her eyes.

Now she could hear the animal tracking them: the heavy rhythmic steps somewhere out of sight. If only she could see the creature, it would be easier to face. She pulled Takumi tighter to her side and tried to catch her breath quietly—a feat that took all her energy.

Then the woods fell silent. The animal had stopped. Was it closer than it sounded? Would it be sticking its sharp-toothed snout around the nearest rock any moment?

Takumi began crying.

“Shh,” she soothed. “It’s okay.”

“No, he’s dead.” Takumi’s jaw quivered as he held up his hand, black with goo that had once been a slug.

Her stomach convulsed.

“Shh,” she whispered.

He kept crying, but silently, his little body shaking against hers.

She strained her ears and waited. Minutes passed. No sounds of pursuit.

Finally Takumi sniffed and wiped his nose with his clean hand. “Claire says there are lions here,” he whispered, “with tails like scorpions, six feet tall.”

“Claire’s a schoolyard bully,” she whispered back. “Ignore her.”

“But *something*’s tracking us,” Kiyoshi added quietly. He fiddled with his compass. “We ought to head home.”

“Maybe it got tired of us and left.”

“Maybe.” He gathered a pile of rocks and fist-sized seedpods from the trees above them, then began throwing them methodically in the same direction, slightly harder with each pitch. It sounded almost like footsteps, leading away. Victoria held her breath for sounds of the animal.

When nothing came, she felt her involuntary grip on the stick relax. It *had* gone. Kiyoshi looked at her and shrugged. She carefully stood, disentangling Takumi, and scanned the area. Nothing.

“Let’s go,” Kiyoshi said.

They’d hardly made it fifty meters before a telling snap behind them sent chills down Victoria’s back. They all whirled around. Nothing within sight.

“If something attacks,” Kiyoshi whispered, “make lots of noise. Wave your arms, stand up tall. Anything to look more intimidating. If it comes down to it, go for the eyes.”

If it had recognizable eyes.

Kiyoshi picked up a stick of his own, then found a smaller one for Takumi.

It didn’t startle her this time, the rustling behind them, because she’d been half expecting it, but it terrified her just the same.

They continued, Kiyoshi setting a rigorous pace that didn’t quite turn into a run. Takumi’s shorter legs struggled to keep up. The sounds behind them continued, regular, distant—and very real. Finally Kiyoshi motioned in an arc with his arm, making what looked very much like a signal that he was going to circle around and come at the animal’s back.

She shook her head frantically, but he motioned her on.

“No,” she hissed.

“I’ll catch up. Trust me. Follow the ridge half a kilometer, then find somewhere to hide and wait.”

She slowed her pace and watched as he picked his way down the gentle slope toward another cluster of rocks.

“What’s Dad doing?” Takumi asked.

“Recon.” She choked out the word, hoping that’s what it was, and that he didn’t intend to attack the animal on his own. All she could see when she pictured their pursuer was Claire’s stupid scorpion-lion.

The trees around them sprawled low and thick, their leaves the shape of human hands, dark-veined and trembling in the slight breeze. She visualized all the self defense training she’d ever done. None of it had been intended against wild animals.

After seven or eight minutes’ march, they found a cluster of trees and hunkered down behind them to wait. Fifteen minutes, she’d give Kiyoshi. Then she was going back, whether it embarrassed him or not.

Minutes crawled by.

Takumi quietly dug a tiny hole with his stick, then carefully scraped the remains of the slug into it and patted down the ground on top. Victoria stroked his back. How many minutes now? Then footfalls—behind her? She and Takumi both twisted toward the sound. Kiyoshi materialized ten meters away, bent low as he picked his way quietly toward their hiding place.

“Did you see what’s following us?” she whispered.

He crouched down beside them, breathing hard, not answering.

“What is it?”

“Gary.”

“Gary?”

“And Nathan.”

Relief soothed her rogue heartbeat.

“With rifles.”

Most everyone carried weapons when they ventured out of the colony. She would be holding one now if they had the passcodes. And for a moment she didn't understand what Kiyoshi was saying.

He leaned forward, his face dead earnest. “They're hunting us.”

“Ridiculous.”

“I heard them talking,” he insisted. “About us.”

“Maybe they think we're lost. Trying to rescue us.” But even she didn't believe herself. If Gary and Nathan were on a rescue mission, they wouldn't be sneaking around behind them, stopping—out of sight—every time she and her family did. Peter was behind this. She'd seen his eyes, back on the ship, when for a moment she thought the other colonists might side with her and Kiyoshi, instead of Peter. How could it be that no one else saw through his dignified veneer and dramatic speeches about unity? Peter had realized they'd slipped out of the colony without telling anyone. Maybe he'd even given them the time free to do it, hoping they'd provide him an excuse for retribution. Now he'd sent Gary—the “police”—to find them and bring them back like escaped criminals. Or worse. Could Peter truly be that ruthless? Would he have ordered Gary to get rid of them quietly?

Well, she wouldn't go without a fight.

She looked down at Takumi and wished for the millionth time that he was still safe in Tokyo, face pressed against the glass, asking questions about wolves and geese and cherry blossoms.

But then again, if he were still in Toyko, he wouldn't know all about the gooey innards of the oilwood, which he'd apparently seen all over the forest today.

“There's one right there,” he said, pointing with his own mix of pride and exasperation. “Miss Elizabeth showed us two weeks ago. I told you all about

it.” He grabbed a fibrous stem and, with some effort, pried it open. Then he held it upside down to drip over Victoria’s hand.

“Perfect,” she said. Takumi—her little genius.

They rose, with only a few quick glances behind, and began to move again, slowly, bending here and there to pick more oilwood, keeping careful track of how far behind the pursuing footfalls remained.

After a kilometer they found the perfect spot. They’d been following the very slow rise of the hill, and now their path led along what might actually be called a ridge, the ground sloping away on both sides at just enough of an angle to make this work. Directly in front of them lay a tangle of thick brush and a couple of jagged rocks. Enough of an obstacle to force them slightly down slope along what looked like an animal trail. The carpet of old needles and leaves made for a slippery trek as it was. When they came to the steepest bit of the faint trail, Kiyoshi tore into the oilwood stems with his pocket knife. Takumi used his fingernails. Victoria spread the milky substance across the trail, back and forth, in crosses and loops. She stirred the leaves and needles with her stick and let Takumi finish up. He flung the substance enthusiastically onto his leafy canvas, then gave them a thumbs up and tromped uphill, trying to make as much noise with his two little feet as the three of them had together.

She hated sending him off alone, even though it was safer.

She and Kiyoshi hid their packs beneath the bushes, then crouched behind the rocks that blocked the higher route. Kiyoshi held his pocket knife tight, already raised slightly. She gripped her branch with both hands.

The faint sounds of their pursuers’ footsteps began again, apparently taking Takumi’s bait, growing louder as Takumi’s faded. Gary and Nathan. She didn’t realize they were such skilled trackers. It was Dustin who came back with the most meat on their hunting trips, not Gary or Nathan. The footsteps advanced. Kiyoshi put his finger to his lips. As if she needed the warning.

Then a voice. Nathan's. Very close. "Straight ahead?" It was asked in barely over a whisper.

"Yeah. Three hundred meters."

The footsteps stopped for a moment, and Victoria feared they'd been discovered.

"Just go around," Gary hissed.

Something crashed hard. A grunt. A struggle. Another thud. "What the—"

Victoria sprang up. Both men were on the ground, Nathan on his hands and knees, pawing at the ground, unable to find purchase. Gary's arms and legs thrashed as he slipped and slid on the oilwood-slicked leaves. She spied Gary's rifle, still caught stubbornly in one flailing hand. She swung her stick at its barrel just as Gary saw her.

"Hey!" he yelled.

Her stick made contact. The rifle flew out of his hands.

"Stand down!" Gary yelled. He caught her makeshift weapon and jerked. She dug in her heels and held on, but his strength pulled her forward. Her feet flew out from under her and she lost hold of the branch. She struggled against the slippery ground for a moment before she made herself relax into it and let the slope work for her, rolling downhill until she was even with Gary's lost rifle. She grabbed it and rolled again, out of the oilwood zone, and came up with Gary's weapon firm in her hands, trained on the scuffle of leaves and limbs and dirt where Kiyoshi and Nathan were rolling around like pigs. She pointed the weapon at Gary, where he'd stabbed her stick hard into the ground and used it to pull himself to more solid ground. He pushed himself to his feet and looked at her.

"Victoria, calm down."

"I'm calm."

Kiyoshi grunted in pain, hands flying to his face. Nathan pushed himself to a sitting position, rifle back in his hands, and pointed it at Victoria.

“Hold,” Gary shouted. “No one do anything stupid.”

“You’re the ones who came hunting us with rifles,” Victoria yelled back.

“The rifles aren’t for *you*. What do you think we are?”

“I think you’re Peter’s yes-men.”

“I am the colonial police. I enforce the laws of the charter. I’m no one’s yes-man.”

Victoria laughed bitterly.

Kiyoshi, by then, had followed her lead and rolled down far enough to gain his feet. He still had one hand to his face, though she couldn’t see any blood. Nathan’s gun held steady on her.

“Then tell me what you’re doing following us,” Victoria said.

“You were seen leaving with colony property.”

“*Camping* equipment,” she responded.

“Yes, but colony property regardless. Property you hadn’t checked out properly. Neither had you noted your travel plans.”

“There’s nothing in the charter about that.”

“But it’s standard procedure. Do you realize how dangerous it is out here? Someone needs to know where you’ll be in case you need help. You didn’t answer your comms.”

“We turned them off,” Kiyoshi responded, pulling his hand away from his face. “We’re camping.”

“And if we all put down our guns,” Gary said calmly, “would you come back home to the colony with us?”

“Why?” Victoria challenged. “Are those Peter’s—”

“We still have another day off,” Kiyoshi said, his voice loud enough to drown hers out. “Our camping trip isn’t finished. We’ll return to the colony then.”

“I’ll have to ask you to give back your equipment. It’s unregistered.”

“Sure,” Kiyoshi said with a smile. “We’ll turn it in tomorrow.”

“Now, I’m afraid.”

No guns had lowered.

“If we start making exceptions,” Gary continued, “things will fall apart.”

“Is that what Peter says?” Victoria couldn’t help prodding him, though she knew perhaps it was unwise. Maybe Kiyoshi was right this time—maybe giving Gary a way to save his dignity would get them further than challenging his honor.

“Peter is the governor, whether you like it or not, and I agree with him on this point. That doesn’t mean I’m his ‘yes-man.’ Don’t you see, the colony must stay together in order to stay strong. Peter thought you were running away. I told him you were too smart to try surviving on your own.” He grunted sardonically. “So we compromised. We’d follow. See what you did. Then I’d retrieve the colony property. The rifles are for the wildlife. Not so we can shoot each other like barbarians.”

Victoria stared at him. His annoyance somehow lent credence to his words. She lowered the barrel slightly, then looked at Nathan, willing him to do the same. He did. By tiny increments, in turns, they lowered the weapons entirely, but her hands never loosened their grip.

“Well,” Gary said. “Shall we head back together? Put this all behind us?” He smiled, hesitantly. For the first time, she wondered if he hated his unexpected police duties as much as she hated the job Peter had assigned her in the textile plant.

The first “community night” they’d had, two weeks after landing, Peter had scheduled her and Kiyoshi to be working. It was clearly a message, not a road building or textile manufacturing emergency. Afterward, late in the night, after they’d finished their nonsensical shifts, they heard a knock. There stood Gary, proffering up three bowls of the fruit and custard he’d made for the party. He offered it in silence, like a confused thief, then slipped off into the darkness.

It was that Gary she saw glimpses of now, standing in the dappled woods, his gun in her hands, a pleading smile on his face. “No use making things more...complicated,” he said.

She looked over at Kiyoshi, shrugged slightly, and waited for his lead.

He stared at the western horizon, where dusty clouds smudged the blue-purple sky. “It does look like a storm,” he said.

“There’s a poker tournament tonight,” Gary offered.

“Open to everyone?” Victoria asked.

Gary looked her straight in the eye. “Everyone.”

Kiyoshi nodded. “It’s time I taught Takumi how to bluff.”

Nathan’s hand relaxed on his rifle. “Pair of nines,” he muttered, chuckling to himself. “Mirek still owes you about a gallon of ale for that game.”

Kiyoshi smiled. “Maybe he’ll owe me two after tonight.”

Victoria knew Kiyoshi’s whole arsenal of smiles, and this one didn’t mean exactly what Nathan and Gary thought it meant, but she still breathed easier. Going back would appease Peter, but Kiyoshi would somehow convince himself he had won, and poker would blot out the unpleasantness of this encounter.

Obviously Gary and Nathan hadn’t been sent with the sinister orders she’d imagined as she crouched hidden among the hand-shaped leaves of New Eden. Peter was a controlling, self-important little power grabber, but not a

murderer. Perhaps she'd been making mountains out of molehills. Victoria carefully propped the rifle against a tree at her side.

"Very good," Gary said with a hearty clap of his hands.

"Where's the boy?" Nathan asked, looking at Gary, not at her and Kiyoshi. Why would Gary know? Gary shrugged, but the look he flashed Nathan told a different story, and as Victoria stared, Gary's eyes strayed momentarily to something on the forest floor.

An upside-down datapad.

She and Gary dove for it at the same time. They wrestled in the slippery leaves, both trying to push each other away from the datapad, but her fingers found it first. She scrambled to her feet with the device—a thin Q-3 no longer than her thumb. The bitty screen showed only an arrow and a number: one hundred ten meters.

"What's this?" she demanded. As she moved the screen, the arrow changed direction, pointing constantly up the hill. Toward Takumi. One hundred meters.

Gary said nothing, hands wobbling out at his sides to help keep his balance as he rose in the oilwood slick.

"Is *this* how you tracked us while keeping out of sight?"

"What do you expect? We're not bloodhounds," Gary retorted, but the tips of his ears had gone red.

Eighty meters. Kiyoshi grabbed the Q-3 and studied it. "Sneaking locators into my son's backpack? That's low."

The arrow wobbled and then the counter stopped moving. She looked toward where Takumi should have been, but the thick trees blocked her view.

"Takumi," she yelled.

He jumped from behind a tree, wielding his fallen branch like a samurai.

“Come here,” Victoria ordered. When he was close enough, she pulled off his backpack and tossed it aside. The arrow stayed firmly planted at his chest.

“Take off your jacket, honey.”

Takumi—no longer the brave samurai, but a little boy again—obeyed.

She threw his jacket as hard as she could over her shoulder. No change in the readout. “Give me your boots.”

“Mom!” He squirmed under all their stares, just like the slug that had so delighted him, but he unlaced his hiking boots and stood in his socks, feet turned in, overlapping, as if trying to hide behind himself.

She handed the boots to Kiyoshi, who carried them off without disturbing the Q-3’s display. Then Takumi, in his stork-like pose, lost his balance and stumbled three steps sideways. The arrow jerked wildly.

“What’s this tracking?” Her voice quavered in rage.

Gary’s eyebrows furrowed. “I... I don’t know.”

“It’s *him*. It’s *in* my son.”

Silence.

“Peter gave this to you?” she demanded, brandishing the Q-3. “And do you have one for me too? Does Peter have one for *you*?”

The line of Gary’s mouth hardened. “If he does, it’s for our protection.”

The ground seemed to shift, mountains or molehills rising beneath her feet.

“Is that ‘protection’ worth our civil rights? Subcutaneous locators are illegal!”

Neither Gary nor Nathan answered.

“And if we refuse to let Peter track our son?” Victoria demanded. “What will the rifles be for then?”

“It’s not going to come to that,” Gary insisted.

“Are you sure?” She stepped back and touched the smooth stock of the rifle. Her shaking hands would kill her aim, even if she knew what to aim at. And bullets like these didn’t stop when they first met resistance. They kept going, kept killing.

“Victoria...” Kiyoshi warned.

She stared at Gary. “No matter what Peter claims, this isn’t unity. It isn’t freedom.”

“No, Victoria,” Gary said. “This is survival.”

But here on New Eden, population twenty-five, she wasn’t sure what any of that meant anymore.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

John C. Waugh retired from science teaching in New York to a small island off northwest Washington state. First publications were articles for *Cricket* magazine a few decades back. His tween-targeted books *The Magic Rock*, *Kansai International Airport*, and *Treachery in the Sky* (eBook) can be found on Amazon. John's non-writing interests include chess, Zen, reading science fiction, and playing with his granddaughter Savannah.

# Fossils and Fools

*by John C. Waugh*

*NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #18: Time.*

If I had known I'd wreck the human race I'd have split a fifth of vodka with Weigel and gotten truly hammered. Instead, we played chess as usual at the Dragon City Chinese restaurant, sneaking white wine into water glasses.

"You did what?" Weigel asked in response to my mid-game attempt at conversation.

"Linked CTCs in the zero point flux," I repeated, then, leaned closer. "Closed Timelike Curves." He frowned. "Wormholes," I said. "You know, time travel."

Weigel shook his head. "Billy Boy, you need black holes for that. Got one up your sleeve?"

Tipsy, I pulled back a cuff and peeked in, nodding. "Quarks do ten-to-the-minus-forty-two seconds into the past all the time. Known fact."

Weigel shoved a sauced-up hunk of broccoli in his mouth and blocked my rook with a knight. “Three quarks for Muster Mark,” he said, quoting *Finnegan’s Wake*. “There are paradoxes you can’t wish away.” Then he made the traditional argument: “I off my mom before I was born and then where the hell am I?”

“Multiverses! That’s the crazy part. The theory’s there. Look in the journals.” In my stewed state I hated to have to explain everything. I slid a bishop across the board.

“What theory?”

“Once time travel happens on a scale above quarks, it’s easier after that.”

“Easy, as in drop your quarter in the slot and shake hands with Genghis Khan?”

“Easy, as in super-cooled laser-faceted plutonium crystals.”

Weigel swigged from his glass. “Jesus! What’s your source? The terrorist shopping network?” He grabbed my bishop—I’d made a total blunder.

“Takes less than a microgram for what I’m doing. Friend of a friend up at Livermore.” My funding and love life had dried up at the same time, so I’d sold my car, borrowed equipment, and set up in my apartment.

I refilled Weigel’s glass from the bag. “Sounds like a moneymaker,” he said. “But if it’s so easy, why aren’t time tourists here like fleas on a dog? Laser-flaked plutonium-whatever can’t be that tough to score in the future.”

“Since Becky left, I’ve been working on that twenty-four seven.”

Weigel cracked a knowing smile. “Ah, it’s all about the chick! Impress Becks and she’ll come crawling back. You haven’t answered my question. Who cares who invents it—big money in the future will grab it and sell it. So where are they?”

“Maybe I’ll keep it to myself.” I was too sotted to find a good move, so I pushed a pawn.

“Don’t make me puke. You’d sell your mother for fame.”

“My mother’s dead.”

“Sorry, forgot.”

“Theory says when I make that anchor point, they can only come back to that moment. Hasn’t been done, so no tourists.”

“You said quarks do it all the time.”

“Fluctuations. Gotta get a wormhole past a nanosecond. That’s what Rosemary’s gonna do.”

“Rosemary?”

“Quark pump.”

“Oh, right. Sounds like a moneymaker.”

Weigel’s two loves were James Joyce and dreaming up get-rich-quick schemes. Call me stupid, but I should have seen it coming. Love is blind whether it’s physics or women.

His next move would be mate in two. A wok sizzled and the smell of hot oil came from the kitchen. By the light of a flickering dragon I tipped over my king. I hoped to God I was better at physics than chess.

“Let me know when she’s ready to pop,” Weigel said. “That’s gonna be one helluva moment.”

I called him late that night.

\*

Weigel sat on my ratty sofa, fiddling with his laptop while I tweaked equipment. “C’mere,” I said finally, yelling over his iPod.

“So this is Billy’s time machine.” Weigel blew at the vapor trailing off the liquid helium unit.

“No,” I said irritably. “This just makes an itty-bitty anchor point. A *time machine* is a whole nother thing. Leave it to the big dogs. All *I* want is the Nobel.”

“All glory and no money makes Billy a dull boy.”

Green digits on the frequency display counted down. If Becks’d stuck with me, I might’ve been fat and happy designing chips at Intel. *C’est la vie*. I rammed that molybdenum rod home. Rosemary’s baby was born.

The lights went out. I heard noises and turned around. It was like New Year’s Eve in my living room. Wall-to-wall people talked, laughed, rubbed elbows. They carried candles and kerosene lanterns. I lost track of Weigel right off. People bumped me with no apologies. Drinks spilled.

I turned to a pudgy woman, unable to avoid her in the crush. “Um,” I said, “who are you people?”

“What’s wrong with *you*?”

“Nothing. What’s going on here?”

“I came to check out The Nanosecond.” She spoke as if it were capitalized. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

Perhaps it is, I thought. “Amnesia,” I said, tapping my head. “What *is* The Nanosecond?”

She eyed me like a chicken examining an odd insect. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, you know, *this*.” She held up something that resembled the Star Trek transponders. “We’re in the context when it started.”

“What started?”

This time she stared as if I had three nostrils. “*Time* travel?”

“Oh.” I tapped my head again. “So... you do it with that thing.”

“Of course. How else would you do it?” Then she must have had a tiny leap of the imagination: “How did *you* get here?”

I hesitated too long. “Oh my *gosh*,” she said, staring, “you’re *him*. You’re the *Founder*.” She turned, drink sloshing, to a friend. “Betty, it’s *him*.”

Betty was totally ignorant of the technology she was using, but I pieced together a few things. My quarks had linked in the flux like kids in a tug-of-war! They had made an anchor point. As theory predicted, time travel instantly became simpler from then on. Not trivial, but apparently without needing super-cooling.

I had to be sure. “So you can only come back to here? You can’t talk to Lincoln or watch the pyramids get built or stop the Kennedy assassination?”

“Who’s Kennedy?” Betty asked, uncaring.

“Pyramid,” said the pudgy woman. “That’s some kind of building.”

The universe had been ripped right back to when I’d first cracked it.

Weigel had probably swiped my notebook that night and sold it. He’d always been more interested in dollars than was decent for a Lit major, but I’d inflated his ethics. The highest bidder developed the hand-held “Personal Universal Devices” that everyone carried, and it didn’t matter if that took ten years or a thousand...I’d pounded the first spike, and now they could come right back to that moment. Once that happened, my erstwhile buddy wasn’t in the equation anymore; from my point of view he was gone instantly. My score with friends and lovers: zero.

People began traveling everywhen. Paradoxes? Nah, Mom and Pops are fair game. Thorne and Klinkhammer had had it right, except for a curve ball or six.

I tried to connect with some of the time tourists. “Can you tell me,” I asked a smart-looking red-headed woman, “why there aren’t multiple copies of each of you? If you come from different multiverses?”

She put one hand around the back of my neck and probed in my mouth with the other. “Nice teeth,” she said. “Who’s your dentist?”

I went outside. They’d trashed the lawn. They stepped on my toes. ‘Sorry’ wasn’t in their vocabulary. The novelty evaporated: my life’s work was finished. Done, stolen, sold.

I walked down the dark block as a breeze rustled leaves and blew dust and papers along the empty street. Later I sat in the candlelight at Joe June’s 24-Hr Cafe. Joe appeared at ease with the whole thing, but he was running the place by himself without electricity. Too busy to gab. His propane stove still worked and I stared into the black coffee I’d ordered. Then I looked up and saw sandy curls across the table, framing a familiar smile.

“Becky!”

“Uh, no. It’s Shelley.”

I shook my head impatiently. “Cut it out Becks. God, it’s great to see you.”

“So call me whatever.” She reached across the table and put her hands on mine. “Were we in love?”

If time travel had worked, then maybe anything was possible. But to be staring at Becky who claimed to be not-Becky was too weird. The touch of her hands felt good though.

“Are all time travelers obnoxious?” I said, trying to move ahead.

She broke down laughing. Then she reached over and wagged my chin. “Rule number one, when traveling in time one must be obnoxious.”

I'd invented the game but I didn't know the rules. I asked Becky-Shelley about the intrusion in my house. "Fools are peeping Toms," she told me. "No respect for privacy. They're like clumsy lovers poking in every cranny."

"Fools?"

"That's what we Fossils call the time travelers."

Shelley said that some people never did jump through time. I was one of them. We 'Fossils' were stuck in the base multiverse. Sort of a mother-verse from which other multiverses blossomed as the PUDs were used. And the Fools kept the devices to themselves—alternate futures were all Fool futures.

The first time travelers quickly became Fools, their identities scrambled by the unavoidable consequences of wormholes. If you jumped to a space-time where you already existed, the second 'you' was knocked like a billiard ball into a different 'verse. This chain effect eventually wrecked your mind. Or minds.

"I might be able to make one of those PUD things even if they won't give me one," I said to Shelley. "I invented them f'Chrissake."

Shelley dipped a piece of doughnut in my cup. "No, you never do. You're one of the legends."

I wondered how she knew all this—it was still just the first morning of the new 'verse. Shelley said, "I'm a Fossil by choice, but I used to be a Fool. When you change contexts, you lose track of who you were. You're permanently spaced out."

Shelley, it seems, had been burnt several times relationshipwise. After me, it had been with Fools. She'd trashed her history with a PUD and now she was Shelley, with a dim recollection of something lost.

Fools are shallow as a mud puddle, floating in a state of perpetual puppy love with each other. But Shelley had come to start over at the Nanosecond, the closest context she could get to sanity. And perhaps unconsciously, I thought, to me.

I shivered. “You’re cold,” Shelley said.

“Forgot my jacket.” Actually my nerves were wired. The future had RSVPd the unwitting invitation I’d sent, and coffee wasn’t helping. “When do I get my apartment back?”

Shelley grinned. “Party’s over. Your place was just a target last night.” I could tell she liked this old Fossil again. Maybe that’s why I never jumped.

\*

The nights were filled with campfires and candlelight; it was mythical, like Disneyland’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride. Romantic if you didn’t scratch the surface. Shelley and I often walked along a sidewalk leading to a park and then through uncut grass. Small fires sparkled across fields and we saw Fools surrounding each. Warm breezes carried the smells of smoke and eucalyptus.

Later the days were full of the sharp odors of growing corn. Fools were Appleseeds, planting fast-growing food that didn’t need much tending. Machinery, like tractors and power plants, was beyond them. Most all technological items had been cut up and taken to other multiverses. Souvenirs from infinity.

Shelley and I walked through shoulder-high stalks in what used to be a playground. We sat with a group of Fools at a fire where they roasted ears in the husks. Shallow as they were, Fools were okay once you got to know them.

“So where are you folks from, originally?” I said. That Fossil concept confused them, their past and parents lost in a Rubik’s pattern of changing contexts. I liked to pick on them for some reason.

Shelley patched it up. “He means, where were you last?”

“Oh, Geneva,” said a tall girl with straight auburn hair, light eyebrows, and lovely blue eyes. She wore a burlap dress. “I helped stop the revolt.”

“I was there as a kid,” an older Fool with a beard said. Time travel doesn’t stop aging—Fools die just like Fossils. A long time ago in his own personal

memory, the bearded fellow had been at the Geneva revolt from which the pretty tall girl had just jumped.

“The Geneva revolt,” Shelley explained, “will be an organized effort by Fossils to make a place where they can keep time travelers out.” You could call a Fossil a Fossil, but you didn’t call Fools Fools to their faces.

A young woman with raven hair stared. “You’re a *Fossil*,” she said. She looked at me like sex with a Fossil could be fun. I wasn’t sure about their birth control methods, but Fools are promiscuous, perhaps because they often die young and life is immediate. Medicine is way beyond the Fools, so all the doctors in the Fossil era are booked solid. As are the dentists. Most Fools had lousy teeth. All domestic animals had quickly been eaten, and raising animals was no fun—Fools were de facto vegetarians. Raven-hair took a sensuous bite of her corn.

“What, no spare ribs? Lamb chops? Meatballs?” I said sarcastically. Shelley poked my side, stood, and pulled me up gently by the hair.

“He’s sick,” she said, and it was true enough.

\*

A good movie feels like life, but the whole thing is already in the can. Much like a movie, Einstein’s theories require that our past and future actually exist. We strut and fret our hour upon the stage, simply following the script.

With multiverses, however, each PUD jump burns a new modified print of the movie, showing in a different theater. They’re all playing at once. Free will is back: you choose what you want to see. But what the theorists missed was an audience that bounds around like puppies, through any and all of the theaters, in a ghostly mind-blowing pandemonium.

One day a ghost came home.

I was in the graveyard behind the Bethlehem church where my parents are buried, grateful they hadn’t lived to see the mess I’d made. A young man

walked along a sidewalk beyond a white fence. Weigel! I ran after him. “Hey Melvino,” I called, using his nickname.

He stopped and turned. “Hello friend.”

“Friend? You stole my secrets and sold them. Am I right?”

“If I have wronged you, I am deeply sorry.”

This wasn’t the Weigel I had known. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Paul.”

“Do you remember me?”

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked at me with intense yet vacant eyes. “You’re my friend.”

The body was there; the spark was gone. Shelley had kept the best of Becky and then some, but Weigel got sucked in. He was a Fool, just passing through. He’d been a key player in the time-bending events but, unlike me, he now had an insanity plea. Weigel was dead and I had killed him.

\*

“What’s wrong?” Shelley asked one day after a string of my expletives.

“Mind control.”

“Still upset about yesterday?”

“All I did was *try* to make some notes.”

“You know you can’t do that,” she said. “I’ve told you about that.”

Write a play? Build a better mousetrap? Forget it. Anything with potential becomes a target for sightseeing Fools. I’d had an idea for an invention, and must have built it. Then one Fool told another and the vast empty-headed future invaded once again, to see where it started. I couldn’t take it. Burned

my notes to make them go away. They'd love-bombed it out of existence, at least in my context. Was that a paradox? Who thinks straight with groping Fools everywhen.

And so, disgusted with life for the moment, I said, "Let's go see Max."

"Okay."

Shelley took my hand and we went out.

Max is an original Fossil like me. I can actually beat him at chess, and he still has a major stash of coffee beans. And when we talk ideas, the Fools don't come.

We sat around Max's kitchen table with javas and lanterns and a little ersatz whiskey I'd distilled from corn mash. Drunk and enjoying myself, I was trying to be clever shooting my mouth off about how it was so amazing that one person, me, could affect the structure of space-time. I meant to disparage the Fools by implying that we Fossils were the real players. Max wasn't buying.

He was tall and weighed about 250 pounds. That and his friendly manner gave a certain automatic credibility to his words. "Y'know, Bill, it was you who ruined the universe," he said matter-of-factly. He wasn't angry—that wasn't in his nature.

"I didn't ruin it. I just changed it."

Max looked toward the ceiling shadows as if past the oak beams, and out at the unseen stars. He shook his graying head tolerantly. "You ruined it," he said. "Haven't you heard of The End?"

I looked at Shelley. The half-smile failed and she sighed instead. "I didn't want to tell you. I thought it would make you depressed."

"Tell me now."

She looked resigned. "Well, you know the PUDs don't reach far into space."

“Yeah.” I downed some coffee. “You can’t make a worm hole much beyond a gravity base. We’re in our own loopy little pocket here. Go on.”

“How far do you think they can go into the future?” she asked.

Surprisingly, I hadn’t fully considered that question. It took just seconds now. I stared at Shelley with suspicion, then at Max. He nodded slightly. “Yep, four billion give or take,” he said. “Textbooks were close. The sun goes red-giant. Earth is fried.”

“But...”

Shelley shrugged. “The Fools don’t talk about it. Not a fun topic.” She lifted her cup and leaned back. “Some tried jumping there on purpose, others accidentally. Nobody’s returned.”

Max added more moonshine to his coffee. The aroma-filled silence dragged as Max and Shelley waited for me to flesh it out for myself. I’d almost begun to take the whole thing lightly, like a Boy Scout at a jamboree, complete with campfires. Now that the truth became clear, I almost wished Max *was* angry with me.

“The End,” I said finally, “is the end of hope. The end of history. If it wasn’t for the time loops, we would have learned more. Technology would have advanced. War might have sharpened us. In four billion years we probably could have reached the stars before the sun wipes us out. I killed that chance.” I couldn’t fault the Fools—they were caught in my screwy space-time.

I pushed my chair back, got up, and freshened my coffee. Shelley and Max sat watching me.

“It’s like that in every ‘verse?” I asked.

“Just the same.”

I stared at a corner spider web. What could the spider know of our conversation? Of multiverses and the decay of dreams. The Earth and its closed web of space-time was now an inbred backwater in the great galactic

sprawl. How many other dead-end civilizations among a half trillion stars had fallen victim to the future's siren call? And had I always been fated to destroy our hopes? The Nobel Prize—what a joke.

“I have an idea,” I said.

They both looked at me in the lamplight, waiting for ol' hare-brain to speak.

“I've been doing some theory and it might be possible to send something small back *past* The Nanosecond. Just a little mass, just a little before.”

We glanced around reflexively to see if any Fools showed up. Either nothing came of the discussion, or we would keep it secret.

“What would we need?” Max asked.

“A nuke would be great. But maybe a few barrels of home made gunpowder, cadmium shavings, a stolen PUD, plus some other junk.”

“How would it help?” Shelley wondered. Then she saw. “Oh. You mean send a message so somebody could stop you. Keep you from doing The Nanosecond.”

We looked at one another for a long time, each alone with their thoughts. Then Shelley said quietly, “We'd never meet.”

“More likely nobody'd believe it,” Max said. He heaved his bulk off the chair and made his way to the stove. “Although...maybe you would, yourself.”

“I don't know if it would be that accurate,” I said. Hell, I didn't know if it would work at all.

“You could write a letter to yourself. If somebody found it they'd probably drop it in the mail,” Max said. “You wouldn't need to hit your own personal location. Wherever it showed up, if it had the right address it'd probably get to you.”

I frowned. “What if I didn't believe it? That was my life's dream. Would I quit because of a letter?”

“You could tell yourself things only you know,” Max said. He’d filled his coffee cup and sat down again.

Shelley was silent and I knew why. Could I destroy *us*, something better than I’d ever had? For a hypothetical second chance for those backstabbing rascals before the Nanosecond? Who might not survive anyway? Hell, the dinosaurs only lasted a couple hundred million years and they didn’t even have guns or drugs or fluorocarbons.

She walked over to the dark window. Curtains fluttered in a dry wind. I followed and put my arms around her. “I won’t do it.”

“No. Don’t even think about it. You have to.”

\*

This part’s for you Billy, you stupid jerk. I thought if I made it a story, you might actually read it. If you don’t believe it, sell it to a fiction rag and pay the gas bill—and destroy the future. You thought you were in love and that Becky jilted you, but you never gave her a chance. You didn’t love anybody except yourself and your damn project. You’re an egocentric idiot and I hope you understand by now that no one is going to give you a Nobel Prize. Look, I love Shelley. You know how I know? Because I want what she wants—even if it means giving her up. Shelley was once Becky so I’m pretty sure you still have a chance with her if you get off your high horse.

I gave you the whole story so you’ll know what’s at stake—and maybe there’s enough to satisfy your curiosity. Go be happy at Intel. But here’s what you have to do first. BURN THAT BLACK AND WHITE NOTEBOOK you keep behind the refrigerator. And don’t blame Weigel. But don’t trust him or anybody else. BURN THE NOTEBOOK and forget those formulas. I’d say get a lobotomy but I’m guessing that’s past your limit. Oh, and smash Rosemary’s trigger.

Don't invite Weigel to your apartment. And by the way, if you bring out your king's knight instead of pushing the pawn, you've got a decent shot at beating him.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

William Locke Hauser, after military and business careers, is engaged in a 'third career' of writing fiction. "Home" is his twenty-fifth published story, following "Pity" (*Wisconsin Review*, Autumn 2011) and "Fleta Mae" and "The Frog in the Window" (*Rosebud*, Spring and Fall issues 2013, respectively). He and his wife Helen Alexandra, an entrepreneurial businesswoman, live in Reston, Virginia.

# Home

*by William Locke Hauser*

*NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #16: Home.*

The clerk at the rail station said the woman was there when he opened his counter, and the dispatcher at the taxi stand thought she must have arrived after daylight, while he was busy putting people into cabs. The proprietor of Kevin's Diner knew better: "She came in here about five a.m. for a cup of coffee and one of my cornbread muffins."

The first sizable crowd of commuters, those catching the 6:57, found her crouching by a grocery cart bulging with her possessions, on the steps from the parking lot down to the platform. Most were inured to such phenomena on the streets of the city, but never before in this comfortable suburb. One distinguished gentleman, the head of a consulting firm on Madison Avenue, was so disturbed that he counted out four and a half dollars to the unfortunate woman, precisely the amount needed for train fare ("off-peak, so wait till ten o'clock") back to the urban setting from which she must surely have strayed.

This largesse made for compliments throughout the giver's ride, enhancing his reputation for community service.

She remained there all day, shifting only as needed to catch the feeble rays of the late-autumn sun. Thus it was that the very folk who'd had to step around her in the morning, found themselves clambering over her in the evening.

"Did that lady fall down, Mummy?" a little girl named Gillie asked from the rear seat of her car.

Sada Charbonneau Chastin shut the door and settled back, her arms filled with packages. As her husband, Farris pulled into traffic, she struggled to fasten her seatbelt. "What lady, sweetheart?"

"Back there at the station."

"Oh, I think she's waiting for someone, and got tired and sat down. Like Mummy is tired from shopping in the city."

Farris said, "She was there this morning, Sada, when I dropped you off. It's a disgrace!"

"How can a lady be a disgrace?" Gillie asked.

"She's not, precious," her mother said. "Daddy is afraid she might be sick, and he didn't want to worry you."

"If she's sick, we ought to take her to the hospital."

"The woman is not sick," Farris sneered. "Drug-addicted tramps have no place in a nice town like Onhaitet. If you feed a stray cat, it'll never stop hanging around, so leave her be and she'll understand that her kind aren't welcome here."

"How do people get that way, Daddy?"

"Defying their parents," he said, stabbing the air, "in violation of God's fifth commandment, that's how!"

“You’re frightening the child,” Sada said. “Don’t worry, Gillie, everything’s going to be okay with that lady.”

“I’m glad, Mummy. Can we stop for ice cream?”

\*

On a lakeshore at the edge of town, in a cozy setting of wood paneling and polished brass, Ned Broder stood by a roaring fire. This was Davey Jones’ Locker, the downstairs bar of one of the town’s boating clubs. The walls were hung with fishnets and blue-glass floats, photographs of champion sailing crews, and a stuffed marlin, caught in some long-ago tropical sea by some now-forgotten member. A ghostly rectangle, lighter than the surrounding wood of the mounting plaque, revealed where a commemorative plate had once been affixed. Across the room was a mahogany bar with a brass rail along its base. The bartender, a young man wearing an apron over his button-down shirt and repp tie, polished glasses as he studied a college textbook.

Ned called to the bartender. “A light beer, please, Guido. And let me tell you what I saw at the station today.”

“Here you are, Mr. Broder. What?”

“There was a homeless woman, shopping cart and all.”

“More likely someone’s live-in maid, sir. Got fired or quit and took her things with her.”

“She was there all day. When I left this morning, and when I came home tonight. Hadn’t budged.”

“Police’ll run her off. They don’t allow that sort of thing in a nice town like this. Mrs. Broder joining you?”

“She’s hasn’t come from the city yet, but you can put a bottle of the ‘82 Vouvray on ice for our dinner, please.” Ned glanced toward the entrance.

“Here she is now.”

Taking Ned's hands in her own cold ones, Beth leaned to offer her cheek to his kiss. "Pardon my lateness. I had to wait in line at Macy's for those sourdough rolls you like so much." Her face glowed from the outdoors. "And then I gave half of them to a homeless woman at the station, along with some money. I hope you don't mind. I would have given her only the cash, but that seemed so impersonal."

Love welled up in Ned. "I don't know what more you could have done. She'll probably be gone next time you catch a train."

But she was there the next morning and evening, in the same place. The day after, there was an early-season snowfall. Sada, after taking Gillie to the city on Saturday for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, returned home incensed.

"That person is still at the station, Farris."

"It's a public place, my dear, so say those left-liberal bureaucrats at Town Hall. She'll leave soon enough, when it gets colder." He smiled at the prospect.

"But she... she... Gillie, go to the kitchen and put some ice in Mummy's drink."

When the child was out of sight, Sada resumed. "She smells! We can't have that sort of thing, not in the very middle of our shopping district."

"No," he replied, "not there. Terrible for business."

By Sunday, the woman had become *the* topic in the town. Waitresses and patrons clucked their tongues in Kevin's and at the IHOP on the road to Polton Mills, debates were held in homes both townside and across the lake on the Ridge, before church and in all three boating clubs afterward, and the subject was discussed over many a dinner table that evening. There was a consensus, keenest among homeowners concerned with property values, that the woman *had to go*.

Ned parked his car in the station lot, remaining inside as he surveyed the area. A light rain was falling through the misty air, and piles of snow shone dirty white below the haloes of streetlamps. There she was, huddled under the telephone overhang, a heap of clothing identifiable as human only through foreknowledge. The grocery cart stood beside her, presumably containing her pitiful belongings. A change of clothing, he guessed, plus a collection of old magazines and cake tins, and perhaps a journal in which she recorded the strange images peopling her private universe.

He got out, stretched to cross a puddle, then picked his way through the slush of the roadway.

“Hello.”

“Hello, yourself.”

“Can I help you?”

“Going to run me off, are you?” she cackled, then broke into a fit of coughing.

He waited until she’d recovered. “Would you like a place for the night?”

“Indoors?” Her voice lost its feistiness. “Lead the way.”

Pushing the cart with one hand while she walked alongside holding his arm, he led her across the street. The stone walls of St. Cornelius rose gray in the night sky. They made their way up the slippery flagstones to the side door, where he let them in with his vestryman’s key.

The church’s interior was cold, its darkness filled with smells ecclesiastical: candle wax, incense, furniture polish and old hymnals. He turned on a switch. As the light caught her face, the woman looked away, then jumped in fright. “Who’s that?” she exclaimed, pointing at a dark figure half-concealed within a niche in the wall.

Ned laughed. “Nothing to be afraid of. That’s old Corny.”

As her eyes adapted to the light, she looked again. What had surprised her was the life-size, wooden figure of a Roman soldier, a sword grasped in his outstretched hands. “Corny?”

“St. Cornelius, the patron saint of our parish. A statue. Our rector says the old guy reminds him of the company commander he and I served under in Vietnam. Some imagination!”

“It sure fooled me. No other spooks around here, I hope.”

She looked perhaps fifty, with delicate features in contrast to a body thick with layers of clothing. Her skin was clean but reddened from the cold. Ned could detect no body odor, only the smell of wet wool.

“There’s a cot downstairs,” he said, “in the choir room. You could spend the night, but you’ll have to leave in the morning.” He pressed a fifty-dollar bill in her hand. “Train fare,” he mumbled.

“God bless you, sir,” she replied huskily. Embarrassed, he touched her lightly on the shoulder, and left.

\*

The next morning, at work in the city, his secretary buzzed him. “You have a call from a Father Dahlgren, Mr. Broder.”

“Morning, Hal. What can I do for you?”

“It’s about this woman, Ned. She says you said she could live in the choir room.”

“I told her no such thing. She was supposed to leave at dawn. I should have called last night, but it was late, and today I’ve been caught up in...”

“Well, Manuel found her when he came in to clean. He knew she couldn’t stay there, so he moved her to the storeroom in the parish house. That’s where she is now.”

“Believe me, I intended nothing of the sort. I even gave her money for the train.”

“You did indeed, and she handed it to me about an hour ago. ‘For the less fortunate,’ she told me. She’s swept and dusted the place—that’s needed doing for a long time—and hung some makeshift curtains at the window. Looks to me like she’s settled in.”

“I never dreamed...”

“I’m going to let her stay a few days, pay her a little something to help Manuel catch up around here. He’s been overwhelmed since old Jenkins retired and left us without a sexton. And get some weight on her. She’s horribly thin.”

“Oh Lord, I never asked if she was hungry!”

“Anyway, she’s already made herself and the Thrift Shop volunteers a morning snack in the kitchen. She also gave Manuel the dickens for its condition. He’s helping her clean it now.”

Late that afternoon, Hal was in his rectory office, after an exhausting day. He’d spent much of the morning with an ancient, lifelong parishioner, who was dying at home with a slowness agonizing to every member of his family but himself. Garrulous in the prime of life, he was the more so as death approached, with an urge to share his repertoire of stories before they were sharable no more. And there had been a hospital visit to a dreadfully ill young man, who’d been coming quietly to an occasional early service until the lesions of Kaposi’s sarcoma could no longer be concealed under long sleeves and a high collar. Finally, the choirmistress, a grim perfectionist with an expertise perhaps too rich for this little parish’s blood, had nagged him for an increased music budget.

No, that wasn’t his final task, for he was still faced with the day’s—be honest, the previous week’s—paperwork, piles of which cluttered his desk. He hated paperwork.

“You wanted to see me, Reverend?”

Hal wondered who had walked in. “Ah, yes, Miss...”

“Josephson, Reverend. Angela Josephson. You asked me to stop in and talk before you went home.”

The transformation was miraculous. She wore a belted shirtdress of light blue denim, and her feet were shod in a pair of loafers which, though scuffed, appeared to be of good quality. Her features, haggard this morning, were now softened with a tasteful minimum of makeup and a look of hopefulness, and her gray-streaked auburn hair, which had writhed like Medusa’s snakes, was clean and brushed backward into a neat bun.

“Sit down, please, Miss Josephson.”

“It’s Mrs., Reverend. And call me Angela, please.”

“Won’t you make yourself comfortable... Angela. And why have you come to see me?”

“It was you wanted to talk with me.”

“Uh, yes. Are you comfortable where you are staying?”

“You want to know when I’m going to leave.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Uh, yes... I mean no, that is...” He regretted having let Ned off so easily.

“Here’s how it is, Reverend. My husband and I raised three kids in Chicago, but they all left home mad from his drinking, and after the booze killed him and left me with no insurance and a pile of debts, not one of them could be bothered. So I came back to New York where we got married when he was on shore leave from the Navy, but I didn’t know anybody anymore. And I ran out of money, and they put me up in one of those shelters—you know that big old armory on Park Avenue?—and I was going crazy there. You can’t keep yourself clean, the druggies steal everything you own, you can’t sleep for all the nut cases.

“I stole a shopping cart from a D’Agostino’s and put my stuff in it, what I had left, and came to the PATH Station, and got on a train. I thought it was the one to Hoboken, where maybe I could find some of my people, but I wound up here. I’m sorry for the little white lie I told you—Mr. Broder didn’t really say I could live here—but you can imagine how desperate I was not to go back out in the cold. I hope you’ll let me stay a bit longer, while I look for work.”

Her account finished, she folded her hands in her lap and sat quietly, as he struggled to find words.

“Well, Angela, I really don’t know if we... we really don’t have what you’d call proper accommodations...”

“Say no more. I’ll be out of here first thing tomorrow morning, or tonight if you insist.”

“No, no, I meant you’re welcome to remain, until you can find a more permanent solution.”

“Thank you, Reverend”—she prepared to rise—“but it’s probably best...” There was a knock, and the door cracked open behind her.

“You’re with someone, Mr. Dahlgren. I’d hoped to find you alone.” It was Sada, head of the altar guild and self-anointed “first lady” of the parish.

“Come in,” he answered cheerily, ignoring the peremptory tone. “We were just winding up. Sada Chastin, I’d like you to meet Angela Josephson.”

Sada paused warily. “How do you do, Angela. New here?”

“Yes, ma’am, I arrived last week.”

“Well, I hope you’ll like our little town. Nothing fancy, but there are those of us who love it!” Her manner changed again as she addressed Hal. “We need to speak on a most unpleasant matter.”

“Is it confidential?” He glanced at Angela.

“I’ve been working this afternoon in the Thrift Shop, and would you believe, the morning-shift ladies, under the influence of that sentimental old fool Essie Gillson, have been giving clothes away! I’ve put a stop to it, of course, for we price items when received and sell them as marked, no exceptions.”

“There must be times when an exception makes sense, Sada, if the person truly needs the clothing but can’t afford to pay. I’m sure Essie meant well.” He glanced toward Angela, who was staring at the ceiling.

“Well yes, if she’d chosen one of our local indigents to shower with charity, but it was that homeless person who’s been hanging around the station. As Farris says, and my lawyer brother Robert Charbonneau agrees with him, the wretched woman will never leave if people encourage her. More will come, and before you know it, this town will be a regular Calcutta.” Sada grimaced. “You’re new here, Angela, but I’m sure you can see what a problem this could become.”

“Still and all,” Angela replied, “the Lord did tell us to clothe the naked.”

“Yes of course, but if we *give* away clothing, we won’t have any profits to distribute to charity. And with the Christmas Fair coming up, you know—I guess you don’t, being new here—we want plenty of stock for that blessed occasion. Besides,” her features puckering, “our little town isn’t equipped to handle this homeless business. That sort of thing is better taken care of in the city, where they have shelters for those sorts of people.”

“Are there no workhouses...” Hal muttered. Then, aloud, “I failed to make a proper introduction, Sada. Angela is going to fill our sexton vacancy.”

“How nice, I’m sure.” Sada’s tone betrayed a social unease. “Do you normally do this sort of thing? I was just now moving racks in the Shop, and I’m exhausted.”

“Is the job done?” Angela asked. “No? Excuse me, Reverend, while I go help the ladies before I quit for the day. And we’ll be wanting to shape up this place, by and by.” She indicated the stacks of paper on Hal’s desk. “Give me a

couple of days to catch up cleaning, and I'll come help you with administration.”

He could hear them chatting happily, as they walked away down the hall.

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## GUEST WRITER

Liam Kennedy is a film director from the north of England. Alongside short fiction he writes screenplays, advertisements and travel memoirs. He has a travel blog that can be found at <http://liam-kennedy.squarespace.com>. 2014 is the year he intends to make the move towards becoming a full time fiction writer. In his spare time he loves reading, snowboarding, travel and photography. This story is his first fiction publication.

# Sing For Your Supper

*by Liam Kennedy*

*NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #16: Home.*

“No woman no cry,” sang the cycle rickshaw driver, “*No chapatis no chai!*” A gap where his front teeth should be curled ‘*chapatis*’ into a whistle. He smiled at the woman in the back seat. She was pig-like and dripping in sweat and patriotism. She wrapped herself in American flags: matching shorts and shirt, topped with a star-spangled cap. She turned up her snout and ignored the driver, leaving his broad, warm grin to linger on the flattened punchline. The driver put eyes back on the road, clacked his tongue against the gap in his teeth and cocked his head like a confused puppy. *Don’t show desperation. They hate that. Chin up. Make them laugh. Try again.*

He felt around in his pockets for inspiration. In one muddy brown-stained pocket he had a half chewed liquorice root, frayed at both ends, and a pocket knife. He half considered making a funny fake mustache out of the liquorice but shook it out of his head. *Too childish for this one.*

His other pocket held a packet of chewy ginger sweets, gooey and misshapen in the heat. He grabbed one and threw it high in the air in front of the rickshaw, peddling faster to catch it in his mouth. He caught it and pretended to choke, desperately clutching at the air in fake torment. The American tried hard not to notice while keeping one wary eye on the driver. Finally, he spluttered, hit himself hard in the chest and slumped over the handlebars.

“Hey...” The American nudged him. “Hey!”

The driver’s eyes glowed with mischief as he turned to her. He opened his mouth to show the sweet stuck in the gap between his teeth then lapped it back and swallowed with a gulp and a giggle. The American tutted and rifled through her purse for her phone.

“Look, I can just get the hotel to pick me up,” she said as she dialed.

“No no! It’s okay. Okaykay okay...” he waved his hand in front of his face, wiping away his shame. *Too much.* The driver faced front and pedaled. He couldn’t lose this one; he was lucky to have even picked her up. She had been dropped at the ‘Taj View Grand’ by her previous driver instead of the ‘Grand Taj Mahal View’. When she had refused to pay, the angry driver had abandoned her there. It was a lucky coincidence that he had been passing on his way to his usual spot, half a mile from the Taj Mahal Eastern gate.

She was heavy. He knew that at a glance. He also knew the ‘Grand Taj Mahal View’ was at least three miles away and the quickest route was through the sweltering heave of morning rush hour traffic. She wasn’t going to be an easy task for a man approaching sixty, pedaling with bare feet. *Make them laugh. Don’t let them notice the slow pace or the times you get bullied off the road.*

He wished, as he had in every morning prayer and every sleepless night in the cramped backseat of his rickshaw, that he had never left his family behind. He had come to Agra with the promise of rich pickings and an easier life for the ones he loved, but he hadn’t predicted the coarse engines and coarser drivers. He was lucky if he picked up one customer a day, and even then he could only charge half the rate an engine could.

He longed for the peace of his village and the warmth of his love, but how could he return? Four years and nothing to show? Pathetic. All he needed was some regular work. Just enough to save a little each day and perhaps a year from now he might be able to afford a second hand engine rickshaw. He would have to settle for a beat up model, but it would be better than the rattle and rust he was currently heaving away on. Another year and he would earn enough with the engine to return home. Then he would be one of only a handful for miles around with an engine. He would be able to make a living from the people he knew and trusted and one day he would pass his legacy to his grandson, give him a good start.

His grandson had been born two years previous. The driver had been trying to raise enough to visit home and see him, but every pedal towards his goal seemed to throw up a speed bump. Burst tires on broken roads; minor collisions with other drivers and the aggressive extortions of money for damages to their vehicles—even when the damage wasn't his fault— that followed; police bribes to freely work unlicensed.

The past four years had aged him quicker than he deserved and his sunken eyes and matted hair belied a strong patriarch. He was weak now. Years of farm fed muscle had dripped off his body and left only loose skin and scars. He would never recover.

They cycled past a street, blocked across its mouth by a makeshift barricade and lined by a mess of souvenir shops and tourists.

“Down there is Agra Fort miss, okaykay?” He waited for a response. She was busy typing something into her phone and hadn't looked up for at least a minute. “Agra Fort has very rich history. The Sultan of Delhi...”

“No thank you.” She cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“Free of charge, miss. No no extras. Just talking my knowing.”

“No thank you,” she said without a glance; bitter and final. She slid her finger around the face of her phone then held it in front of her, posing and forcing a fake smile to snap the fort in the background. As quick as the smile grew, it

fell. It hit the dusty road and rolled under wheels and heels until it returned a plump, misshapen pout that sat beneath the American's snout and mocked the driver.

He'd seen this happen before. Smiles weren't freely given around Agra. He often had to tend them; cultivate them until they bloomed. He would sing his little ditties or perform his jokes and tricks and usually they worked. Sometimes he would be lucky: a particularly cool day; a festival; a few kind hearts among the crowds. On lucky days he would be able to pick smiles growing wild on the side of the road, or find an entire bouquet in his back seat. Lately though, lucky days seemed to be occurring much less frequently. He couldn't blame people for the most part. As Agra poisoned his own body, so too did it poison his smile. The driver was terrified that those kind hearts would eventually leave his own behind to blacken in Agra's smoke. Maybe he would forget how to freely offer a smile altogether.

Snaking traffic slowed to a slither. The driver parked the rickshaw and hurried ahead to see the delay.

"It is celebration. *Laxmi* day! We wait for the parade go past. Not long time, okaykay miss? Very pretty parade miss."

"Can't we just go around? That guy is..." The American grunted in the direction of a moped driver that had taken to the curb. "Do that," she said as she returned to her phone.

The parade swelled as it scooped eager participants along its course. Some tourists who had climbed out of a shiny engine rickshaw had gotten too close while trying to take photographs and had been swept away by a wave of color. They re-emerged 30 yards down the road, twinkling with baubles, blessings and wonder.

The driver pointed at the tourists. "Lots of blessings for Americans miss, see! Very good time to be in Agra." She tutted and humored him, bending over the side of the rickshaw to take a look.

“Great. Now, go around,” she said, though there was obviously no way around for his cumbersome vehicle .

The driver watched the parade with reverence. In Agra he took the small victories, the moments that reminded him of home. His village would be having a parade this very moment, smaller in scale but enormous in heart. He watched as a beautiful dancer painted arcs of spice and flower across the sky. She twisted and spun in hypnotic rhythm, plumes of deep crimson and jade flying from her sleeve, swirling together in pools of fire. Even among the color and chaos, she stole him. He burned in her passion and in the dance of her emerald eyes.

Her eyes. He took them and made them his own. The street became his canvas and he painted home. He danced, and around him his world brightened. Lush greens and fresh, clean blues splashed and clashed with every shade of sand then settled in a watercolor puddle that shimmered under sunlight, unblotted by oppressive smoke and high-rise hotels. He painted his own parade, picking up people as he danced through his village, throwing spice and shimmer as he searched for his family. He willed himself to form faces on the colorful splashes that danced around him, each leaving their own frail paint trail, but whenever he felt close to recognizing a smile here or a flash of almond eyes there, they would smudge and fade and mash into a mess of blue, red and white. The parade moved to paint the next street over and traffic began to stir. A sharp tug on the driver’s shoulder drained the color from his canvas, leaving behind a naked street coated in bleached-out stars and stripes.

A begging boy who trailed the parade reached a hand into the back seat of the rickshaw.

“One chapati? One chapati...” He pretended to feed himself with dirt-blackened fingers. His lips, crusted by sores, mouthed teary pleas that darted between driver and passenger.

The driver ignored the boy; his job dictated he abstain. *Don’t overstep the bounds. Neither help nor hinder. Remain impassive.* The boy tugged at the American’s sleeve.

“Chapati... chapati...”

She pulled away, whipping her sleeve and moving across to the other side of the rickshaw. She tapped the driver on the shoulder.

“Can you tell him to beg somewhere else?”

The boy turned to him, cupped hands held high and brimming with hope. If the driver could have filled the cup with anything worthwhile, he would have. Instead, he took the boy’s dusty hands to his lips and kissed his fingers. The boy flinched but the driver held firm; two weary faces drawn near translucent with fatigue studied each other. Wormy blue veins under sun-darkened skin.

The driver offered the smile he hadn’t yet forgotten. His grin revealed another ginger sweet, hidden between the gap in his teeth. He dropped the sweet into grateful hands and at once the cup overflowed, spilling hope in splashes along the street as the boy ran, bumping and squeezing through the crowd.

“Why would you do that?” Said the American. “You gotta ignore the lil bastards or they win...” She huffed and balled her fists.

The driver suppressed a snarl. *Nothing. Nothing. Nothing more for this one.* He climbed back onto the rickshaw with a new resolve and picked up his pace. He would be better than his lot. He wouldn’t crumble in the crush; he wouldn’t balk at tiny gaps or sidewalk shortcuts; he wouldn’t fan his heat, his dust, his noise, his culture away from him. He would breathe it. His lungs burnt and the world blurred. He scraped scrapes and kissed metal on metal as Agra swirled around him. *Inhale dust, dirt and sweat. Exhale home. Inhale ignorance and impatience. Exhale family. Inhale Agra. Exhale India.*

The ‘Grand Taj Mahal View’ stood tall and garish, stained pink with chipped paint and boasting a blown up photograph of the Taj Mahal on a banner across the porch entrance. The driver slowed and creaked his rusty bones. Now he could show her what she was worth; a few drops of effort and an achey afternoon. He climbed from the saddle and grabbed the American’s luggage. She noticed for the first time that he had a limp but she wasn’t going to allow pity to creep through her bad mood.

The American dug around in her purse, fat with promise. She held a hundred rupee note between her lips as she fingered through wads for the eighty rupees they had agreed on. The driver had never seen such a pregnant purse. She held out a handful of tattered twenties and mumbled through her money. "Here..." The driver stared through her. She stood mute for a few heartbeats. "What?" she fired at him as she tucked the hundred back into the safety of her purse. "What are you staring at?" Her thin patience had dropped some weight. "You waiting for a tip? You ain't getting one buddy. It's gonna be a long wait."

But he wasn't.

He was weighing her up. She was a butcher's dream; a stuck pig worth a small fortune. His hand drifted absently to the knife in his pocket. It wasn't much but it could cut. Her purse was heavy enough for an engine, he could cut a year from his struggle in a moment. *I should bleed her. I should cut her and slice the fat from her purse. I should leave her in the mud to roll around and squeal.* He wouldn't even need to do that. He could point his knife at her and she would squeal and cower and hand over the purse without an ounce of pride. All he had to do was threaten her. No one would see; no one would care except him and her. *She* was depriving him of his home and his family. *She* was the reason he had never seen his grandson. *She* owed him his cut.

"If you don't want it I'll keep it..." Her voice wavered a little as she readjusted the money in her hands, fanning the notes to show him all four twenties.

*Do it.* He gripped the handle white-knuckle tight. *Do it. Make them squeal if they won't laugh. Do it.* The American dug around in her purse again.

"Look, I can stretch another ten but I gotta go. That's my last offer. Take it." She thrust the notes at the driver. Her battered pout was near bubbling.

*Do it!* He twisted the blade in his pocket; felt the weight and the fit. It was light. Unnaturally light. It felt like it was making him lighter on his feet; younger and quicker. He held freedom in his fist. *DO IT!*

He braced. The morning sun hated them both, it drove their patience wild. He clenched his teeth so they wouldn't chatter with anticipation. He could smell India again and it burned into him. It wasn't Agra that filled his consciousness, with its smog and its stench of burnt plastic tourists. It was a different India. It was the smell of his wife, sharpened sweet by a day of motherhood. It was morning *dosa* and masala chai. It was fenugreek fields and dusty roads. It was a new smell, the scent of his grandson's hair as he fell asleep leaning on his chest. He could hear his shallow breath and his daughter cutting coconuts behind the shack in preparation for the morning market. He could hear the gentle buzz of village life, itself a beat slower on the metronome than the city. He could hear the throaty choke of an engine, one that could turn petrol into rupees. The engine roared proudly, angrily; louder and louder until he could no longer hear his grandson breathing. Louder, until the steady beat of the machete licking coconut flesh lost out to the rattle of metal and fire.

*DO IT!* The engine deafened him. *DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!* His nostrils burnt with the smell of petrol, turned sour in its excess. His ears screamed and his grip tightened. *DO IT!*

The world hushed. The blade bit flesh. A life of frustration sang through his body and focused on the tip. He felt the warmth course through him as the wetness spread. He twisted the knife and exhaled, his teeth finally chattering over the stuttered sigh.

Then the pain struck.

Hand still in his pocket, he pulled the knife slowly out of his thigh as he reached out to take the ninety rupees. He turned away from the American to hide his blade; his anchor; his shame. He reached his hand into his other pocket, pulling out a sticky ginger sweet to throw it in her direction with a broad smile. He clacked his tongue against the gap in his teeth to draw her attention from the purse she was putting back in her handbag. She looked in time to watch the sweet fly past and hit the floor by her bags. The American didn't pick up the sweet. She didn't thank the driver and she didn't smile. Instead, she entered her hotel and found a bellboy to take the brunt of her

heat-tempered fury. The driver didn't really mind. He was already on his rickshaw and pedaling towards the Taj Mahal Eastern gate.

As he rode, the brown-red stain over his pocket grew and darkened. Half a mile before he reached the gate he picked up his second customer of the morning, a rarity before noon. He softened his grin long enough to whistle a couple of bars. "No woman no cry," he sang. The man in the back seat, a retired accountant from Colorado, smiled.

"No chapati no chai!"

The man from Colorado laughed and clapped a little, unaware that he had saved a life.

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