

Interview with M.M. Buckner

By
Lesley L. Smith

Your new book, *Watermind*, is out in November, 2008. What is it about?

Watermind is set in present-day Louisiana. It's about a liquid artificial intelligence, spontaneously self-assembled from trash in the Mississippi River.

Every day, the Mississippi carries up to 400,000 tons of rubbish from forty-one US states and three Canadian provinces. All of North America's most advanced technology flows into the river – microchips, nano-devices, pharmaceuticals, genetically modified seed. Now in the Louisiana Delta, a radically new primordial soup gives birth to an elusive entity. Drifting in the water, it's more alien than anything that might come from outer space – because it springs from the waste-stream of our own civilization.

How did you get interested in rivers and water pollution?

Water is my element. I'm a devoted whitewater and sea kayaker, and for many years, I've served on boards of environmental organizations seeking to protect water quality in our streams and rivers. Among other things, I edited a major report for the World Wildlife Fund about aquatic species in southeastern rivers. I've also participated in river clean-ups and macroinvertebrate samplings. The sound of clear running water feeds my soul.

How did you research this book?

I used all the standard tools – books, articles, web sites, as well as interviews with experts and a site visit to southern Louisiana. Actually, I traveled through New Orleans and Baton Rouge just a few months before Hurricane Katrina. Most of my story takes place in Baton Rouge – or more precisely in an EPA Superfund site called Devil's Swamp. This is a real place, and most of what I say about it in the book is literally true. The site has a long notorious history as a haunted dumping ground. I learned a lot from talking to locals while I was there.

Your books have been called eco-thrillers and ecology seems important to you. How did you get into it?

Eco-fiction is a natural for me because of my work in environmentalism. *Watermind* is actually my first novel in the eco-thriller vein, though I don't think it follows the typical thriller formula. I've tried very hard to develop engaging characters. All my novels are character-driven. I do enjoy a good adventure ride though, and I hope this book provides excitement for readers. There's plenty of suspense and action.

Your work has also been called post-cyberpunk. What is "post-cyberpunk"?

My first three novels were labeled post-cyberpunk. *Hyperthought*, *Neurolink*, and *War Surf* are set in a dystopian near-future earth, which is characteristic of cyberpunk. There's a lot of debate about what the "post" prefix actually means.

I do relish the works of William Gibson, Neal Stephenson and Bruce Sterling, and they have clearly influenced me. However, my work offers a more hopeful view of the future, and I tend to focus more on climate change as a driver of progress.

My next novel, the one I'm writing now under contract with Tor, will again be set in a near-future earth altered by climate change – but I offer optimism about how science and technology can solve our environmental problems. Its working title is *The Gravity Pilot*, and it's about an extreme skydiver living in Alaska

Is *Watermind* set in this same world? Why or why not?

Watermind is set in the present, and this really freed me to do things I couldn't do in the earlier books. The interesting thing about writing in the present day is, every detail has to be accurate. Any mistake about a street name or a historic date will stand out to readers. And when you need technology, you can't make it up. It has to be real. So for many reasons, the research for this novel was more involved. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Your Greenhouse Earth Series terminology for the workers, protes, reminds me of Orwell's proles in 1984. There are also similarities with your coms and Orwell's totalitarian super-states. Were you influenced by Orwell?

I guess everybody has been influenced by Orwell's seminal works. I read them in high school and loved them. I hope to read them again before long. My coms are multinational corporations.

Regarding the coms – corporations, conglomerates – many futurist writers include these in their stories, for good reason. Just look around at our caving economy, where inept CEOs walk away with \$millions while workers lose their homes. This is not Sci Fi. This is the nightly news.

In all three of your Greenhouse Earth novels, the main male character becomes trapped in a structure (underground lab, underwater settlement, orbiting spaceship), is transformed literally or figuratively, and then reborn into the world. What about this plot particularly appeals to you?

Yes, the womb-grave theme obsesses me – although it doesn't appear *Watermind*, which is basically a journey-by-water story.

Of course, many classics have been written about the transformational womb-grave. Edgar Allan Poe was haunted by it. In grad school, I read his novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and it continues to inspire me. I highly recommend it. Other stories along this line include *Jonah and the Whale*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and my all-time favorite, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Joseph Campbell has written extensively about tomb-womb mythology. I see this theme as an expression of the endless cycle of life – the death and rebirth of the universe itself.

Only your first book, *Hyperthought*, has a female protagonist. What about *Watermind*?

Yes, *Watermind* has a female protagonist! She's feisty and smart, with lots of troublesome personal history and a tendency to make reckless mistakes. I like her a lot.

I notice you use your initials in your professional name. Why? Do you think there's sexism in science fiction? Why or why not?

My parents gave me a double name, which is common in the South where I grew up. I'm Mary Margaret. Nobody wants to pronounce such a long name, so I'm M.M.

Regarding sexism, yeah, sure, there may be some. I don't worry about that, though. The people I write for are more enlightened.

In *War Surf* some members of the exec class actually surf wars--go to battle zones and sightsee. How did you come up with this idea? Is it an extrapolation of reality television and 'real video' on the Internet?

War Surf definitely fits with reality TV and video. Actually, I got the idea from an article in the *New York Times*. A reporter was describing how weird he felt covering the war in Bosnia. He described spending an afternoon with freedom

fighters, ducking bullets behind a riddled wall with dead bodies lying all around. Later that same day, the reporter flew to Paris to have dinner with friends in a nice restaurant. I don't know if he called it "mental whiplash," but that's the sense I got. That story was the germ of my idea for *War Surf*.

You have won a number of awards, including the 2006 Philip K. Dick Award for *War Surf*. How do you do it?

I feel very honored and grateful to have received those awards – also very lucky. This year, I'm serving on the jury for the 2008 Philip K. Dick Award, and there are so many excellent novels coming out, it's tough duty to choose the best.

Your book blurbs by the likes of Robert J. Sawyer, C.J. Cherryh, and Allen Steele are impressive. How did you get those?

Again, I feel immensely thankful for the kind words from these celebrated authors. My main focus is to write to the best of my ability. Everything else flows from that.

How did you get your first book deal?

I sent my manuscript "over the transom," and an editor at Ace picked it out of the slush pile. Good luck strikes again!

How did you get your agent?

After I received the offer from Ace for my first novel, I contacted an agent recommended by a colleague. What a stroke of good fortune that was. My agent has been a true friend, and I owe him a huge load of thanks.

Do you ever write short fiction? Why or why not?

Yes, I have written and published a few short stories. One day, I hope to devote much more time to the short format. The requirements of that form are very different. Short stories are closer to poetry. They achieve power through economy, tone and truth – the perfect turn of emotion. I have great respect for the masters of the short story.

Is there anything else you'd like to say to our readers?

Please tell your readers I would love to hear their thoughts about my work or the art of science fiction in general. I always try to be helpful to other readers and writers, because so many people have helped me. We are all on the same road. Any reader or writer can reach me through my web site, www.mmbuckner.com.

End Of Days

By

Tyree Campbell

Marjod was lying face-down on the floor of the cabin when Kern returned from the traps late in the morning. As Kern dropped to a knee beside her left shoulder, he wondered whether he should turn her over, to see her one last time. But if he saw how she had done it, he might be tempted to try it himself.

Oh, Marjod . . .

A seagull *skreeed*, as if to mourn her passing, the echoes fading in the surrounding Rockies like the spirit that had been hers, muted by the lush pads of spring wildflowers.

Kern had not been gone very long—the traps and weirs were still empty—but in the interim Marjod had managed to do something to herself so swiftly that the nanogens could not repair it in time to keep her alive.

She was facing away from him, one blue eye still staring into the beyond. Under her chin welled a puddle of blood, almost black in the shadows behind the old sofa. The puddle was contiguous with the great pool that had spilled from under her torso, the liquid cool and tacky as it soaked into the knee of his denims. She had fallen on her right arm. Her left arm, alongside her body, was also black with blood. He realized now what she had done.

Kern thumbed her eyelid shut, and sighed heavily as he rose, loathing the task her death made necessary. His eyes followed the broad ribbon, black in shadow and crimson in the sunlight through the front window, to her heart where it had come to rest against the south wall. It had ceased beating, but that scarcely mattered to the nanogens. Already they had constructed tendrils in the direction of Marjod's corpse, had begun lengthening the stumps of the aorta and the pulmonary arteries and veins. He stood still, staring. My God, how had she found the strength and the will to complete her final task? To make not just the one great incision, but to plunge her hand inside the cavity and hack and slash until all the links between the heart and the body were severed . . .

Oh, Marjod—

He could guess what she had used: the fish filleting knife, sharp as a scalpel and sturdy enough to cut through sinew. She knew his daily routines, and she knew how long the human body could live without oxygen. The length of his absence had been more than sufficient. Dead Marjod might be, yet the nanogens could work miracles, even rebuild the brain if necessary. They could not re-ignite life itself, but they would try.

From the bedroom Kern brought a woolen blanket, wrapped Marjod's corpse in it, and slung it over his shoulder. Relieved of the burden of blood and heart and life, Marjod weighed on him with the substance of a discarded mannikin. This was not, *could not be* Marjod. The temporary delusion failed to ease his mind but helped him see what had to be done. There was soft ground

on the other side of the creek they fished. Burial was taboo, but he had neither the means nor the desire to cremate her—and in any case no one would ever know of her demise. On the way down the slope he snagged the spade from the garden, and the soft chuffing of his boots in the loose surface dirt echoed back to him as whispers of breath in a cavern. After Kern splashed across the creek and climbed the low, undercut bluff where the creek made the great turn eastward, he laid Marjod gently on the sparse grass and prayed silently while he excavated a grave deep enough to discourage the few remaining predators—cougars, mostly, and coyotes. Within half an hour, only the low mound of tamped earth signified that the woman had ever lived.

The nanogens promised forever. She had broken their promise.

Another gull passed overhead and called out as if bidding him to follow. Kern hesitated, blotting the perspiration on his forehead with a swatch of his undershirt. The cabin on this western slope, facing the sunset, had been their refuge for the past nine years. To abandon it so readily felt disrespectful of Marjod and his decades of memories of her, of them. Yet he had no stomach for the crimson mementoes of her inside the cabin, or for their removal. She was an open wound on his body that he could not bring himself to look at. If he didn't look at it, maybe it wasn't as bad as it felt. Ignorance gave him something to cling to, to keep himself afloat.

And what if he did follow the gull to the coast? If the people living there still remembered what he was, his return could become ugly. Still, he had always longed to return to the ocean one day. With Marjod gone, Kern heard its summons anew, demanding a response, and he yielded despite his ambivalence. If later he needed something from the cabin, he could always return for it.

Despite his surrender, departure required a conscious effort. Kern placed one boot-clad foot on the flat rock in front of him and followed it with the other foot, gathering momentum. Soon he was taking a lateral tack around the foothill, following the contour that had once been listed on physical maps at 2500 feet above sea level, drawn by the sound of distant waves growing louder in his ears, until he reached the crest of the saddle that linked the foothill to the next one north. There, he paused.

The ocean appeared a stranger to Kern now that Marjod was dead. In the evenings on that saddle, out of sight of the coastal residents, they had held hands and spoken in the intimate whispers of couples who had long become comfortable with one another, taking in the canopy of stars and the luminescent froth below and gazing out to the vanishing point in the horizon where the stars and sparkles were indistinguishable from one another. Stars, like nanogens, promised forever. Now, alone in the afternoon daylight, Kern saw only the vast aqua-green stretch of the Great Central Gulf that had encroached over the past century from the Gulf of Mexico as far north as Canada. With binoculars he might have made out the rugged coastline of the Black Hills to the northeast or even, on a very clear day, the two small islands that remained of the bluffs of Sioux City and Omaha. Kern lowered his gaze to the coastline and the tiny islets a quarter-mile offshore but was unable to locate Seaside. For a moment it seemed to him

that the rolling terrain that lay between the foothills and the ocean blocked his view of the village. Belatedly he realized that the encroachment of the water had inundated the village and that what he thought at first were islets and crags were in fact the tops of the taller stores and houses.

In the three years since he had last visited the shoreline, the water had risen to within a mile of the foothills. And how much further would it rise?

The urge to find what remained of Seaside impelled Kern onward. He began a gradual descent, selecting the most passable slopes, following the creek here and there along the periphery of the forest, keeping to the shade wherever it was available. The sea disappeared behind the hills. Only the sounds of the waves betrayed its presence. Soon Kern began to hear voices: cries and laughter and the calling out of names. Children were at play.

When finally Kern came over the last of the bluffs he was startled by the closeness of the sea. The gentle slope at the bottom of the bluff led directly to the beach, not 200 meters away. Already the tides had deposited a thin layer of coarse ochre sand and fragments of shells, together with the detritus of civilization—plastic soda bottles, partly decomposed disposable diapers, pitted stalks of wood, and the odd rag. To the north, on higher ground, the survivors from Seaside had erected makeshift dwellings of stone, wood, tin cans beaten flat, anything they could find that could be fashioned into a wall or a roof. They had laid out small terrace gardens. And further north, where an arm of the sea pierced the lowland between two hills, organized fishing teams dragged nets through the inlet.

Carefully Kern picked his way down the bluff toward the sea, savoring the smell of brine and salt, old friends still waiting for him. His boots left rough imprints in the young, coarse sand as he turned north and wandered parallel to the shore. Now and then a stronger wave reached the imprints to form short-lived puddles rimmed with froth. The tide was coming in. Presently Kern slowed and stopped, uncertain now. The playing children seemed oblivious to his emergence from the forested foothills, but some of the adults performing daily chores on the higher ground had paused to consider his arrival and its significance. Kern could not reassure them. Other than to answer the call from the sea, he had no idea why he had come.

A child tugged at the tails of his shirt, drawing Kern from his introspection. Narrow gaps between his upper incisors gave him an urchin's smile, bright as the sunlight in his eyes, and his bowl-cap of black hair had been badly trimmed by dull scissors. He was wearing blue swimming trunks dotted with yellow happyfaces, and recently he had lost the nail from the second toe of his left foot. Kern, who had never fathered children—one of the physiological prices he had paid for the nanogens—suddenly felt an emptiness larger than that left by the death of Marjod.

The child held out a deflated, multicolored ball. A cursory examination told Kern that it had no visible punctures and probably had lost its air over time. But to re-inflate it would require a pump and a needle, items clearly beyond the technological level of the village remnants.

Another doomed memento of our civilization, thought Kern. Shaking his

head, he returned the ball to the boy, who trudged away, dejected. Disappointed as well, Kern made for the villagers on the higher ground. This was their territory; he ought at least to ask permission to wander around.

As Kern approached, a young woman paused to smile at him. She might have been the child's mother—the physical resemblance was there, even down to the gaps in the incisors. Kern decided her skin was the color of cappuccino, not a comparison she was likely to understand, given the generation chasm separating them. Her smile faded as he climbed past her, making for the man standing at the top of the hillock and issuing instructions.

Kern introduced himself. "I don't mean to intrude," he said, enduring a brief inspection. "With your permission, I'd like to roam the beach awhile."

The foreman shaded his eyes from the sun and looked up at Kern. His voice was low and barely carried the two meters to Kern's ears when he spoke. "Better for you if you roam further down the coast," he said. "We want no trouble here."

A shadow of dismay fell over Kern, though he kept it from his expression. After all these years, technology continued to haunt them, the stories passed down generations . . . perhaps now as cautionary tales. Kern had no way to oppose the bias—protestations that he meant no harm to anyone obviously still fell on deaf ears.

At least the foreman had been civil about it. Perhaps that was social progress, of a sort. "I understand," said Kern, resigned. "May I ask—how did you know?"

"I didn't *know* you were Fixed," answered the foreman, "until just now."

As Kern turned to leave, he collided with the smiling woman, spilling water from the open canteen in her hand. He caught her arm before she tumbled down the slope, and dragged her to level ground. While both of them gushed apologies, the foreman made a sound of disgust. "You shouldn't be up here, Paloma. Not in your condition."

The woman planted fists against her hips, defiant. "I'm in better shape than you, Andrew Peavy," she growled, the canteen now dangling from the shoulder strap banging against her thigh as she spoke. "And I'll not be a burden to anyone. I'll pull my own weight, and thank you. And why would you be running off able-bodied help?" she added, with a glance toward Kern.

"It's not your concern, Paloma," said the foreman. "Kern, you should heed my suggestion."

Paloma latched onto Kern's elbow. "Well, come along, then," she ordered, as the foreman's eyes narrowed in disapproval. "It's time we took a break from our labors."

The woman led Kern down the gentle slope behind the higher bluffs toward a clutch of rude huts nestled among the silver maples that marked the boundary of the forested lands. In recent years the waters had engulfed Seaside like a gigantic ameba, and even now they extended pseudopods, silvery in the sunlight, inexorably into the low breaks in the bluffs where the men now fished, and Kern reckoned that, for a time during the inundation, scavenging and salvage had become the most critical and sought-after of abilities. Absent

industry and production, the coastal dwellers had been forced to improvise, taking what materials they could and rendering them into whatever form was required. Rusted sheet metal from old cars thus became roofs and doors for the huts—in the sun these glistened, and Kern realized that the metal had been rubbed with some sort of fat as a rust inhibitor. He saw no bricks, and no kiln. Clay would have eased their construction woes considerably, but the only deposit he knew of lay in a broad valley three days' journey to the northwest, and he doubted this information would do more than tease them unnecessarily.

The woman's opposition to the foreman puzzled Kern. Where Peavy had been unwilling to countenance a Fixed in his neighborhood, Paloma seemed entirely too ingenuous, unguarded. In a society supposedly wary of strangers, she had behaved incautiously. If she saw him through different eyes—what did she see? What did she know . . . ?

Paloma's hut had no door, only a large fragment of an old poncho that she drew aside to allow Kern to pass. He did so warily, his smile a lie—although it was generally pointless to try to harm a Fixed, he was still capable of feeling pain. He was glad of the company, but Paloma clearly wanted something from him. He had no idea what she thought he could give her.

The interior of the hut was unexpectedly neat, if spare. A thick sleeping pad, stained by grass and by age, stood rolled up and bound in one corner, a wooden chair in another. Near an opening in the back of the hut Kern spied a hearth, with two chunks of split log and a tepee of kindling awaiting ignition. Pushed into the ground on either side of the hearth were lengths of rusted rebar, the top ten centimeters of each bent down and back up to accommodate a cross bar, a rotisserie, or pots for stew or soup. A rickety wooden table with two drawers completed the furnishings.

Paloma bade Kern sit on a soft patch of grass, and he did so in tailor fashion, slightly hunched over, facing her. She remained standing. An awkward silence settled upon them, and Kern became aware of her, which did nothing to ease the tension. Her eyes told him nothing, except that now she was reluctant to look at him.

"It doesn't show yet," Kern said at last, solicitous to put her at ease. She blinked at him, and he explained, "Your pregnancy."

Now she looked puzzled. "What makes you think I'm . . . ?"

"Peavy did refer to your condition."

Her eyes glowed in the shadows of the hut, signaling her comprehension. "No, I am not with child," she told him. "He was referring to my . . . to this."

Her fingers dug into her right thigh, bunching the fabric of her ragged and patched denims to draw the material up past the top of the leather hiking boot and expose a thick shaft of hardwood. Halfway up her calf the binding began, fixing the stump of the leg to the shaft. Kern guessed the boot was part of the prosthetic unit. A wonder she had not limped on the way here—but he recalled the willful determination with which she had stood up to Peavy. A quiet woman with a quiet pride she was, and Kern studied her with renewed alertness.

Her exposure of the injury was an invitation to talk about it, so Kern said, "What happened?"

Paloma's dark eyes flicked in the direction of the ocean. "A shark took it, not quite three years ago."

Kern barked a laugh of surprise. "Sharks!"

"The waters are warm, and deep enough," said Paloma. She dropped to her knees on the grass and sank back. "And I was careless."

"I'm sorry," said Kern.

"It wasn't *your* shark." A smile tickled the corners of her mouth, and she shrugged, and added, "I can offer you water, or a glass of sun tea. It's an herbal, but you'll probably notice the apple mint most."

Kern closed his eyes. Marjod was not yet dead half a day, and here he was already with another woman. That he did not feel himself on the verge of a fresh intimate relationship failed to diminish the pang of guilt that now stung him. In the deep past Marjod had turned a blind eye to his rare liaisons, as he had to hers. At this moment, however, he could not quite put his finger on the difference between the past visits and the current.

Kern looked at Paloma again. In the shadow of the corner of the hut she sat still, hands folded in her lap, looking demure as she awaited the bidding of her guest. Surely she grasped that he was an outcast, a misfit.

"The tea, perhaps, but later," he finally answered. "Paloma, I appreciate your hospitality, but this is not going to please your foreman."

Under the cropped jersey her delicate shoulders moved slightly, acknowledging the problem and dismissing it. "Andrew does not see beyond the next encroachment of the sea," she said. With her thumbnail she pried a mote of dirt from under a fingernail and wiped it on her denims, and Kern recalled with wry amusement that nail trimming was one process the gentschies had never gotten the nanogens to understand. No matter how far back he trimmed them, within the day each nail had grown back out to the programmed length, including a perfect millimeter of gray along the tip. On the other hand, although at that length tearing a nail was a risk, the damage was easily repairable.

But Paloma had short nails broken by her hardscrabble life, two of them torn recently, perhaps while gardening. The injuries marked the insurmountable difference between them, and Kern, deciding belatedly that this visit was a bad idea, moved as if to leave.

"Please don't go," pleaded Paloma. In the shadows her eyes glistened.

Kern hesitated. He had journeyed to the coastline without a specific purpose in mind, avoidance of the bloody reminders in the cabin a reason to go from, not to come to. He had meant to steer clear of Seaside and its inhabitants, who presumably remained biased against him, only to find that the assault by the sea had scattered them and reduced their numbers. Now they sought only to continue, to eke out an existence as best they could. Were they yet so different from him? He wondered whether the very question stemmed from his longings long suppressed—the desire for intercourse with those who, after all, were his own kind. The death of Marjod had disturbed a dusty shelf in his mind where he had put basic social needs on display as if in a private museum. Now, it seemed, these were not ready for retirement, after all, but they needed practicing. He scarcely knew where or how to begin. With the woman, still regarding him with

glistening eyes? What did she want from him?

Before Kern could respond to her plea, there came a rustling of leaves and grass outside the hut, the soft impact of approaching footsteps, and he tensed, searching the back wall for an exit. In the darkness of his mind gathered a memory of a night long ago when they had come for him and his kind, and he had fled from their society. A soft knocking dispelled the memory, for those who had come for him then did not knock. "Paloma," said the foreman, quietly. Through cracks in the wall materials Kern could see him standing there, looking away, as one who did not wish to intrude, deference to her privacy trumping his feelings regarding her guest . . . or perhaps toward what she and her guest might have been doing.

Paloma, still seated on the floor, blinked at the distraction. "Yes, Andrew."

Kern felt the man's hesitation. Then: "When you've finished your break, the guddlers could use some help cleaning the fish and preparing the smoker."

"He means you," whispered Paloma, to Kern.

"I'll be there presently," said Kern.

The finger of water between the hills was neither wide nor deep, and the villagers had dammed off most of it after the high tide, trapping a few incautious smelt and perch. These they caught with their hands or in sieves of cloth and deposited in pails of water. Scaling and cleaning the catch was left to the women and older children. While several men gathered the last of the fish, others, including Kern, prepared the smokehouse.

The sturdiest structure of the bluff settlement, the stone-and-plank smokehouse had been assembled with joints that fit smoothly, with a roof that allowed no air to escape save through the vent pipe and no rain to enter. It had but the one door, set in the jambs with minimal play, fixed there with two hinges of stainless steel. In the middle of the floor had been dug a shallow depression, into which the men placed cordwood from the pile beside the smokehouse—hickory, mostly, and some oak.

On racks affixed to the walls hung cleaned fish. Kern, kneeling by the ash-filled depression to tepee the wood, estimated there might be enough to supply the inhabitants for a week. The day's meager haul might add a couple days more. No one had said much to him—despite the foreman's invitation, Kern remained a stranger—and he reckoned the men were trying not to think about any seasonal reductions of their catches. The village was perpetually a month from starvation.

Kern knew he might help them. The subsistence gardens that he and Marjod managed could supplement their supplies. But once that was exhausted, the villagers would fall back to the previous patterns—and leave him with nothing at all. Secrecy enabled his continued survival. He did not know them well enough to risk disclosure.

Still, it was possible that Peavy had invited him into the group to lull his defenses, to catch him off-guard. It took no great stretch of reasoning to see that Kern had survived in the mountains somehow. Either he had a great cache of foodstuff, or he grew his own, and surely Peavy and Paloma and others

understood as much.

And what of Paloma? Her invitation preceded that from Peavy. What had she seen in him?

This was one reason why the Fixeds absented themselves from society, thought Kern. To escape the labyrinthine machinations.

One of the men put a flame to the kindling, and minutes later the cordwood was aflame, filling the interior with the smell and smoke of a forest fire. "We'll have to feed the coals all night," he said, ushering Kern outside. Smoke followed them outside into the dusk.

"I'll take the first watch," offered Kern.

The man made a desultory gesture toward Paloma, coming to meet them. "It seems you've won a reprieve," said the man.

Alone once more with Paloma in the hut, Kern ate fastidiously by candlelight of baked bread and a bean and lentil soup, the woman watching him all the while. Inside the hut she smelled of the sea, as if she had recently bathed there. Near the roots, her hair was still flecked with beads of water. She did not serve herself, and Kern wondered whether he was eating food she could not spare. He might have claimed a lack of appetite, but he wanted to avoid discourtesy. He hoped the same conflict did not arise in another context—for it was now quite clear to him that Paloma meant to share the sleeping pad with him as well.

By the time Kern finished the soup, night had fallen. Until sunrise there was little that could be done except perhaps some stitchery or tidying, and Kern felt shadows of expectation descend onto his shoulders. The reasonable social options were threefold: conversation, lovemaking, and sleep, separately or in combination. And Paloma was looking at him with glowing eyes, her choice already made.

Kern put the empty bowl and mug into the basin for washing in the morning. Across the candlelight their eyes met briefly. Then Paloma crawled on all fours to the sleeping pad, knelt there, and drew the cropped jersey over her head and cast it aside. Her skin was a shade lighter where the upper garment covered her, her petite breasts attending to receive his touch. An irregular pale splotch on her left flank, just above the floating ribs, suggested that the rough skin of the shark had abraded her as it swam away with her limb. With the thought, Kern's eyes went to her prosthesis.

"It's my leg," Paloma said dejectedly. "Isn't it? It puts you off." She sighed. "Dammit . . ."

"You won't accept that it's my age?" said Kern. "After all, I'm 173 years old."

"But nothing can happen to you," protested Paloma. "I mean, they'll fix it, right?"

Kern smiled, and moved to the corner of the sleeping pad and sat down. He spoke slowly, reluctant to share his loss, but owing the woman an explanation. "The truth is, Paloma, that I lost a loved one this morning. And I'm feeling . . . a bit lost."

Her eyes, huge now, searched his. "But that's not possible! I mean . . . how is that possible? How can that be?"

Kern was trying not to think of Marjod, lying in a lake of her own blood on the floor of the cabin. How was it possible? For Marjod, it had taken more than a simple willingness to die; she had required a terrible determination in order to act at all.

"One has to have a particular mindset, a focus," Kern told her. "But yes, it can be done."

Paloma fell silent, picking at an imaginary blemish on her forearm. "How long had you . . . been together?" she asked at last.

There had only been the two of them. They had grown accustomed to one another the way one takes one's arm or a leg for granted. For so long they had been one, that even their infidelities, tiny protests against routine and monotony and unacknowledged to one another, had been shared. And now, for an instant, Kern knew a flash of anger: how could she have done that to *us*?

But entropy was the way of the universes, thought Kern. Everything winds down. The boy's beach ball lost its air and would remain forever deflated. The fire in the smokehouse, though stoked throughout the night, would die down at last. And, despite the nanogens, people and their relationships were meant to wind down as well. Death was the proper endgame of life. Entropy might take years, decades . . . even centuries, but it was inexorable. He wondered whether Marjod's suicide marked her acceptance of that. Whether she had, nanogens be damned, wound down at last.

"We'd lived together for 136 years," answered Kern.

Paloma gasped.

More than a century, thought Kern. He and Marjod had joked about their Hundredth Anniversary. Fiftieth was gold, and Sixtieth diamond, but what was the Hundredth? Finally, giggling and giddy after finishing off a bottle of rum they had found, intact and not caramelized, on a bottom shelf in a decrepit and long-abandoned convenience store, they had decided on dysprosium.

Kern smiled at the memory of that night.

"You're thinking about her, aren't you?" said Paloma. It was not an accusation.

"You're a very comely young woman, Paloma," said Kern. "But I'm a very old man."

"You look not much older than me. And no, I'm not deceived." She patted the pad beside her. "Please?"

Kern edged a little closer, just out of easy reach of her. "Paloma, I can't make you pregnant . . ."

She hushed him. "I know about the trade. The capacity for reproduction in exchange for eternal life. It's okay."

The capacity, he thought, but not the desire. The intimacy of the candlelight and the nearness of the woman were having their effects. But Marjod—

"Tonight," Kern said softly, "perhaps if I could just sleep."

Paloma fluffed a cushion for him. It smelled of and felt stuffed with fresh

grass. "I've been discourteous," she said. "Forgive me." And after Kern made himself comfortable on the sleeping pad, she curled in delicately beside him.

Daylight and Paloma brought Kern wide awake as if they were one and the same. On the edge of darkness he had been teetering, dreaming, of a woman. Marjod . . . but not Marjod. He came back from that edge with the dim sensation of having entered her. He opened his eyes, and looked up into Paloma's. Straddling his hips, leaning slightly forward, her mouth open, she was moving up and down to a purpose and a primitive rhythm hidden behind her dark, vacant eyes. Although they had scarcely just joined, already he was slick with her moisture, and, recognizing the moment, he was ready, even eager, to succumb to her movements.

But he had been a man for too long. A century and a half had passed since he would become tumescent at the merest touch of a woman. Paloma had given him no choice, had not required his consent. He grasped her hips and held her still. "What are you doing, Paloma?"

The woman closed her eyes and moaned.

Kern tried to sit up as she squirmed against him. "No, Paloma. Get off me, please."

"Please," she breathed, trying to resume her rhythms. "Make me whole again."

Kern twisted roughly, withdrawing from her, and jostled her aside. He retained the memories still of those terrible days long ago—how many Fixeds had the mobs torn apart in vain attempts to assure themselves of virtual mortality? In hope they had ingested blood, fragments, any part of the Fixeds they could swallow, so that the nanogens would incorporate themselves into their bodies.

"Dammit," Paloma whispered hoarsely.

Kern sat up at last. "It doesn't work that way, Paloma. The nanogens are typed to the DNA. Mine will only repair me."

"But you have to," she cried. "Only you can do it."

"I cannot. I don't know that I would if I could," he added, thinking again of Marjod.

Paloma screamed, and leaped back onto him, her legs vising him, her stump a club against his spine. "Fuck me! You have to make me whole again! *I want my leg back!*"

Kern unwrapped her legs and threw her off him. As she rebounded, he clipped his fist against the shelf of her jaw, knocking her unconscious.

The screaming, he quickly realized, had not stopped. Outside in the settlement, faint at first, he heard other cries. They grew louder, and the ground shook with footfalls as people ran past the hut. Quickly Kern gathered up his clothing, and dressed himself before he stepped outside.

The villagers were running away: women and children, and some of the men, though these were fleeing at a more measured pace, not in terror but in awe and horror. Kern looked past them toward the edge of the forest, and his heart stuttered.

Marjod was staggering down a slope toward the beach. From her open chest, caked with dirt and dried blood and oozing remade blood, long tendrils extended, taut as they dragged her heart along the ground fifty meters behind her. Covered with dirt and leaf fragments, it tumbled and bounced like a child's toy. Stiffly and stiff-legged she made her way to the sand, dripping blood but dead still, animated by the nanogens which had been unable to jump-start her life.

"Marjod!" Kern yelled. She could not hear him, but the nanogens reacted to the sound of his voice, and they turned her, zombie-like, toward him, arms held wide in a parody of greeting.

Kern ran to her, beyond shock now. Despite the exertion, his chest was constricted, and he fought to breathe. His feet thudded into the sand, jarring him, casting words from his mouth, a repeated question: what have we done, what have we done? He did not even hear the words at first, so focused was he on the horror waiting for him on the beach. The trail of tendrils behind her had fallen slack, and Marjod's heart was rolling and bouncing the last few meters down the slope and onto the sand. Kern gathered it up like a ball, and wound the tendrils around it as he drew near Marjod.

What have we done?

Beyond Marjod, tied to a makeshift pier, floated a rowboat. Kern chucked her heart into it, and scooped her up to deposit her in the stern. His mind was blank. He saw images of his actions, without giving thought to what he was doing. He was driven without awareness to protect his zombified mate from the nanogens, from the settlers, and from herself. She could not know, would never know, what he was doing for her. Only after Kern picked up the oars and began rowing did his mind pause to reflect.

Marjod lay sprawled athwart the stern of the rowboat, her heart having spilled into the great cavity from which she had wrenched it. The nanogens continued to hold her arms out for him, fixed in that position as if she were a mannikin. For one mad moment she reminded him of a giant Barbie doll . . . anatomically incorrect now, the operation having failed. Kern swore softly at the sacrilegious thought. She deserved better.

He looked up from the boat. They were perhaps a quarter kilometer from shore now. People had gathered there, gawking and pointing. At this distance Kern was unable to hear them, but he knew some were still screaming and crying. Mothers pulled their children to them, hiding their eyes from the monster that had descended upon them from the forest. Perhaps some of them even thought he was saving them from it.

Damn you all, he thought, still rowing ferociously, and then dismissed the curse. The waters still rose, and the settler's numbers shrank—condemning them was redundant. If they were to survive, they would have to start anew and reinvent, rather than steal what had been done before . . .

. . . from what had clearly failed, Kern thought, and stopped rowing. Here the waters of the great gulf were smooth, scarcely rocking the rowboat. Kern leaned forward to touch Marjod's forehead. Her skin felt gritty and cold, and he regretted the contact. Briefly, he closed his eyes and remembered holding her on

a lazy spring morning, their bodies entwined. He kept his eyes closed and focused on that vision as he spilled her body into the water, as he cast her heart out, trailing the remade aorta and pulmonary arteries and veins the way a comet trails sparks.

After the splash, Kern opened his eyes. Marjod was gone. He retained the sensation of her touch that morning, of her body. With those images he had cured himself of the horror she had become; he, and not the nanogens. They could repair functions—but not visions, not memories; only he could do that.

Five meters away, the water began to boil violently. Kern saw a gray dorsal fin, and another. The remanufactured blood had drawn the sharks to feed. Fervently, he hoped that digestion would overcome the restorative powers of the nanogens. And if it failed . . . then at least he would be unaware of the failure. He nodded to himself: he could die with that.

Marjod, he breathed, and dove into the water.

Littleblossom Makes a Deal with the Devil

By

S. Hutson Blount

Snow was knee-deep outside the bleached skeleton of Harbin, making Xiaoying work to get across the valley floor. Her ears burned with the cold, even under the felt flaps of her hat. Every day, she thought about the orders Comrade Lieutenant Liu had given her. "You will be unsupported in Heilongjiang Province. No one will come until the spring. Live until our troops can cross the rivers again."

From beneath the camouflage of kindling on her back came Grandma Thinkbox's quiet voice. "You should have something hot to drink, child. Do not make yourself sick."

"Yes, nainai. As soon as I check on Pig."

After Comrade Liu had been evacuated with the last of the support troops, Xiaoying had rearranged the personality of her assistant battlefield AI into something that suited her better. If she were going to spend months carrying it around, she wasn't going to listen to it drone on like a party chief. The way it talked now reminded her of her grandmother. The missiles had overlays for their small brains, too, and she'd decorated them with personalities as well. Boredom was a more immediate enemy than Japan.

Pig was still in its burrow, protected by a sheath of snow. It responded to the presence of Grandma Thinkbox and the prod of a narrow twig.

"I'm fine!" Pig's voice sounded just as she'd told it to sound, nasal and snarly. "Have you found that locust yet? No? Then don't trouble me!"

"I'll find it for you, Pig." Xiaoying pulled the tab on a ration pack and squatted in the snow while it heated.

She was the entire army of China left in this part of Dongbei. A few people still scraped out an existence in the valley, but not enough to support a village, much less the modern city Harbin had once been. Xiaoying neither pitied nor admired these diehards. She was simply glad to have them around for camouflage.

An enemy cybertank had taken up permanent residence in the area north of the city, and Xiaoying walked in its tracks. The hundred-ton weight of the mazha had compacted a hard snow road for her. Grandma Thinkbox had taught her to use the force of the enemy against it.

The cybertank was covered with graffiti from times it had parked in the city. **We are determined to liberate Dongbei**, it said in dripping characters across its tread skirts. **Imperialism is doomed to failure. The Revolutionary struggle throughout the world is bound to triumph**. Cartoons and splashes of

dried blood also decorated the mazha, but none of it obscured the original meter-high pennant marking: 031. You could say whatever you wanted to the invaders, or display whatever slogans expressed your feelings, and they didn't mind. If you *acted*, however . . .

The improvised road passed near the grove where Dog slept, buried near the wrecked remains of a tank. Dog was glad to see her.

"There was a great noise, lady!" the missile said when she woke it. "I wanted to chase it, but I remembered that you told me not to, so I slept again."

"You are a good Dog," she told it.

Her hut was cold when she returned. It wasn't much of a base: her sleeping nest of old blankets and straw, a fuel cell for collecting power from the small turbine in the stream, a few bottles for collecting water, and a salvaged plastic feed tub she used as a chamber pot. Moisture wept in from the crown of the roof, but the straw soaked it up. Xiaoying didn't notice any moldy smell yet.

She had stacked the rest of the hut with little things: Comrade Captain Peng's uniform jacket, Corporal Ma's machine pistol (Xiaoying had saved forty-seven cartridges for it, but had never found anything to shoot at), a small handheld vid terminal, and pictures cut out of old magazines or printed from images taken by Grandma Thinkbox. They were all here, the last signs of the commando cell. Except for Comrade Liu, who hadn't left her anything but orders.

The fuel cell looked nearly full, and Grandma Thinkbox sighed as it was connected to the charger. Xiaoying found the other wires leading into the hut, and plugged them in, too. The other missiles were close enough to run direct leads; Chicken, Snake, and Ox all reported in. Tiger made her wait a few extra seconds, as usual.

"Maps," she said.

Strings of green light wavered in the air above the AI's housing, forming contour lines shaping the land from Harbin to Wuzhan. Symbols lit the positions of her missiles and the last reported detections of the enemy. Xiaoying swam motionless in the glow.

"Track plot for 031."

Obediently, a trace of white looped among the miniature hills and valleys. It intensified and faded, marking in rapid time the order of several months' sightings. She could never have worked out the complex pattern for herself. Grandma Thinkbox had taken a long time to be certain that it wasn't random.

Unit 031 had been their cell's sole target. They'd expended half their missiles, all their demolitions, and almost their entire strength against it. Comrade Liu had been the last, almost flayed by the cybertank's smart-flechette guns from over the horizon.

The white line pulsed within 300 meters of Dog's buried canister. Xiaoying kept the map centered on this point for a long time.

"A guerilla fighter is patient," Grandmother Thinkbox said. "Ineffective demonstrations against a superior enemy waste materiel. Do you remember what happened to Dragon and Rat?"

Xiaoying remembered. She'd left them autonomous too long, and they'd attacked 031 simultaneously as it passed between their camouflaged canisters.

In an instant, Dragon and Rat flashed into nothing, neither of them closer than a kilometer to their target. And then she had six.

"Simulation palette," Xiaoying said. "Northeast Harbin. Run Plan Six, repeating."

The air over the AI wavered again, replaced with a much larger-scale map focused on the bombed-out industrial sectors of the city. Individual buildings were modeled, updated to show which were intact, which were usable as vehicular hides, and which were rubble. Six points of red light marked planned positions for missile launch points. Large splotches of white marked the defenses of the Japanese base and the beaten zones of their fortifications. A white line snaked out of the city, patrolling as 031 did. When it came through the area marked for her missiles, they sprouted red lines of calculated intercepts.

They didn't reach their targets, even with all six of them at point-blank range.

The simulation restarted, adding different random variables: weather, the hypothetical path of their quarry, possible movements of civilians and wildlife. Failure. The simulations kept starting over, faster and faster, showing all possible ways in which Xiaoying would not destroy 031. She watched the colored lights flicker, die, and be reborn. Failure.

"We will not have to wait much longer, Xiaoying."

The cold was forgotten. Xiaoying looked at the box wide-eyed, almost in tears. "You've heard something? Is the army returning early?" She'd lived! She'd done it! Surely, Comrade Liu would be giving her the orders to act in concert with the new offensive! And, one way or another, she would finally be out of the cold.

"No, child," said the AI. "Peacekeepers from the Pacific Alliance have landed, and Dongbei will be administered by them until Beijing is ready to do it again."

After her brief spring, Xiaoying felt the winter again. More foreigners were coming to China.

"We must dig up your friends, child. The peacekeepers will want them."

"And the mazha?" Xiaoying's teeth chattered.

"They will be disarmed. All will be well. The war will be over."

"Order of battle, Pacific Alliance." Xiaoying geared back up for the cold. Her guts clenched.

"We haven't received any details yet. The first of them will reach Harbin by morning."

"Nainai, do you remember Comrade Liu's stories about the time before the Revolution?" Xiaoying retied her boots with more force than she needed to.

Calling the AI "nainai" had been a little girl's game; the nickname stung her now, though she made herself say it just as before.

"He told you those stories, child, not me."

"Before the Revolution, China was laid low. Foreigners came from all over the world to take land because no one could stop them."

Grandmother Thinkbox said nothing, of course. It was so easy to forget that the grandmotherly speech was something that Xiaoying had crafted onto the machine. She'd done a good enough job that she'd thought of the AI as kind,

wise and old, even when she knew better.

"The Japanese might have swallowed up China entirely." Xiaoying refastened her parka. "But the People found the will to throw them out, and later, to throw out the corrupt forces that had allowed China to rot in the first place."

Xiaoying had more to say, but no time to say it. She'd pushed her luck already, giving free reign to her feelings during the outburst. No telling what the AI's stress and context analysis might have picked up.

"Where are you going, child?"

"I am going to retrieve the maintenance key." Xiaoying was relieved. It seemed the AI hadn't caught on.

Xiaoying left the AI to its deceit and collaboration with the fools in the chain of command. She trudged off to save China. It felt safer to think without the computer on her back. Grandmother Thinkbox wanted to shut the missiles down, and to do that she'd need human hands to insert a security override key. Xiaoying would get the key, all right. Maintenance mode would also let her fire the missiles manually.

At the drainpipe that had been her base before she'd discovered the abandoned hut, she kept a cache of packaged food here and an extra parka. And the maintenance key, which she fished out of the filthy, icy creek. Its waterproof case was still intact. One obstacle cleared.

She felt a rumble through the ground. As it grew audible, she knew she had to leave.

What had been a roadway was now merely a long clearing. What the war hadn't destroyed with artillery impacts and heavy vehicle traffic, the winter had completed. The concrete was churned and cratered into a surface worse than the terrain off the road. But that didn't bother the mazha.

It swept into view around a copse of willows, which shivered away their blankets of snow as the ground trembled. The cybertank was low, slab-sided and angular, a dark alloy wedge showing no visible weapons or sensors. It moved furtively, more like an animal than a machine. Though it was bigger than a house and heavy enough to shake the earth, it flitted about on its treads as if it weighed nothing.

Xiaoying remembered to walk, to seem like a peasant on her way to scrounge something to eat.

031 stopped again, facing her, a few hundred meters away. If it decided she was responsible for the attacks on itself or its base, she wouldn't have time to register anything before it killed her. She would very much like it to recognize her, she realized. She wanted it to know it had enemies. The drunkards who'd painted on it might have felt the same way. Instead, she kept walking, observing as much as she could out of the corner of her eye. She knew the bottled hell it could release; at least she'd seen its effects afterward. Long range hypersonic missiles, swarmbots, the horrible smart-flechette guns, and the interceptor missiles and lasers it had used to kill Rat and Dragon. It was difficult to reconcile that with the featureless lump humming to itself in the snow. More terrifying than any weapon was the implacable intelligence beneath.

Xiaoying knew it wasn't really sentient. She knew that it was an AI just like

Grandmother Thinkbox. What she knew didn't change the dread she felt. *Gwailo* wasn't just a superstitious cliché here; 031 was really a foreign devil. Worse, it was a devil she lacked the strength to banish. The only things in Dongbei strong enough to make it leave were the other *gwailo* streaming in from the coast. They were, regrettably, her only option.

Her task would be much easier if the machine could understand Mandarin. She knew it could *read* well enough, as the *mazha* would occasionally examine road signs and such. Occupation directives had been broadcast in accentless synthetic speech, in both Japanese and Mandarin, but they were simply recordings.

She forced herself to raise her hand and wave.

"I have the key." Xiaoying burst into the hut accompanied by a flurry of snow.

"I am ready to proceed," said Grandmother Thinkbox. "Insert the maintenance key."

The key, an irregular block of translucent plastic with a tiny transceiver embedded inside, remained in Xiaoying's pocket as she bundled up the AI in her pack once again. She did not bother with much in the way of camouflage.

"Stand by." Xiaoying lifted the machine onto her back. *Say hello to all the traitors in hell*, she didn't add. Instead, she said, "We're going to contact each missile by direct link. Less risk of detection that way."

She had to tell the device to stand by four more times during the hike. The AI had its own positioning device, and knew it wasn't being taken around to the missiles.

031 had returned to the clearing where'd she'd seen it before. It waited silently.

Xiaoying set her pack down just out of line of sight of the massive cybertank. She loosened enough straps to allow access to Grandmother Thinkbox's security port and inserted the maintenance key. It whirred into place.

"Place search, acquisition, and fire-control systems in maintenance mode," Xiaoying said. "Execute."

"Completed," the machine responded, its mechanical voice muted to tactical levels. "Child, there are several enemy traces close by. This is not a safe place to do this." It had lapsed away from the terse language of orders; it was using every folksy bit of grandmotherliness Xiaoying had crafted into it.

"No," she said. "It's not safe. No more talking. Stand by."

Xiaoying thought it might know what was coming. Its electronic suffering was gratifying, but she had to act quickly.

She carried the pack before her as she walked into the clearing. The tank seemed oblivious to her presence, but Xiaoying knew better than to believe that. 031 could have detected and killed her kilometers ago; it waited instead.

"Stop," said the *mazha*'s amplified synthetic voice as she reached the middle of the clearing. Xiaoying stopped. A small motion from beneath the machine's treads caught her attention. A small machine, smaller than a cat, flailed through the packed snow with devices that were not quite wheels or legs.

The swarmbot had to work hard to cover the difficult meters between them. Xiaoying placed her pack on the snow and waited. At length, the 'bot stopped an arm's length from her.

"Identify yourself," it said in a tiny version of its master's voice. Xiaoying couldn't say if it was exactly a male or female voice they'd sampled to create it. Maybe it had no natural source at all. It had been both a relief and an affront to hear the tank's Mandarin.

"I am Long Laoshu," she said. "I've brought the insurgent device."

There was a pause. "Thank you, Miss Rat Dragon. Your cooperation with the New Enterprise Zone Security Forces will be recorded and rewarded." The swarmbot looked at her with eyes she couldn't see, photocascade nets built indistinguishably into its tough plastic case.

"I'll take my reward now." Her speech slurred more than she meant it to. She needed to get warm. "Where are the peacekeepers?"

The 'bot sat unmoving for a few more seconds, a lot longer than Xiaoying figured that 031 would need to think about things. "Vanguard elements of the Pacific Eight-Power Alliance peacekeeping forces have reached the crossroads of State Highway Five and the Taixu Ring Road. Is this information truly the only reward you desire, Miss Rat Dragon? I can authorize extra disbursement of ration relief packages, or an amount of—"

"No, that's fine," she said.

"Please leave the area while the insurgent device is neutralized."

Xiaoying didn't waste any time getting out of the way.

The satchel with Grandma Thinkbox in it sat alone on the snowy field as she withdrew; the swarmbot was leaving as fast as it could thrash along the other way. Though it might have looked suspicious, Xiaoying kept looking over her shoulder at the fate of her former AI comrade. She started a little when she heard the cybertank begin to move. It looked like 031 wasn't willing to use up any munitions on Grandmother Thinkbox. The machine glided forward, packing snow under its treads with a soft crunch that belied the threat of its hundred-ton mass. Xiaoying gave up any pretense of not watching. She figured anyone would do the same.

Just before the oncoming graffiti-covered bulk of the tank swept over the pack, flattening the tough bulletproof plastic of Grandmother Thinkbox's case as if it were paper, a small object popped out of the pack. She was too far away to see details, but with a sick pit of certainty in her gut, Xiaoying knew what it was. Grandmother Thinkbox had ejected the maintenance key before being crushed.

031 pivoted on one tread and withdrew toward the ruins of Harbin with a receding tremble of the earth. It left behind a smear of plastic debris—the wreckage of both the AI, and of her plan. Since Grandma Thinkbox had closed out the missile maintenance cycle, she no longer held a trigger to fire the missiles. They'd reject her commands until provided with the proper codes. Beijing wouldn't send her any more. Beijing was too busy selling her home to foreigners.

Xiaoying realized she had fallen to her knees when the damp chill finally ate through her trousers. Forcing herself to rise, she set out at a determined pace

for the hut. She hadn't time to feel sorry for herself! She had to save China!

Inside, the hut seemed strangely larger without Grandma Thinkbox. Xiaoying waved away the distracting thought. The machine had gotten what it deserved. She forced her numb fingers to fish out the wires hidden under the layers of plastic tarpaulin and straw on the floor. Her hands didn't want to cooperate. She'd been outside too long; Grandma Thinkbox would have scolded her.

The little vid terminal was a civilian model with only a single port, so she could only plug in one missile at a time.

"Snake?" she said into the little terminal. "Snake, do you hear me?"

"I hear many things, Mistress. Unsettling things."

"Snake, I need you to help me. I need you to enter maintenance mode."

"I await the proper offering." Its tinny voice carried the dry sibilance she'd made for Snake so long ago.

"There won't be any interlock codes," Xiaoying said. "There won't be any ever again. Grandmother Thinkbox has . . . has been lost to the enemy."

"Even the Mistress must make the proper offering."

Xiaoying wanted to curse her own handiwork, but now her only hope was that the many extra layers she'd crafted into the missiles' brains would give her the opening she needed.

"The codes are to prevent you from being used by the enemy, Snake. I am not the enemy. The enemy profits by our inaction. I need your help," she added with more emotion than she'd meant to.

"I require an offering."

But not "the proper offering," though, Xiaoying noticed. She was afraid to say the wrong thing. She was afraid to wait too long. She was afraid.

"Challenge my identity," Xiaoying said.

"What place did I finish in the race?"

Xiaoying smiled until she felt her windburned skin crack. "Sixth. Just ahead of Horse."

"You are my Mistress," it said.

Xiaoying tapped in instructions as fast as she could with the terminal's little keypad.

"Mistress is planning a surprise," said Snake afterward. "I do so love surprises."

"I know, Snake. Now be ready. And thank you."

Xiaoying switched one wire for another, breathing on her hands to keep them working.

"Ox, do you hear me?"

It was getting dark. Xiaoying knew she shouldn't be out again with no food or rest, even without considering she was now in violation of the mazha's curfew. She hadn't convinced Pig. Pig wanted to throw itself at 031. In the end, he sulked and relocked himself in autonomous mode.

She found the wrecked tank where Dog and its wire lead were buried in

the snow.

"Dog, do you hear me?"

"Lady! All has been quiet here!"

"We are finally ready to move, but there is a problem. Grandma Thinkbox has been destroyed. I need you to fire on manual command, and to do that I need you to confirm my identity to enter maintenance mode." She had refined the spiel after five tries.

"You are the Lady! No one comes to see Dog but the Lady!"

Xiaoying blinked a few times, not expecting it to be that easy. She tapped in Dog's firing orders.

"We are not to attack the enemy, Lady?"

"No, Dog. You're going to get someone else to do that."

"I am glad to help! We can do it!"

Xiaoying really didn't want to cry. She didn't want ice on her face. "Yes, we will. You are a good Dog."

Snow began to shake from the barren trees.

A mazha was coming. By the tremor, she could tell it was 031 or one of its broodmates. She was still alive, so it hadn't detected her and decided she was a threat. It might change its mind in—she looked at her watch—ninety-three seconds, but Xiaoying had nowhere to run. She ripped the wire from her terminal and huddled in the carcass of the dead tank.

If the mazha came close enough, the cold metal of the wreck would not shield her body heat from its sensors. She waited and calculated and wished Grandma Thinkbox hadn't belonged to the traitors in Beijing who wanted to let foreigners partition her home. She lost track of the count, which made her jump when Dog obeyed its order.

Dog was about as long as Xiaoying was tall, a featureless thick-walled tube that blasted out of the ground in an eruption of snow and dirt. She had only a blurred glimpse of her friend before the metal-hydride ramjet lit, taking over from the launch booster and accelerating Dog out of sight to the southeast. She could see flashes over the hill her hut. That should be Ox, Snake, Tiger, and Chicken launching on schedule. If things were going as planned, they'd arc from their canisters to the line she'd programmed, a line that ran straight from the Japanese base to the reported position of the Pacific Alliance troops.

The missiles were too small, and their smokeless and nearly flameless engines didn't reveal them to her sight. The nearby cybertank saw them and popped out smaller, even faster missiles that shrieked after them. Xiaoying was pretty certain they wouldn't matter. The mazha would have aimed to make intercepts to protect itself, not to catch missiles that were even now turning for the coast and running away at Mach 6.

Ox would be the first to sacrifice itself, popping up into a ballistic arc and searching the ground ahead of his ground-hugging brothers. If (no, when) it was shot down, Tiger would pop up into the lead next. Xiaoying didn't expect any of them to actually reach a target, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that when the peacekeepers tracked them back, they'd appear to have been fired by the Japanese. By the time anyone would have leisure to examine the wreckage,

it wouldn't matter who'd fired first.

She heard another launch, down the valley from where she'd just hiked. Pig had changed its mind, after all. In another heartbeat, more missiles. Not interceptors this time. She peered upward. Faint licks of exhaust flitted by, chasing after her friends. The cybertank had launched a wave of long-range missiles at the Pacific Alliance forces, too. It knew there was going to be a counterstrike, and decided it was in the fight whether it planned to be or not. Xiaoying admired the enemy for its decisive and resolute nature. She hoped it would die in fire.

The icy metal of the wreck she leaned against had numbed her entire body. Xiaoying was too tired to get up. She didn't want to be asleep when the Alliance missiles arrived; she'd hoped to see it. There was a real danger that the Pacific Alliance would decide the hulk she hid beneath was a target worth expending a few submunitions on. Yet, sleep was sounding like a better option. She'd done everything she could to save China. The gwailo would at least be fighting amongst themselves now.

She didn't know if she'd see the sunrise again, but at least she no longer felt the cold.

The Quantiversal Coefficient of Fate

By

Jason K. Chapman

Yahneesh followed the hooting and thrashing of the lizard creatures to a small clearing. Three of them were gathered around the base of one of the large, knotty trees that reminded her of the oaks of her home world. She rubbed her horse's neck and whispered for him to be quiet as, still mounted, she watched from cover. Her caution was wasted. The hunting party made a tremendous amount of noise. The creatures waved their flint knives at the thick canopy above them, bellowing challenges in the tones of conch shell horns. She hadn't seen them behave that way over the tiny, screeching primates that flitted defiantly through the high branches. Their prey was something else—something not from their world—or hers. She raised her rifle and three quick shots dropped them into a pile.

"Come, Kedah," she said, urging her horse forward with gentle pressure from her knees. Kedah trusted her. He strode into the clearing, leaving the task of wary defense to her. Yaneesh's mother would be proud of her, behaving so much in the Kah Leshee, "The Way of the People." She spat what saliva she could muster onto the ground. *Chingalo!* Her mother would never be proud of her. Never had been.

As a child, Yaneesh had shown herself to be both bright and fearless. She consumed her academics the way a wildfire swept through a dry plain, rushing years ahead of the other children. There was no timidity in her will. No uncertainty in her declarations. What she knew, she defended with vehemence. What she didn't, she assaulted without mercy.

By the age of eight, she had already begun tackling differential equations. That was the year she had refused to partake in one of her mother's favorite ceremonies. She declared, instead, that ancestor spirits were a mathematical improbability. Clearly the rate of increase, based on population expansion, would quickly outstrip whatever medium sustained them.

"Faith sustains them," her mother had said.

But Yaneesh calculated that each succeeding generation would have to provide more and more faith to keep the rapidly accumulating crowds of ancestors. It would go on and on until the entire life of every person was devoted to nothing but believing. And still it could not be enough.

"Why," the young Yaneesh asked without guile, "can't they have enough faith in themselves to survive? Then they wouldn't need us."

Unshaken, her mother smiled. "It is we who need them."

"It doesn't sound that way to me," said Yaneesh.

Now, almost thirty years later, that argument was still going on. For the most part, there was no heat in it. It had burned itself out, becoming a ritual, as formal and rigid as any in her mother's traditions. The exchanges were inevitable, inescapable, predictable. They had the weight of destiny, something Yaneesh had come to understand.

A round, white face peered down at her from a break in the tree's lush cap. It was Juarez again. She had known it would be. The universe—all universes—operated with mathematical precision.

She called to him, urging him down before more hunters appeared.

"Huh? What is that?" he shouted. "Portuguese? Spanish? I'm sorry. I don't understand."

English! Each iteration of Dr. Juarez grew stranger. Fortunately, she spoke English fluently. She'd become fascinated by its muddy tones and unsubtle pronunciation during a cultural studies seminar and gone on to take several classes in it. It was an odd course of study for a mathematician, but she'd found it interesting. With a language so poorly suited to delicate thought, how could the English help but be the way the were? The fact that she knew the language, here and now, proved it: She knew the nature of Destiny.

"Come down," she said in English. "We must go."

He jumped down, landing without grace. "Thank you," he said. He hurried toward her.

"Stop!" she said. "Discard your weapons."

"*Weapons!* No," he said, hands fluttering, "I don't—I'm a scientist. Why would I—? Oh, wait. This!"

He moved like a crow, nervous, quick. He pulled a long knife from its sheath and held it aloft. The blade threw off angry glints in the clearing's dappled light.

"It's not a weapon, really." He spoke with a coward's cadence, testing her English skills to keep pace. "Well, I guess it could be. But not for me. I mean I wouldn't. Nice, though, isn't it? I found a sporting goods store, at least I think it was. It was kind of like New York, but everyone spoke Dutch or German or something. Anyway, the counter backed right up to the next fragment, so—."

"Drop it, Dr. Juarez," said Yaneesh as she gave her rifle a subtle twitch.

The babbling stopped. The knife slipped from his fingers. "Waring," he said.

It meant nothing to Yaneesh.

"Come, Dr. Juarez," she said. "We must go."

He stepped toward her and stopped, hands at his sides. "It's Dr. Waring," he said. "Waring, like the blender. Kind of appropriate, if you think about it."

She eyed a non-existent motion in the brush about twenty meters away. "There are more of them," she said.

That propelled him to Kedah's side in a single rabbit-like hop. Yaneesh had to help him up behind her. He was clumsy and nearly pulled them both to the ground. Kedah twitched his irritation at the man's presence, but when Yaneesh pressed with her left knee, the horse turned obediently. The animal lived his name. Translated into Spanish, it meant "Faithful Stone." He was sturdy, steady, steadfast. Not bad for a rental. At Yaneesh's urging, Kedah quickened his pace.

The new Juarez, who called himself "Waring Like the Blender," clutched at her, terrified of falling from Kedah's broad back.

"Velociraptor," he said over Yaneesh's shoulder. "That's what we call them. They died out something like sixty million years ago. Didn't have tools, though. And I think their arms were shorter. That's Darwin for you. How did they evolve this far? How did you? Do you hunt them? I'd love to talk to your—elders? Chiefs? Medicine men? I don't know. You *seem* like Native American, but who knows?"

"You talk too much. And too fast." A chorus of lizard creatures hooted not far behind them. "And too loudly," she said.

The man drew a sudden, sharp breath. She wasn't sure if he ever let it out, because he was silent all the way to the barrier.

She stopped Kedah a few meters from the formless, watery wall that was the plane of intersection between two fragments of universes. She always hesitated before crossing. It resembled the wavering illusion of rising hot air, but light seemed to twist prismatically through it. It was surfaceless. Textureless. It sliced through the woods as wide and as high as she could see, and though it looked like the woods continued on the other side, they didn't. Not for her. And not for Kedah or Juarez, either. They were all fractured, just like their respective universes. Just like the entire Quantiverse. Everything was broken. For all she knew, every possible universe now contained a fragment where the boundary between realities broke down.

Waring-Like-the-Blender moved behind her, and she could feel that he was preparing to cast himself down another torrent of words.

"No," she said, damming the stream before it could start. "I'm not native whatever-you-said. Yes, I know this is the intersection between fragments of the Quantiverse. And, yes, I come from the fragment on the other side. At least I hope I do. I'm never really certain that it always works the same in both directions."

"You know about the Quantiverse?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "*You* told me," she said.

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. She had deprived him of an excuse to talk. Then, "I told you?"

"A *possible* you," she said. "One with better manners."

She called to Kedah and nudged his sides. Without hesitation, the horse leapt forward into the barrier.

Back in her universe, amid the cool green hills that rose and fell like a sleeping mother's breast, she settled them in her camp, half a kilometer from the eastern barrier. Granted she lacked the data to call herself an expert on all of the Quantiversal possibilities of the phenomenon she knew as Dr. Juarez/Waring-Like-the-Blender, but she knew enough to declare this particular iteration "strange." Their worlds appeared to be nearly identical, geographically, but very different historically. They were so different, in fact, that she thought he might be lying, trying to build himself up in her eyes. His description of a large, fish-shaped island on the northeastern coast could only be Manhassa, the Lentème ancestral home, but in his world, the Nederlanders had massacred most of her ancestors. Then the English took the land away, killed more of the Lentème, fought and defeated the Spanish, and dominated the world. She tried, but

she just couldn't imagine the backward, ignorant, uncultured English dominating anything. The idea was preposterous.

"The Spanish and, what, the Mohegans?" he said. "The whole continent?" He looked around at the hills, the distant woods to the south, the sky. She could see there was no appreciation in his eyes and no reverence in his heart. It was all just sticks and dirt and plants. His mouth pinched in that disdainful way that seemed to come so easily to the English face. She knew that expression. She'd seen it reflected in her mother's scorn.

"That explains it," he said. "In my world there's a great city here called Philadelphia. Large buildings, streets, people of knowledge."

She sighed heavily, using the act to keep herself from telling him just how many different types of animal dung she would prefer to his opinion. She buried her disgust in a pile of manners. "I apologize for not being clear. This place is Wikweko. You might call it a park. Or a temple. Either is true," she said. "It is set aside as a place where the Lentême, my people, the 'People of the Wolf,' can come to hunt and meditate and return, for a time, to the simple ways of our ancestors."

"Of course," the man said.

"Dr. Blender, I hold advanced degrees in mathematics and biolytic computing. My people have over three hundred thousand residents on Luna," she said between clenched teeth. She reached into her pack and pulled out her compad, turning it on. "This is linked by orbitals to the world data fabric. I can communicate with pictures or sound to anywhere on the planet. Now, unless your English world has made these things seem like children's toys, I would appreciate it if you would try to control your condescending tone."

He stared at her, his expression blank. Her ungenerous side would call it stupid. He took the compad from her, poked at the screen, then hefted it, testing its weight. It was an older model and she was afraid he was about to tell her it was unbearably heavy, or how his people plucked data from floating clouds of knowledge that followed them around like swarms of swamp flies, but he handed it back to her, handling it gently. She seemed to have found something he *did* revere.

"It's so light," he whispered. "You said 'biolytic'?"

"Of course," she said. "Coherent light manipulating protein data strings. What else?"

"I'm an idiot."

She smiled. "The Lentême hold that, unless insult is offered, one should never disagree with a guest."

"Waring," it turned out, was also the name of a manufacturer of kitchen machines in his world. His name was just "Waring." He had traveled from his version of Nueva Madrid where he conducted research at a surprisingly Spanish-sounding place called Columbia. As with the others, his research had been in quantum physics. He described his journey in alternating tones of horror and fascination. The histories of the world were varied. Many appeared not to include mankind, while others would have been better off without it. He described one version of Nueva Madrid, New York, to him, that was covered with a glass and steel dome and inhabited by dark, twisted, diseased creatures

that were barely human anymore. Another was little more than blasted rubble and weathering skeletons.

Much of what he said about the fracturing of the Quantiverse matched with the model she had developed over the months since the disaster and with the things the other Juarezes had said. Only those bits of matter, living or not, that were near a fracture line at the time of the catastrophe could pass through, or even see, the great, shimmering planes of intersection. Everything else just continued on in its own reality, blissfully unaware that anything was amiss. In places where the fracture appeared in populated areas, panic took over. People in high rises found that their bedroom doors suddenly opened on sixty-meter drops onto undeveloped land. Strange creatures appeared as if from nowhere. Waring had found one poor man out of his mind, cowering in the middle of a two-meter patch of marble. He could see his home, could see his world all around him, but he couldn't touch it. Every direction led to another world.

In her own world, the fracture occurred here in Wikweko, in the middle of hundreds of square kilometers of uninhabited lands. The Lentême had created many such reservations. It was traditional for her people to take solitary trips there, where they would live as an integral part of nature for a week or a month or more. They saw it as a way to honor their beliefs and satisfy their ancestors. Yaneesh saw it as a way to reconcile their tribal, animist past with their technological present. Neither, in her opinion, made much sense.

There was irony in the fact that this trip had been Yaneesh's first. For thirty years, she had resisted. The university at Nuevo Madrid was her world. Wikweko was her mother's. It had been the death of Yaneesh's beloved grandmother, the one who had accepted her, the one who had allowed her to be who she was, the one who had understood the need that burned in her, the one who had died so needlessly, that had driven her to her first retreat. She had come in desperation, looking for anything that might make the Lentême beliefs worth dying for. When the disaster struck, she had been alone, dreaming atop a hill, just meters from where one of the fractures formed.

Faith and Fate, the two things that gave Yaneesh's mother such rigid form, had taken away her grandmother. A defect in her heart had caused a valve to fail, even after four different surgeries to keep it working. For three years, Faith had worn her down, hammered her with agony, stolen her strength.

Grandmother had believed. She'd had faith. And faith killed her.

The Lentême believe that the soul resides in the heart. Somewhere in those crushing, muscular chambers, tossed by heaving fluid, resides a tiny, helpless atom of "selfness" that is supposed to be the soul. A heart replacement, especially one of the readily-available artificial hearts, had been out of the question.

"It was her destiny, Little One," her mother had said. "Her fate."

They stood on the Salto de la Fe Bridge that stretched from Nueva Madrid to the Outer Island, just a few minutes' stunned walk from the hospital. To Yaneesh, the death was barely real. The wind still carried her grandmother's scent, the hills had yet to send the last echo of her voice.

"She didn't have to die," Yaneesh hissed.

"Of course she did," her mother said. "All things die."

Yaneesh turned so quickly that her mother flinched, sucking breath. "But they

fight!" she said. "Teeth! Claws! They fight it. They don't just give up because they're told to by some stupid set of rules only an idiot would believe!"

It was a tiny sound, lost quickly to the traffic behind them and to the currents below, but the slap of her mother's palm across Yaneesh's cheek thundered all the way back to her earliest memory. Its echo rolled forward with her still.

Everyone Yaneesh knew thought she had lost her sanity, and she was no longer certain they were wrong. She could talk to them by compad, but she couldn't explain what had happened. As far as she could tell, she alone, of her world's billions of people, knew about the fracture. To the rest, such a thing was clearly impossible. And why not? Physics forbade it. Only her comforting, accepting mathematics allowed for its possibility.

Her mother insisted Yaneesh was just being spiteful, punishing her.

"You hate me!" her mother said, the accusation thundering through the compad's tiny speaker. "I told you too much science worship would lead you astray. All I ever did was try to make you stay balanced, to observe our ways properly, but you knew better. Your science. Your math. You always knew better, didn't you? And look where it has led. You hate the very one who passed on the gift of life to you!"

"I don't hate you, Mother."

"Then come home."

"I can't."

"You see? You hate me."

And so it went, over and over, until Yaneesh simply broke the connection in frustration. Now, she mostly just dashed off brief, passionless messages. "I'm fine. The universe is fine. Be home soon." She'd taken to leaving the compad on "Busy."

Yaneesh gave Waring a plate of the raw vegetables she'd gathered that morning and strips of dried venison. He winced every time he bit into the dry, bitter root, but showed the surprising grace to cover it. She wondered just how many times he could scratch the same itch on his cheek or wipe the same imaginary sweat from his forehead without confessing his obvious distaste for the food. He held his composure and chewed on.

"The fragments," she said, beginning her now-familiar ritual, "were much smaller at the start of your journey. Just centimeters at times? I suppose that is why you decided to travel."

He coughed, perhaps to cover another wince. Perhaps not. "Yes," he said.

"Like an earthquake," said Yaneesh. She was casual, carefully disinterested. "You were maybe near the actual event."

"Maybe," he said. At first he had endangered their lives with his babbling. Now it seemed she could not draw more than a word from him without a team of horses. He put his food down and stared at it, as if the dried meat had suddenly reanimated.

She watched him for a while, waiting. She reached out casually to draw her pack nearer, using it to slide her rifle, as if by accident, within reach. She waited.

"It was nothing," Waring said. "I was just trying to do a bank shot off a cushion in another universe, that's all. I thought if we could squeeze photons out of our universe and then back in, we could communicate faster than light. You know, change frames of reference. It had nothing to do with any of this!"

"Of course not," Yaneesh said. "And where are you going now?"

He looked up, alert. "I thought I was coming here—Philadelphia. They have a lab. But now...."

"Now?"

"I don't know. Atlanta, maybe. A university there was doing some work on quantum entanglement," he said. Then his eyes narrowed and his mood grew suspicious.

She let her hand rest on the ground, inches from the butt of her rifle.

"This is a test," Waring said, "isn't it?" He looked pointedly at her rifle, at her hand, at the cold, emotionless expression she wore.

"What could I be testing, Dr. Waring?"

"I can't imagine," he said. He tensed as if he were ready to run, but he was sitting cross-legged. He would not stand a chance.

"Perhaps," Yaneesh said, "you simply have a poor imagination."

"Why? Why would you save me?" he asked. "If you were just going to kill me anyway, why not just leave me for the raptors? Why this?"

"Do you believe in Fate, Dr. Waring?"

"It's a fairy tale," Waring said, slowly straightening his legs. "It's spiritual hokum designed to comfort those who can't deal with uncertainty."

Yaneesh smiled. Waring was readying himself to run.

"So quickly you disparage the beliefs of others," she said.

"You? You're a mathematician. A scientist."

"Isn't quantum physics rife with uncertainty? Wasn't the Quantiverse shattered by it? It seems to me that uncertainty is all we have left."

Kedah noticed the stranger first and chuffed a soft warning. Waring glanced at Yaneesh before focusing on the still-distant form. It was a hazy figure, distinction lost to distance and noon's warm haze.

"Friend of yours?" Waring asked.

Yaneesh picked up her rifle and laid it casually across her lap before answering. "Not a friend," she said, "but a constant companion."

She activated the cameras she had placed around the perimeter of her camp. A moment's fiddling found and zoomed the image on her compad. She smiled as she handed the device to Waring.

"I think you know him," she said. "His name is Fate."

Waring stared at the screen, glancing up a few times as if to assure himself that the display truly showed the approaching stranger. Yaneesh knew he was staring at the man's features, looking for differences, trying to blot out the frightening similarities.

"He is you," Yaneesh said. "Or a possible you."

"Like Juarez," Waring said.

"Like the many Juarezes. And the Wares. And the Varens."

Waring looked at her, eyes wide. He showed signs of panic, hints of understanding.

"You're number two-hundred thirty-seven," Yaneesh went on. "You're not even the most interesting one. Let me tell you what I've learned. First, you caused it. Maybe not individually, but cumulatively. The many yous and your many experiments, all

tapping on the barriers between universes, came together in some enormous wave of probability that the Quantiverse simply couldn't withstand. It shattered. Then, each in your own way, for your own reasons, came here."

"I'm trying to fix it!"

"How? You don't even know how to start!"

Waring's eyes seemed to light up. He dared to hope. "But don't you think someone does?" he said. "Someone out there. In a fragment where they're more advanced."

"Then why," Yaneesh asked, "would they need you?"

Waring's whole body sagged. He had to know she was right.

Yaneesh drew a deep breath, judging the time she had before the new one arrived.

"You say you don't believe in Fate, Dr. Waring, but that's because you still think of it as some kind of mystical spirit-thing. It's not. I've had a lot of time to work on this, you see. A lot of time *alone*. There's nothing mystical about it. It's just a simple calculation."

Waring skittered backward, but stopped when she eased the rifle's barrel toward him.

"It's a probability curve, Dr. Waring, the aggregate of one's possible actions across the Quantiverse. It's the place where divergent realities converge. *You* came here, because *they* came here. It was your destiny."

At last Yaneesh raised her rifle, aiming it firmly, certainly, at Waring's chest. He raised one hand, feebly trying to deflect the bullet he knew was coming.

"Please," Waring said. "Please."

"I have no choice," Yaneesh said, wrapping her finger around the trigger's smooth, metallic comfort. "I'm the first derivative. I'm the point value your function approaches."

"I don't understand!"

"Calculate it, Dr. Waring. What else can destiny resolve to? What other result can there be when it solves to a single point in a single universe?"

Tears streamed down Waring's cheeks. His hands came together, begging, maybe praying.

"I am justice, Dr. Waring," she said. Then she gently squeezed the trigger.

The stranger's steps faltered at the sound of the rifle. Yaneesh glanced at the screen, checking his progress. Then she dragged Waring's body behind the shack. It was good that the stranger had grown cautious. It gave her more time to prepare. They were coming faster now. Her job would grow more difficult. At this rate she would run out of ammunition in a matter of days.

She sat down in the same place where she had faced Waring, then loosened her hunting knife in its sheath. An inch of bright blade showed. She didn't need the ammunition. Nothing in the formula said that justice had to be swift, just inevitable.

A Queen for a King

By
Lyle Skains

She flitted among the trees like a dragonfly. Her dress glittered, alternately sheer and opaque in the piebald light rippling over the forest floor. She laughed, and he heard bells.

He didn't stop to wonder what she would be doing in delicate skirts in the middle of Newborough Forest. He *should* stop, of course. His father's voice vibrated in his head, a lifetime of pious warnings jumbling around his skull. But he followed her anyway. He was eager to see her clearly, the freckles on her nose, whether her teeth were crooked, whether her eyes were blue or green.

She peeked from behind a tree, waving him forward. Mist shimmered in the evening air. The beach must be near, down the trail and over a sand dune. Fog cloaked the clearing, the trees on the other side barely visible.

She danced in the middle of the clearing, the mist a soft-focus filter, like a storybook enchanter beckoning him into her world.

Temptress, his father's voice whispered. *Do not follow where she leads.*

He could not hear the music, but it vibrated in his bones. The tune was lilting, pipes playing in a Shakespeare fantasy. He tapped his hiking boot in time.

The song changed, as though the unseen DJ segued the beat from strip club teaser to money-maker. The bass notes his ears could not discern rumbled up his legs, pounding in his gut. Sly tones massaged his ribs, shimmied over his nipples.

The girl's body swayed, bumped, pumped, and shook. The wispy skirt rode up over her thighs, the gauzy blouse rubbed tautly over her chest.

She stretched out an arm, asking him to dance.

Evil. Death. Hell. Damnation. His father never let a day pass without linking these ideas to Newborough Forest. As a boy, he'd watched fearfully from their farmhouse as tourists, campers, and dog walkers boldly came and went.

No one ever screamed, however. No one ever disappeared, or staggered out, their limbs reduced to bloody stumps.

This is not evil, he thought. *This is a girl. This is music and dance and maybe a little fun, but nothing here is evil. Surely.*

Perhaps she would catch him in a dancing spell for a year and a day, leave him jiggling happily with no memories. That was the worst his hidden library books had ever told him about the forest.

So today, on his eighteenth birthday, he stepped forward. Jutting his chin, he

walked into the clearing.

The music hit him first. No longer just a humming in his skeleton, it thrust into him. It lifted his feet, flailed his arms. The rhythm, hard and savage, reached deep into his loins, tugging them. He danced.

The clearing faded away, the trees retreating, the fog dissipating. The sky blackened, lit by occasional lightning pulsing in time with the beat. In the flashes he saw a structure over him, a ceiling as high as treetops, vines and brush hanging down. Stone walls surrounded him, overgrown, pumping like heart chambers in the music and the light. It was like someone had set up a nightclub in a decaying cathedral.

The prudent side of him stopped his feet. He stood, still and staring, as the thumping played on.

Turning, he sought the girl. She was gone, nowhere in the hall, no sign of her pale skirt or milky skin. But he was not alone. All around him men danced, their limbs jerking like string puppets, slaves to the beat. Perhaps hell was a grinding dance club with no women.

He pushed through the flailing men to the edge of the dance floor. Not one noticed his presence.

His shoes ground through a fine, filmy dust coating the floor. Taking in the dazed, joyous faces, he wondered what drug they were on. He must be on it, too - the girl must have slipped him something.

In the forest? a voice in his head asked. *How did you get here, then?*

He was certain the police would burst on the scene at any moment, breaking up the drug-riddled party. Father would implode.

He felt along the wall in the darkness, his eyes unable to adjust, and strained to remember where he could have been poisoned.

He remembered walking the lane to the forest, stepping over the speed bumps. The signposts indicated in crude spray-paint they were actually "Fairy Tunnels," their Tinkerbell silhouettes far from the demonic images Father described. He remembered finding a trail, taking a sip of water, and setting off.

Then she had appeared. The wood was a popular place, and he hadn't expected to be alone. But she was so strange, with her bare feet and her skimpy clothing, and so beautiful, her smile and her laugh seeping through him like honey.

He tried to pick out when she had drugged him. A drink? A prick of a needle? An inhalant?

But he couldn't place it. He'd been there, and now he was here, and his mind found no stopover in between.

His hands hit air. A break in the wall. He hurried through it, casting the heaving dancers behind, and the music immediately released him.

He was on a path, dirt packed, narrow and crowded with undergrowth. It could have been the trail he'd hiked in Newborough, save the hulking piles of stones rising among the trees. They were built around the trees, through them, the forest forming a crude frame for the hidden structures. Most were without roofs, open to the glittering night sky, carpeted with forest litter, decorated with vines.

Movement. His eyes widened. It was like coming through that curtain of fog in the clearing all over again. The structures that had seemed like ruins were teeming with life. Beautiful women, each wearing less than the last, jumped and skipped on, over, and

around the buildings.

No, not jumping. Flying. The girl in the forest had had no wings he could see, but every one of these had a set of sheer wings on her back like a costume in a Vegas sideshow.

The ground between the buildings was occupied as well, as men walked along the paths. They had no wings, and they were fully clothed, but the pureness of their skin was the same, the shine of their eyes no less captivating.

He moved closer, and that's when she dropped out of the sky.

"Oi! You've made it out, then?" She didn't land, hovering in front of him. He couldn't be sure, but she looked like the same girl who had lured him in the forest.

He glanced back toward the club, where the lights licked out of the open doorway. "What did you do to me?"

"I knew you was the one." She laughed and moved to clasp his elbow under her arm. "You'd best come with me."

"I don't think I will," he began, but she'd already lifted him from the ground.

Flying wasn't as fun as it appears in the movies. He'd always wondered how Superman could keep Lois Lane afloat with just a fingertip of contact. Peter Pan's charges had pixie dust to lift them. This girl just flew, dragging him along with her.

By the time they landed in a dark, empty alley, he thought his arm might fall off. She dropped him, and he rubbed his shoulder, hoping his arm would eventually shrink back to normal length.

"What is this? What drug did you give me?"

"*Shhh!*" She clapped a hand over his mouth. "There's folks being private 'round here. Come on."

She tugged him out of the passage, and he stumbled after her, his pupils still not enlarged enough to pierce the darkness. He heard a moan, a shriek of what was probably laughter, and an organic slapping. Puzzled, he peered into the building as the fairy dragged him past. Through a crumbling, barely cloaked doorway he glimpsed an expanse of flesh, open mouths, eager orifices, groping limbs, and mindless need. He turned his gaze ahead, mentally compiling his list for confession, while another more practical part of his brain filed the images away for future use.

"I'm Seren, by the way." She rubbed his arm, his sleeve muffling her touch. "First time I ever seen one o' you come out of the Factory. What's your name, then?"

"Mabon. Where am I?" The dirt-packed streets were brightening as the moon rose over the wall. He suddenly regretted asking the question.

"You're in Niwbwrch." She moved her hand up his arm. He started to sweat, chilling in the night breeze. "You came here, you know. I didn't do nothing to you. But I could, if you wanted me to."

He saw the glowing, sharp pearls of her teeth as she grinned.

The moon rose, her cool white light spilling into the darkness. Mabon froze, his eyes wide, his pants growing small.

He'd read about places like this. He'd heard about them from schoolmates fresh from oat-sowing tours of Europe. Well, he'd heard about places that emulated it through pot and absinthe.

It writhed. From above, the roofless structures must have looked like a labyrinth full of seething snakes, each twisting over a dozen other bodies, all rubbing together. A

book ten times the breadth of the Bible could not have proscribed the acts he saw.

In one room he saw a naked man chained to the wall, his muscular arms pinned above his head. Three fairies surrounded him, their backs to him, their wings beating his entire body.

In the next window of sin, a perfectly human couple copulated noisily as a fairy floated overhead, sprinkling them occasionally with an iridescent green powder.

Through other doorways: a dwarf whipped a giggling fairy with silver fronds; a woman no less than twenty feet tall laughed joyously as a band of tiny men with pointy ears tickled her toes; and pixies buzzed here and there, poking erogenous zones and fleeing.

Mabon shook his eyes loose from the scenes, turning to his escort. "Where in hell am I?"

"Told you that already, silly git."

"How did I get here?"

"Can't tell you that, specifically, I mean. Wouldn't be much fun being a fairy if human sorts knew what we was doing the whole time."

Her freckled face shining, she shoved him backward. He fell into one of the rooms, the beaded curtain clacking like a flock of rosary beads, and landed on his butt. He clenched his eyes shut against whatever debauchery the room contained.

"Who do you have here, Seren, my siren?" The new voice was scratchy and low, a nightclub crooner after her shift.

Mabon cracked an eye. She was taller than Seren, wingless. Where Seren had the sexuality of a naughty schoolgirl, this woman was the temptress, the madame, the teacher. Her dark hair and red lips promised sensual touches, while her fresh skin and warm eyes reminded him of bedtime stories and tales of redemption.

Seren knelt at the woman's feet, snaking a caress around her calf. "Broke free of the dance, he did."

Mabon noticed for the first time the opulence of the room. Gold linens lined with sparkling gems covered the bed, and she lounged in an ornately framed velvet settee.

"Did he now?" The temptress leaned over him, her earthy scent and soft hair enveloping him. Her eyes captured his, and he was startled to see they were an ordinary, rather human brown.

He blinked and shuddered. A woman of sin in a mad forest should not conjure memories of his father's brown eyes narrowed in anger.

"Has anyone ever said you have the eyes of the fey?" she whispered.

"I - I was told I have my mother's eyes. She was a nurse."

She smiled, and whether it was magic or imagination, he heard the opening notes of a symphony.

"Seren, perhaps you'd like to bring your guest to our show tonight." She pulled back, and a cold emptiness scratched over Mabon's skin.

"Sure thing, Rhiannon." Seren floated upward, her wings flapping. Rhiannon offered her lips, and Seren touched them with her own.

Mabon cleared his throat, feeling sure God could hear his thoughts, even in this place so far from his father's descriptions of Heaven.

Rhiannon smoothed Seren's hair, and the fairy sighed. Purred, almost.

"Tonight, then," Rhiannon said.

Seren nodded, her eyes filmy. She floated out of the chamber, clutching Mabon's collar and dragging him along even as his body strained toward Rhiannon.

"Who was that?" he asked when she finally released him in the courtyard. He stood, righting his clothes.

"That was our Rhiannon."

Mabon shifted uncomfortably, feeling his sinful thoughts rise in his pants. He touched the crucifix hanging at his throat. It was not singeing his flesh with the damnation of hell, so he thought he was safe as of yet.

"Listen, sprite girl-

"Fairy. Sprites are into the really dirty stuff, see, like them over there with the nettles-

"Fairy, then!" He would not allow his eyes to follow her pointing fingers. "Fairy girl, I would very much like to go home now, thank you."

She pressed herself to him, the tips of her wings brushing his nose. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He sneezed.

"You don't like it here?" she asked.

"I - I need to keep my soul intact."

He stepped back, hoping to end the contact. His soul might not give in to temptation, but his body had other ideas.

But she stayed with him, stretched from head to toe along his torso. The courtyard wall was right behind her - just a step and he could have more.

He stripped her arms away. "No! I need to get out of here."

"You want a private room?"

Mabon started down the street, so far away, through so much pleasure. "Not pleasure, not pleasure," he mumbled. "Fires of hell. Fires of hell are very, very hot."

Using his cupped hands as blinders, he pushed his feet along the path.

Behind him, Seren laughed, that sweet, lilting, devil-woman laugh that pitched him into this cesspool to begin with. "You're not leaving are you, Mab? Aw, love, did we scare you away?"

He refused to answer, shuffling along. He peeked, caught an eyeful of nipple, and slapped one hand over his face.

Seren followed, her wings fanning a cooling breeze over him. "How old are you, anyway? Don't tell me you never. Or do you fancy a boy? Is that it?"

She ran her own inspection. In his self-imposed blindness, he had no warning. Just a sudden vise on his zipper-region.

He shouted and twisted from her grasp, dropping his hand.

Seren hovered in front of him, her smile broadcasting the demon desires within. All around them, in falsely private alcoves, lovers paused, ticklers stared, whippers held their lashes.

Mabon's blood rushed upward, heating his face and mottling it red and purple. He hoped enough would be called away to deflate the pillar of temptation below. He stomped away, not bothering to shield his eyes.

Seren followed, plucking at his sleeve. "You still want to go to the show, don't you?"

"No. No, thank you. I have to go home." He gripped his gold cross and headed for the edge of the city.

Seren sighed, but did not follow.

He reached the city boundary, feeling as though God might reach down through the trees to give him a big pat on the back. Stopping, he turned to stare one last time at Seren.

Nothing but forest behind him. An owl landed on a low branch, something squirming in its beak.

Mabon smoothed his shirt front. He turned back to the trail.

The trail was gone. Before him was the fairy city. The stones, the flickering light from the dancehall, the hum of inebriated voices laughing maniacally, all beckoning him into the center.

"What do you think would happen if you could just come and go like that, you nit?"

Seren perched on the stone wall next to him, her arms crossed.

"How do I get out then?"

She hopped down to him and took his arm, promenading him back into the city. "Well, if you was a fairy, you'd go by water. That's why we're such a happening place you know. Port city. We get all kinds."

"But I'm human -"

"Pixies got dust," she went on. "I don't know rightly how it works, but it pops them out anywhere they want." She ticked them off on her finger. "Dwarves come by earth, giants however they want, but humans got to be invited. Not many are, you know. Buncha prudes. We only just got rid of the last missionary what snuck in to preach at us."

They turned onto a broader path, cleared of vegetation. A boulevard. Lights glowed from every surface, blinking idly like lightning bugs seen from across a field. Mabon looked closer; they *were* lightning bugs. They formed outlines of nude fairies, undulating and glittering, or blinked out lewd messages. Mabon concentrated on not reading every one of them.

"So," he attempted again, "how would a human get out?"

"A fairy takes him."

"Then take me."

"Don't want to. I never had a human before."

"I'm not a pet!"

"Pets always think that."

Mabon took her arm, thrilling at the smoothness, and turned her to face him. "I am a human being with a soul. I'm not here for you to pat and rub, and, er, uh—" He paused while he considered why he would not be up for such things. "My father will absolutely go off."

"How about I take you back after the show?" She ran a hand through his hair, and he couldn't recall head-patting ever being named as a sin, so he let it pass.

"I don't know."

"Aw, come on. What's one night going to hurt?"

He twiddled with his shirt buttons. "What kind of show is it?"

"You'll see." She grabbed his hand, tugging him along behind her, her feet not even touching the ground.

As they approached the city center, the path became crowded. Pixies, fairies and

humans alike moved in the same direction, toward a large natural amphitheater. The ground dropped away into a rounded pit, with shaped boulders and fallen logs for seating. One stage-sized slab lounged in the center of the theater.

Moonlight bathed the crowd as they flew, strolled, or tumbled to find suitable seats. Mabon let out a guttural "Sodding - Fatherforgiveme" as he whacked his shin on one of the stone seats.

"Not here." Seren urged him forward. "We get seats up front."

They found their spot, the stage close enough to touch. Mabon hardly had time to avert his eyes from the crowd's warm-up activities before a fairy dropped onto the center of the stage. She carried a male fairy, setting him gently on the stone. She curtsied to her package, then ascended to her exit.

The crowd hushed. The male fairy was so fair he was almost translucent, his hair silver, his eyes softened to a mossy green. He provided his own light, his skin painted with a glowing dust. He wore no clothes. Mabon studied the fairy's exposed anatomy, grateful to look at anything that would not tempt his sinful desire.

The fairy stepped forward, his dingle dangling ten feet from Mabon's face. Mabon's gratitude recoiled.

"Welcome!" The fairy raised his arms. Even his underarm hair was white.

"Welcome to the Lunar Theater, and our monthly exhibition. I know many of you have come far and wide to visit with us here in Niwbwrch. You, my friends, will travel back to your territories and kingdoms with a story like no other.

"Thousands of years ago, before even I was born-" the audience laughed "-my very resourceful forebear Gwyn ap Nudd built this great city. In time, it became world-renowned for the quality of magic and the quantity of pleasures. Pleasures I see some of you continue to enjoy as I speak."

He paused, grinning widely. Several cries of "Rock on, Rhi!" rose from the crowd. Mabon did not turn to see who the fairy king was referring to.

"Our most magnificent Rhi Gwyn ap Nudd not only founded this city we know and lust, he began the tradition, nay, the machine, that fuels our magic. Men of the Otherworld abandon their earthly cares once they hear the heartbeat of the Factory. They dance with the joy of release for a year and a day. The dust worn from their shoes embodies that wild freedom, and we return it to you, you rakes, in your bottles, in your chambers, in your lovers."

Another cheer went up, this time with raised jars and a merry flinging of magic dust. It sifted over Mabon, and his skin tingled, his loins throbbed.

The fairy king took a swig from one of the offered bottles. He waited, still, until the crowd hushed, waiting for him to continue.

When he did, his voice was low, intent. "Many of you witnessed the last Change. We cannot set dates for the Change. We cannot send out messages or book tickets. We can only wait for the One to emerge from the Factory, to renew the cycle of love that balances the lust we all take so much for granted. Either you are lucky enough to be here, on the spot, when the Change occurs, or you must hear about it and wait another human lifespan for your chance."

This time the crowd murmured. Necks craned, looking about for the One. A few young pixies shot up into the night sky in unbridled excitement. Mabon peered around, but could see no one who appeared any stranger than anyone else.

"Your colleagues and relations may have tales of debauchery and pleasure galore." Shouting, leaping about the stage, the fairy king's speech became fire, like a preacher violently selling his wares. "They may regale you with scintillating interludes of bare flesh and pixie-dust-enhanced reverie. Ladies and gentlemen-" a small rumbling went up, and he paused, smiling "-and others, your experience tonight will exceed them all a hundredfold."

He stepped back, indicating a spot on the center of the rock stage. Mabon squinted at it, but it really was just stone, free even of any naughty pictograms.

Then the air center-stage shimmered, wavering in the cool moonlight like heat off a desert highway. Seren palmed his thigh, squeezing. She trembled at his side, and he rubbed her hand.

The shimmer shook. It danced. It was a hint of a form, then the suggestion. It was a swirl of light, like dust motes on a lazy afternoon.

Mabon first spied a breast. A thigh, curving up to a buttock. The back of a calf.

Seren yelped, and he let go of her hand. She shook the blood back into it.

"Sorry," he whispered, his eyes never abandoning the emerging body.

There she was. The light faded, the motes seeming to sing a high note as they melted away. They left her standing in their wake, her sheer skirt barely reaching upper thigh, her breasts protected by strategic patches.

"Rhiannon." The crowd breathed it as one. Mabon felt movement all around him, silky and warm, and tore his eyes from her sinful form for a mere moment.

The writhing was back. It was as though they had all been sprayed with uber-potent pheromones. As soon as Rhiannon coalesced into view, they all fell to suckling one another.

"Thought you weren't up for it," Seren whispered in his ear.

Mabon removed his hand from her bum. Seren did not remove her bum from his lap.

"Rhiannon does that to people." Her breath was sweet on his face, wet and soft. "Niwbwrch thrives on her. We make a living on the dust, but we *need* her."

Mabon didn't look. "Why?"

"Like the Rhi said, for balance. For love."

Love was cuddling in a hammock. Love was wedding bells and children. Nothing Mabon saw in Niwbwrch resembled love. "I don't understand," he said.

Seren sighed. "You will."

The fairy king took Rhiannon's hand, modeling her at the front of the stage. "My friends, I present your queen, your changling. Your Rhiannon."

The assembled debauchers cheered, their shouts slicing Mabon's ears. He looked up at Rhiannon standing tall above him. With moonlight dancing on her skin, she radiated warmth, heat.

Then he saw her face. She was not showing herself off to her fervent admirers. She was frozen in fear. Her lip trembled, and a line of tears cascaded down one cheek.

"What are they going to do to her?" he asked Seren.

Seren, quiet for the first time, shook her head sadly at him.

Mabon lifted the fairy off his lap, clutching her shoulders. "What do you demons do to her? Sacrifice her womb? Do you sell her to the highest bidder?" Mabon gagged at the horror even as the teeming masses around him fed off Rhiannon's presence. He

threw Seren aside, not wondering at how easy it was, or noticing the satisfaction in her smirk.

He leaped to the stage. Rather, he tried. After a brief scramble and a helpful push on the bum from Seren, he stood tall and screamed at the pulsing bodies.

"The devil has taken you all! Your souls have been swallowed by evil, by temptation and depravity! Do you not fear for your everlasting life?"

"We're immortal, you git!" someone hollered. Those who raised their heads to listen tittered.

"Then have pity on those who aren't," Mabon returned. "The humans you have captured here are but ants to you, dying in a day. But we have souls, minds that are wasted as you use us as nothing more than fuel sources and. . . and whores!"

He trembled on the last word, his muscles backfiring.

A hand fell on his shoulder. The fairy king spoke softly, but his voice was heard in every corner of the theater. "My son, you do not yet know our ways. I understand your fear, but in time you will come to embrace us, to embrace our life-

"You will not swallow my soul, old timer." Mabon threw the hand off, his face flushed. "Nor will you swallow hers!"

He rushed madly at Rhiannon, the poor trapped soul enchanted by their demon magic. He threw her over his shoulder, intending to race off into the darkness, a hero and a saint.

But her curves overwhelmed him. He could not lift her from the stone.

"How about I just go with you?" she said. Her voice thrilled him with renewed vigor.

"Okay."

Together they jumped from the stage and threaded their way through the staring audience. No one moved to stop them. No one cried out. Mabon saw smiles, even. Several fairies exchanged high fives, and the giant uttered a wistful sigh that blew a handful of pixies out of the theater.

They reached the top of the open air theater, and Rhiannon stopped. She turned back to the audience, waving and blowing kisses.

"What the hell are you doing? We have to get out of here."

"Hush. And wave."

Befuddled, he raised a tentative hand. The crowd erupted with cheers and hoots. On stage, the fairy king lifted one arm in a fond salute.

"That's enough," Rhiannon said. "Nobody likes an endless encore." She skipped down the hill, heading toward the edge of the city.

Mabon ran to catch up, to protect her from the devils who would seek to take her back. He huffed, his lungs unused to magic dust-polluted air.

Rhiannon stopped at the city boundary. "All right then. Let's go if we're going to go."

"You know how to get out of here?" Mabon asked.

"Yes, but I can't get us out. I'm still only human."

"So am I."

"Are you now?"

Mabon consulted his body. "As human as I have been my entire life."

"That's what I thought. Get us out then."

"I just told you! I resent the accusation. My soul is still intact. I did not succumb to the demon-temptresses-

"Stop blathering." She rolled her eyes and reached for him, turning him to face the empty forest. "Close your eyes. Picture it. Your forest, in your mortal world. Are the trees different? The smells? The animals? Go there in your mind."

She wrapped her arms around him from behind, her flesh caressing his back. That certainly wasn't part of the forest he remembered. Suddenly he was glad she was pressed to his back, and not his front. That could have gotten awkward.

"Come on." Her throaty whisper penetrated his ear, prickling his neck. She rubbed his chest in slow circles. "For me?"

Swallowing, he closed his eyes. He pictured the daylight-dappled trees, the squirrels, the ravens. He imagined the asphalt on the roads, the speed bumps, the campsites. He felt his boots grinding over the sandy floors of the dunes sheltering the beach, heard the waves roll, smelled the tang of the salt.

"On your first try, too." She released him, and he staggered. "I'm impressed."

Mabon opened his eyes. The Menai Strait opened before him, the waters of the Irish Sea separating them from the Welsh mainland. They stood atop a sand dune, sand slipping over their feet, at the border between forest and beach.

He turned around. Niwbwrch the Fairy City was gone, fallen to the ordinary Newborough Forest. His heart sank even as his mind harrumphed with satisfaction.

Rhiannon took his hand, and he turned his attention to her. The chilling breeze nipped at her, playing with her daffodil hair and her milky skirt.

"Home, then?" she asked, her mouth turned in a superior smile. "I'd like to meet Father."

"How. . . ?"

"I'll give you a hint. I'm not the fairy."

Mabon blinked. Understanding slipped through him, and he stretched to feel his shoulder blades. "No wings," he panted.

"Males have no wings, silly."

He shook his head fervently. "No, no I am not one of those devils. I can't be."

"And yet you know it is true."

Mabon slumped to the sand. "I don't believe you. They tampered with your mind."

"Maybe doctrine has tampered with yours." She sat beside him. "Maybe if you grew up where you were born, and I grew up where I was born, things would be different. Maybe I'd be worried about my soul, and you'd be the king of Niwbwrch City, feeding pleasure to the magical creatures. But the system doesn't work that way. There has to be a trade. Once a generation, there has to be new blood."

Mabon shook his head. He pressed his fingertips all over his scalp, searching for a tender spot. "I fell. I tripped in the forest. I hit my head, I dreamed. All those childhood stories. My dad said they were the work of the devil. I never should have - It's very nice of you to help me, miss."

"You really are something, you know that?"

Mabon looked into her brown eyes. He longed to have brown eyes. He could almost feel the green of his, the spark, the otherworldliness that capered within him.

"I can't be what you say," he said. "Not that."

"Changlings are revered in the realm."

"They are nothing but tales in the real world." He shook his head. "In a day or two, this will have faded, this dream, this concussed nightmare."

Rhiannon touched his knee. The skin under her fingers tingled. "Was it really so hellish for you?"

A traitorous hand moved up her arm. "Sin without repentance. . . what would you call it?"

"Living." She leaned into him. "Tell me, Mabon, what happens if you give in to these sins?"

Her lips brushed his, and the betraying protrusion of his body reached toward her.

"You ask for forgiveness."

"Then let's ask for it tomorrow." She met his yearning, bearing him back to the sand.

Oh, hell, he thought.

"Okay," he said.

Nine months and a day later, they stood over a crib, staring down into innocent brown eyes.

"He's perfect," Mabon said.

Rhiannon agreed, squeezing his hand in hers. "She's a lovely baby."

Mabon started. "*He*, Rhiannon. We have a son, not a daughter. "

She patted his cheek. "Wait until tomorrow morning."

She left him standing in the nursery, feeling his head for lumps.

To Love Forever

By

Bob Burnett

I buried my beloved wife somewhere in the Cambodian jungle on 14 May 1970, buried by the explosion of a fragmentation grenade in the VC tunnel. I left her with a crude stake hammered into her chest.

I fell in love with Karen Ann McPhinney in the sixth grade. I pulled her hair and called her names, pushed her around on the playground. She ignored me. In the eighth grade, I asked her to dance and she left me standing red-faced when she turned away giggling.

My life changed at a New Year's party, middle of our senior year in high school. Dope smoke thick enough for a contact high. Loud music and strobes. Peace symbols and bell-bottoms and tie-dye. Karen was with Tommy Lee Bryant. I was with some blonde with stringy hair whose name eludes me. Dreamy float to the midnight hour.

Karen stepped in front of me, placed her hands on my chest, moved them to my shoulders, my neck. She locked her fingers my long hair, yanked my head down, pressed her mouth against my ear, and whispered words I had waited years to hear. Then Karen Ann McPhinney crushed her mouth on mine and changed the shapes and textures of my world forever.

After high school, we chanted slogans and demonstrated and held peace marches and made love on the grass under the stars and floated through the days on Purple Haze and doobies and sweet red wine. But even at Berkeley they expected students to show up for the occasional exam in order to stay in college and keep the draft deferment. I didn't know I'd flunked out until I got my draft notice. The draft board was unimpressed that I'd burned my draft card.

We loaded what little we owned in my VW bus, but the Colombian grass missed the turn to Canada and we were in a wedding chapel in Vegas.

I took my overdue draft notice to the Marine recruiter and he said it was no problem. Sign right here and raise your right hand.

They cut my hair, taught me to march, taught me to kill, and shipped me out to where I could put my new skills to use, killing little brown men with hands and feet and teeth and knives and other weapons of a less intimate nature.

I spent the last of my liberty with Karen at a cheap motel in San Diego, and she kissed me goodbye with tears in her eyes.

That was the last time I saw her alive.

Three weeks later and halfway around the world from my love, I was hustled out of the replacement depot before I had time to unpack my seabag, and choppered to the latest hot spot.

I was assigned to a rifle squad, replacement for a grunt who went home in a body bag. I have some memory of preparing for a patrol. We must have gone out. How else could I have become a prisoner? I remember nothing of the patrol or of my capture.

My cage was made of bamboo shafts the size of my wrist, spaced a hand-width apart, bound with tough vines, supported by posts three feet off the ground. High enough for village children to get underneath and poke at my nakedness with sharp sticks dipped in my own excrement from the ground below my cage.

Most memories of my captivity are muddled, but I remember the children, their delight in tormenting me with sticks, the amusement they shared catching insects to mash into my daily bowl of rice. I remember the interrogations, sharp questions from short men in black pajamas, followed by beatings, always followed by beatings.

Memories of that time still trouble my sleep.

Hunger passed, as did the discomfort of being cramped in a cage too small for standing or stretching out, but thirst was a constant. Sweltering heat intensified the stench of my festering, insect-infested wounds. Fever clouded my eyes and my thoughts. I remember wondering if I was dying or if somebody had put strychnine in my Purple Haze and given me the mother of all bad trips.

The night Karen melted through the bamboo bars and began kissing my wounds, I believed she was just another part of the acid trip. She murmured soft soothing words which were not words at all until they rose in tone and intensity, fueled by her rage, and became, *"Oh the dirty rotten sombitches oh what have they done to my baby oh look what they did to my sweet love . . ."* and on and on while she cradled my head against her breast and stroked my face.

I had almost nodded off when she leaned me back against the bars and whisked away. Her keening wail rose to an excruciating pitch as she whipped through the village, rousing men and women and children to terror and death. A hooch burst into flame and lighted the grisly scene. I watched languidly as this apparition flitted through the village slashing and ripping and killing.

I remember smiling when the head of one particularly vicious small boy rolled toward my cage.

Bodies and parts of bodies littered the ground when she returned to me. With one stroke of her delicate right arm, she shattered the sturdy bamboo bars of my cage. Karen scooped me up and cradled me in her arms, a mother carrying a toddler. My head tipped down and I slept.

I awoke to blackness so complete I wondered if I'd gone blind. I was stretched out on my back on some soft material. I raised my right hand to my face, touched my beard, twiddled my fingers in front of my eyes. I felt the breeze from the movement, but could see nothing.

I sat bolt upright in the darkness. I ran my hands over my chest and thighs and neck and feet. No soreness, no sores, no scabs, not even any of the caked filth that had encrusted my body for an unremembered length of time. I was clean, even my hair and beard. An unfamiliar but pleasant fragrance with a hint of flowers and soap replaced the pungent odors of my long-unwashed body.

I sat for a minute or an hour, with no way to measure the time. It finally occurred to me that I felt . . . fine. I felt clean and well and whole and rested.

I was on a pad of woven material piled six or eight inches deep on a dirt floor. I discovered a smooth cylinder on the floor next to my bed, felt the length of it and discovered a string at one end. A candle. More exploration yielded a small rectangular object with rough sides. A matchbox.

I fumbled a wooden match from the box and scratched it to light. After momentary blindness from the light, my eyes began to adjust and I lighted the candle.

The room was about a dozen feet long and half that wide. Dirt floor and walls of logs rising to a low ceiling of timbers. A mineshaft? A tunnel? My curiosity about my surroundings ended when I discovered a GI canteen of water and a basket of fruit.

Both the canteen and the basket were empty before I saw the note. I recognized her neat script before I started to read. So it hadn't been a dream or a bad trip. Karen was here. How? I read her note.

My Love --

You are in a VC tunnel. If you want to go outside, be careful. I booby-trapped the entrance with a Claymore mine. The trip wire is about a foot below the trap door and you need to unhook the wire from the mine before you raise the door. I didn't find you just to have you blow your ass off!!!! Ha, ha.

I wanted to be with you when you woke up, but I can only be there at night and if you're reading this you must have woke up in daytime. Daytime does strange things to me even in a dark tunnel, so I had to be somewhere else. We'll talk tonight.

I like your new beard. Very distinguished looking. I bet you didn't know you have gray streaks in it. Your hair, too. I can't even imagine what you went through.

Enjoy the fruit and water. I didn't leave much 'cause I figured you'd puke it up and make a mess. We'll get you some real food tonight. Get well and strong. I have plans for you!!!!

Bob, my love, I'm just glad you're alive. Nothing else really matters to me. I have loved you ever since I can remember and will love you forever. For better or for worse. See you tonight.

*Love ya,
K*

So it had not been an acid trip. Karen really was here. What was going on? We'll talk tonight, she'd promised.

I was restless, waiting for dark and having no idea how long that might be, so I took my candle and matches and crawled down the low-roofed passageway to the entrance. I found the Claymore, unhooked the trip wire, and cautiously pushed up against the wooden trap door.

I emerged between huge gnarled tree roots. The underbrush and trees were so dense, I could see only a few meters in any direction.

I took a few prudent steps on tender feet to peek around the Banyan tree, then retreated to one of the roots where I sat and removed a thorn from the sole of my right foot. Sweat oozed and dribbled in the oppressive heat, absent the salt-sting of sweat in open wounds. The dozens of festering injuries had healed. Only pink scars evinced their locations.

It was late afternoon. Under the canopy of trees the sun was an unseen fading brightness as the shadows deepened. Listening to the emerging night-sounds, I waited patiently for my love to come to me.

"Bob?" Her voice came from somewhere to my right, but I could not see her.

"Karen?" I stood.

"Yes. I didn't want to startle you." I felt her at my side, turned and reached out for her in the dark. She melted into my arms and we stood locked together in our nakedness. I stroked her back, pressed her head against my chest. She was cold, so cold against my sweaty body. We kissed then, the long and deep and hungry kiss of lovers long separated.

At some point I became aware that she was not breathing. And I felt no heartbeat under my hands. Karen must have sensed some change in me, for she pulled away.

"Well, shit. I was tryin' to figure out how to tell you, but I guess you figured it out for yourself." Her voice was soft, nearby, anguished.

"I haven't figured anything out, except that you're here."

"Yeah, well, I'm here, but I ain't the girl I used to be."

"What are you talkin' about? Come here." I held out my hand in the darkness, reaching toward the sound of her voice. I heard her inhale, start to speak, then the air whooshed out wordlessly. I felt her fingers touch mine. She grasped my hand and pulled it up, pressing my fingers against her throat.

"Check it out for yourself."

I felt her throat move as she inhaled and exhaled to speak, but that was the only breath she took. Her throat was utterly and completely still. No breathing. No pulse.

"What the . . ."

She pulled away. "No," she said softly, almost to herself. "No, I don't suppose you could figure it out." Louder now. "So I'll have to say the words. I'm dead, Bob. Deader'n a friggin' doornail. D. E. A. D. As in no longer among the living." Softly again. "And I can't even cry about it."

"Karen . . ."

"I should've just left you where some GIs could find you, let it all be a mystery to you, let you think you'd been dreamin' or hallucinatin' or somethin', but no, hell no, I gotta come see you just to touch you one more time. Oh God, Bob, I love you and now I've screwed everything all up and I'm dead-"

"Karen!" She stopped in mid-sentence. "I don't understand any of this, and I don't care," I said.

I held out my arms in the darkness, then felt the chill of her fingers on my hands, my arms, my chest, my face. Then she was back in my embrace again. I felt whole and complete and happy, just holding her.

"You're cold," I said, not thinking of the implications.

"Yeah, well. That's the nature of us dead folks. Only time I get warm is after I've eaten. And that ain't somethin' you want to see. Trust me on that."

"I didn't mean-"

"I know. I know," she murmured into my chest. "Takes some gettin' used to, don't it? Not used to it myself, yet. Only been dead a couple of months. Seems like longer."

"How? What . . . "

"Long story short. Judy Quinlin. Remember her?"

"The weird broad with dirty black hair and strange eyes?"

"Yeah. Her. Think back. Ever see her in the daytime?"

"Well . . . I don't know. Never paid much attention to her."

"Me neither."

"She killed you?"

"Let's go for a walk. Let me sort this out, how to explain it to you."

"A walk?" I laughed. "I can't see a damned thing."

"See how I've changed? I can see just fine. I guess I'd already forgotten that I couldn't see in the dark when I was alive."

"Lighten up, lady."

"Baby, I'm havin' a real hard time with this. Be patient with me."

"I'm sorry. I just . . . "

"Yeah, I know. Let's go inside the tunnel where you can light your candle."

Karen pulled away and I heard the tunnel trap door open. I felt my way to the opening, dropped inside, found my candle and matches.

From somewhere above me she said, "Think you can crawl to your bed in the dark? I'd rather not have a light right now."

"Yeah, I think so." I crawled along in the darkness, clutching my precious candle and matches, feeling my way. Behind me I heard the soft closing of the trap door.

When I reached the pad of blankets I turned to sit on them, waiting for Karen. I sensed her presence, perhaps from the temperature change, perhaps from some stray wind current, before she spoke.

"Get your mind right for some changes in me before you light your candle."

Changes? I carefully removed a match and struck it on the matchbox. After the temporary blindness passed, I lighted the candle.

Karen was squatting at my feet, just out of reach, completely naked. She seemed pale and her dark hair was mussed, but then her hair was normally mussed and tangled under her headband. She wore nothing at all. No headband, not even any sandals. Her dark hair seemed to float around her head, and her brown eyes appeared red in the candlelight. She seemed the same other than that.

"What changes? You are absolutely beautiful."

"Changes like this . . . " She smiled and slowly, ever so slowly, two upper teeth began to extend and lengthen and . . . I awoke on my bed with Karen stroking my face and making soothing sounds.

"What the . . . ? I must have passed out."

"Nah. I did that to you. I have this thing, see, what the others call an aura. I can turn it up so it's real strong or turn it off if I want. Thing is, it makes humans sleepy. I just gave you a big shot of it so you wouldn't freak out."

"The others?"

"Judy and others like her. Like me, now."

I sat up. "Karen, you telling me you're a va . . . "

"Not the V-word. Let's not use the V-word, baby. But, yes. Most of the stories are pure Hollywood bullshit, but in concept . . . well, we refer to living humans as homo sapid, not homo sapiens. Play on words. Means they have an agreeable taste."

"Jesus!"

"Baby, I don't think even Jesus can help me now."

I pulled her down on the pad, kissed her cheeks, her nose, her forehead, her lips. She opened her mouth to me and our tongues danced and darted.

"How did you do this?" I said, raising my left hand, indicating the pink marks which had once been festering wounds.

"Part of the deal. The spit that heals. So we won't leave fang marks around to show where we had supper."

"Show me your fangs again."

"I don't think you're ready for that."

"Try me. If I freak out you can knock me out again."

She smiled. Slowly, ever so slowly her mouth changed shape and fangs an inch long emerged. Her lips were stretched into a grimace, but it was not of evil. Her eyes danced.

I gently kissed each fang in turn. "Lady, you're an orthodontist's wet dream!"

She laughed and pushed me off of her, mumbling indistinctly as her fangs withdrew. "Not fair. I can't talk with my mouth all screwed up like that."

She pushed me down on the pad and we horsed around and wrestled, and the wrestling changed into a wanting with only one possible outcome.

At some point during our lovemaking her fangs slipped into my neck. Her rhythmic sucking was in tempo with the cadence of our hips. Her body warmed noticeably.

Later, while I rested sweat-drenched and breathless and Karen nestled beside me with her head on my chest, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"For having a snack at your banquet table."

"It's okay. Matter of fact, I thought it was exciting."

"You're weird, buster."

"Like that's a new piece of information?"

"Nope."

We rested quietly, not talking or moving except for her fingers playing idly with my chest hair. I was almost asleep when I felt her sit up.

"Que pasa, kiddo?"

"Is there anything you need, Bob? I mean besides more food and water. I know you need that."

"Boots. Or shoes or sandals or something to put on my feet. They're tender as a baby's butt. Maybe another candle. But it can wait."

"I have to go out. I have to go out right now."

"Why?"

She was silent for so long I thought she was ignoring the question. When she spoke her voice was filled with bitterness and pain.

"You might as well know all about it. Bob, I have to go find something – *somebody* – to eat."

I felt her move away from me in the darkness. When she spoke again, it was from several feet away.

"Let me tell you about this new tenderness I've got." Her voice was almost a hiss, forced between clinched teeth. "So we're layin' there together like we always do after we make it, feelin' sweet and cuddly and I got my ear to your chest listenin' to the pound of your heart slowin' down after a humpin' marathon and you know what I'm thinkin' about? You know the *only fuckin' thing* I can think about? I'm thinkin' about rippin' your throat out and takin' a bath in your sweet hot blood. How's that for after-play romance?"

And then she was gone. There was no sound, but I knew she was gone. I fumbled around, found the matches, lit the candle. I was alone in the tunnel. I sat and watched the candle burn down to a stub. She did not return. Finally, I slept.

When I awoke I felt Karen's cold body beside me. She did not move or respond when I spoke her name and touched her. I found the matches and lit my stub of a candle.

Karen rested on her back, eyes closed, utterly still. Dead. Dark brown splatters adorned the backs of her hands. Something dark crusted her short fingernails and smeared her fingers. The same dark stain formed a crude X in the center of her chest slightly to the left of her breastbone. I had to turn away. I could not look at her.

I felt off-center, groggy, a hangover morning without the booze and dope of the night before.

Her note rested on a well-worn pair of sandals with a new candle stuffed in each one. Next to that was a tree limb a couple of feet long sharpened on one end and cut off square on the other end. Next to that was a rock the size of a grapefruit.

Bob, my love –

You probably feel like shit. Sorry about that. I didn't want to talk to you any more so I turned up my aura and knocked you out. I kept you out for almost a month when I first got you here, but that was different.

About what I am . . . After they said you'd been killed my world fell apart. I just didn't care any more. Got heavy into the dope. I was so pissed at you for not splitting for Canada, and at the bastard politicians for getting us into this crazy war. But I was really crazy mad at the ones who had killed my beloved. I guess I ranted and raved a lot. Even beat up an Asian gal on campus. They told me later she was Chinese.

Anyhow, when Judy Quinlin told me she could fix it so I could kill the ones who did it to you, I guess I was ready for almost anything. At least I thought I was. The reality of it was more than I bargained for.

Judy and I and a couple of others like us came here. They love wars. Easy pickings. Me, I just wanted to get even. And I did.

When I got here your spirit spoke to me. I don't know how. I guess we're linked somehow. I was in Da Nang. It only took me a couple of days to find you. I hope you don't remember any of that. I freaked out. When I saw what they had done to you, I just flat lost it.

Anyhow, all the time I was healing your body, I kept this hope alive that somehow, some way, we could make it. Baby, it was only a dream. I am what I am and I'll be this way forever. Unless you set me free.

*Bob, my love, I hate what I am. **I hate it I hate it I hate it.** All I want to do is be really dead, to be done with it, done with the terrible hungers that drive me and the*

things I have to do to satisfy them. To think of existing like this forever and forever and forever - I can't take it. I know that what I'm asking – begging - you to do will maybe be the hardest thing you've ever done. But if you love me, if you truly love me, you'll do this for me.

I guess you've seen the wood stake I cut for you. And the rock -- I couldn't find a big hammer. Honey, I don't even know if it will work. Maybe there's truth in the Hollywood stories about a wood stake through the heart. Maybe not. I guess we'll find out the first night after you do it.

Do it right now, baby, right now before you have too much time to think about it. Do it for me. Do it for us.

And what I want you to do then is, please sit with me for one night. Just hold my hand and sit with me in case it doesn't work right and I wake up scared or messed up or something.

If it works, if I stay dead like I pray I will, I want you to go back home and make some kind of a decent life for yourself. Find some sweet lady and treat her like you always treated me, like she's the best ever.

And once in a while when you're nestled like spoons in a bed that smells of your lovemaking, think kind thoughts of me, the little hippie chick who will always be yours.

*Love Forever,
Karen*

My candle was guttering out. I lighted a new one from the old one, set it in place with a few drips of hot wax on the little board I used as a candle holder, then one page at a time I burned her note. I held each page until it burned my fingers. I watched the flames and felt my tears run down into my beard.

I picked up the stake with my left hand, the rock with my right, turned and without any hesitation hammered the stake into her chest on X marks the spot.

I suppose the movies need the drama of eyes flaring open, of fangs gnashing, of evil hissing, of bodies dissolving into piles of dust and that sort of thing. The reality was that nothing at all happened other than the popping of ribs breaking as the stake passed through her chest. She responded no more than a side of beef responds to the butcher's cleaver.

I lay down beside my love, cradled her head on my arm, and there I stayed while the old candle burned out and the new candle burned down to nothingness and went out. I waited and I waited and I waited and Karen changed not at all.

At some point I slept, then awoke still holding her coldness and she still had not changed. I gently extracted myself and without striking a light, crawled to the tunnel entrance. We had forgotten to hook up the trip wire on the booby trap, which was a good thing since I didn't think about it until I was standing in the darkness.

It was dark. Karen was truly dead. I went back and lay with her, leaving the Claymore mine unarmed and the trap door open.

They must have seen the open trap door. I heard whispers at the entrance and roused myself from my grief. Down the length of the entry passageway I saw faint sunlight from the open trap door, and shadows cast by movement at the entrance. Whispers. Moving shadows. Then clearly, "Shit! A Claymore!" and the shadows disappeared.

I sat up, leaned to lightly kiss Karen's cold lips, put on the sandals she had brought, and prepared to be rescued.

More whispers, more shadows at the entrance.

"You stupid bastards," I said. "If I'd set the trip wire you'd be tellin' your story to Jesus."

The shadows evaporated like smoke.

I crawled to the end of the passageway and squatted below the opening.

"I'm an American," I said, raising my empty hands into the open air. "I'm comin' out. You shoot me, it'll really piss me off."

I crawled into the open and stood, hands raised above my head, palms forward. It occurred to me then that all I had on was a pair of sandals. I had been without clothing for so long being naked seemed normal.

At first I thought I had imagined it, that I was all alone in the jungle with my insanity. Then I saw part of a face and the muzzle of an M-16. Then another and another. In their grease paint and camouflage netting, the Recon patrol blended with the dense underbrush.

They had questions. Where I'd been. How I'd escaped from Charlie. I made up a story which seemed to satisfy them.

"Gimmie a grenade," I said.

"Why?"

"Just gimmie a fuckin' grenade."

Wordlessly, one Marine handed me a fragmentation grenade. I pulled the pin. "Fire in the hole," I said as I leaned into the entrance, released the lever, and tossed the grenade down the tunnel. As I rolled away from the trap door Marines hit the dirt and rolled for cover. The explosion was a muffled *whump*. Dust and debris filled the air. The roof caved in, burying my love.

Three chopper rides later, I was on a hospital ship somewhere off Da Nang. They clucked over me and pampered me and poked and prodded and weighed and measured and shook their heads. I'd lost fifty pounds, but was healthy as a horse. The spit that heals, Karen had called it. Strong stuff. Almost four decades later and I've never had even a head cold.

Thirty-eight years of sameness and emptiness and loneliness. Thirty-eight years of "what if" and doubt and regret. Thirty-eight years of wondering if maybe, somehow, we could have made it work.

This morning I awoke in tangled, sweat-drenched sheets. In my dream Karen had come to me, bringing vivid primary colors of love into my monochrome existence. Between kisses she explained that the wood stake had dissolved in the perpetual dampness of the rain forest, that the old myths were only partly true, that she was free from the bondage of the stake.

It was only a dream. I only imagined the fecund scent of her body in my bedroom, imagined the fading pink marks on my throat when I looked in the mirror to shave. It must have been a dream.

But tonight, tonight . . . I'll leave a note by my bedside.

Awaken me, my darling. Awaken me to be with you forever, to love forever.

Irony in Fiction

By
Betsy Dornbusch

Google “irony” and you quickly find it’s a word that means different things to different people. Some people even claim irony is dead. A writer in *Time* announced 09/11/01 as its death date because he believes that was the day irony came and bit the U.S. in the...well. The gravity of that day notwithstanding, we all know, as Robert McKee points out in *STORY*, “...life is rarely all sunshine and strawberries, nor is it all doom and drek; it is *both*...”

A workaholic labors day and night, making gobs of money, but cannot find a true love to share it with. This isn’t a made-up character; many of us could point to a friend in this ironic situation. We can claim with confidence irony is not dead in real life, which is the springboard for storytelling. And it’s certainly not dead in current storytelling. Consider the themes in popular culture this year: a vampire who lives forever, but constantly tries to salvage what’s left of his humanity (*Trueblood*), the anarchist committed to the laws of brotherhood and society (*Sons of Anarchy*), even the trendy anti-hero (*The Dark Knight* and *My Own Worst Enemy*).

So irony exists. It might even be all the rage. But to discuss it, we should try to define it.

First, we can rule out what irony is not. The modern meaning of the word differs from Socratic Irony, the very first kind, and an animal unto itself. Socratic Irony is the wise teacher pretending ignorance in order to draw out students’ knowledge. Socratic irony has no place in good storytelling, but it does have a kissing cousin in bad storytelling. More on that later.

Irony also is not particularly friendly. It uses discomfort to push us in a certain direction. It is meant to make us think, absorb, and understand difficult truths that we cannot quite put into words.

Now for what it is. For our purposes here, we can stick to the three types of irony laid out in *Writing Fiction* by Janet Burroway because they’re the ones that apply to storytelling:

Verbal, Dramatic, and Cosmic.

Verbal Irony is the simplest kind. The basis for jokes, for sarcasm, the double entendre, and rhetorical questions, it relies on stereotypes and common knowledge. Saying that it speaks to the human condition probably gives it too much dignity. But

verbal irony has its place in storytelling, of course. Authors are wordsmiths and verbal irony relies on words.

Dramatic Irony has one rule: the reader knows something the character does not. For a clear-cut example, think oblivious teenagers doing the backseat tango in a slasher film. The audience knows the killer is watching them with a knife in his hand. The characters do not.

Multiple POVs, unreliable narrators, cultural differences, obvious character flaws, and redemption and punitive plots are all common devices to showcase dramatic irony. Some stories even start at the climax, throwing out suspense in lieu of theme. I would lump “sufficient foreshadowing” in dramatic irony, too. No matter how it’s done, the reader must be led to an early, omniscient conclusion regarding the coming climax, without the characters reaching the same conclusion, and without the reader thinking: *What an idiot! A ghost says GET OUT, you GET OUT!!* (Not always an easy job.) Resolution occurs in dramatic irony when the character catches up with the reader.

Cosmic Irony requires the most trust between writer and reader because it relies on conflicts within the human condition. The writer must trust the reader to come to the intended conclusion, *to get what I mean, man*. Aristotle said dramatic action (showing, plot) implies the metaphysical (meaning, theme). This type of irony often relies more on symbolic action and metaphor, ultimately requiring more showing than telling. In George RR Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, when Ser Jaime the Kingslayer loses his hand, he loses that which is most dear to him: his ability to fight. But Martin never waxes poetic about how Jaime also lost the one thing that made him so evil, and how maybe it’s a fresh start in a better life. As time goes on, we *watch* Jaime grow into a better person, gaining more admirable qualities. The judgment call on the affects Martin’s torture has had on Jaime’s character are left to the reader to determine. Some readers might miss it, but Martin trusts that most of us are paying attention.

So that’s what they are, verbal, dramatic, and cosmic ironies. But even well-defined, irony is not...ironclad. It lives on a sliding scale, relying on discrepancy between actions and results, appearance and reality. It’s a dicey proposition. Since it requires three equal players, writer, reader, and victim (character), the writer must first decide how well she wants the reader to relate to the victim. For instance, for tragic irony the writer relies on sympathy for the protagonist to enhance the ironic punch. In nihilistic irony, the writer relies on plot and action, maybe making the victim less likeable, so that a reader distances himself from the character and concentrates on the circumstance instead. Paradoxical irony is a balance between the two.

In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner uses the classic tale of Helen of Troy to demonstrate decisions the writer must make regarding the scope and scale of irony.

Achaean society, which Helen married into, is by any standard barbaric and crude. Nonetheless, their fidelity to kin and country is an admirable quality. No self-respecting Achaean is going to let some Trojan steal his wife, much less his queen, even if she wants to go, even if it means dying for it. Who knows why? They might adore their queen, Helen. They might have a tradition of venerating war. They might

have been waiting for a chance to invade Troy anyway. Or not. A storyteller can reconstruct backstory any way he likes.

By contrast, the Trojans are sophisticated, but morally lenient. No one makes Paris return Helen, after all. Perhaps Paris didn't realize the Achaeans, who had just been so hospitable, would come after her. Or, maybe he's a spoiled prince, used to having things his way. And did Helen know the Achaeans would come? Was she too coddled and protected to ever understand the Achaeans? Or did she know full well what would happen and decided to assert her independence at any cost?

Again, such backstory and motivation is left to the discretion of the storyteller. The writer must decide *how and why* the characters think and behave the way they do. These decisions tip the scales toward or away from ironic themes and affects the degree of sympathy for the characters. If a writer is going for full-on cosmic ironic treatment, then he must combine characterization, backstory, plot, quirks of fate, and even settings to enhance that statement.

Treading such murky, stump-filled waters is risky, though. When trying for the subtlety that irony requires, a writer might accidentally fall back on Socratic Irony. In storytelling, this includes deliberately keeping secrets from readers, who, if they're sophisticated enough to understand irony, are probably clever enough to see through the Merlins, Gandalfs, and Professor Dumbledores in our stories. Worse, we run the risk of playing tricks, even to the point of *dues ex machina*, in order to trap readers with their own ignorance. It's the quickest way to replace irony with insult.

Many well-told stories contain no ironic message, maybe even a couple in *Electric Spec*. But irony makes the reader *think*. Irony skews readers toward the writer's worldview, if even for a few moments. Irony requires empathy, which is a noble goal for any artistic endeavor. But most of all, stories that end in irony tend to be the most memorable and enduring, those stories that make us say: *Yes! Life is just like that!*

The Quiet Earth

By
Marty Mapes

A last-man-on-earth vibe is in the air these days. Between reading *The World Without Us* in paperback and renting *I Am Legend* on Blu-Ray, try to make room for an unassuming but worthwhile movie from New Zealand called *The Quiet Earth*.

The Quiet Earth was one of the first science fiction films I saw as an impressionable teenager. I was enamored of the very idea: how might humanity disappear, and what would you do if you were left? I was impressed by how much could be done with the concept. For example, property crimes wouldn't exist; you could take what you like and live like a millionaire. On the other hand, with no culture, maybe you'd stop trying to keep up appearances and revert to a more primitive state, materialism be damned.

I decided to revisit *The Quiet Earth* to see whether it holds up to adult scrutiny.

It does, but it's a very different movie from the one I saw when I was a nerdy teenager. If you'd asked me then what it was about I'd have told you that it's about having the world to yourself and trying to figure out how the universe had changed after a strange accident.

This time, I'd say that *The Quiet Earth* is primarily about sex and power.

Zac (Bruno Lawrence, who also co-wrote the screenplay) is our last man. He wakes up one morning to find that people have simply vanished. Coffee is left boiling, cars have crashed in the streets, and seatbelts are still buckled, but there is no sign of people. The movie takes a satisfyingly long time to let Zac's reaction play out. Surprise turns to calm determination. He takes over the radio station, paints billboards, and drives around with a P.A. system. Determination becomes inspiration—everything is free for the taking, so why not move up a tax bracket or two? The high life finally gives way to desperation and then, finally, acceptance. That's when the movie introduces the first wrinkle (spoilers ahead!).

Her name is Joanne, and after a rocky start, she and Zac begin the courtship ritual that will turn them into Adam and Eve. Once their relationship reaches stasis, the film introduces the third character, Api, a Maori man who unbalances the symmetry in the world.

The rest of the film becomes an unspoken battle of wills between the two men. Jane Goodall might have observed that they were fighting for the alpha position and the right to mate with the female.

As an adult, I found this power play the most prominent and interesting aspect of *The Quiet Earth*. Class, race, seniority, and youth all play a part in the power struggle. Zac was with Joanne first, of course, but not all human relationships are permanent. Api is younger, healthier, and possibly a better fit for the role of Adam. But the movie reminds us that these characters are from our own world, and it posits that they can't let go of their old status. Zac is of European descent, while Api is a brown-skinned New Zealand aboriginal. Zac is an educated man, a scientist (who worked in the laboratory that may have caused "the phenomenon"), while Api is a blue-collar drifter. Senses of superiority and resentment simmer below the surface, only rarely boiling over into the characters' consciousness and conversations.

The movie seems to subtly take Zac's side in all this. Twenty years ago, when I was a smart but unpopular teenager, I found the movie's position reassuring and vindicating: brains are more important than brawn. But as a progressive adult, the notion of an educated white man having some greater right to The Girl than an uneducated brown man is backward and repulsive, especially because it treats Joanne like a prize rather than a person.

Then again, the movie shows the survivors becoming increasingly primitive. Perhaps the movie is saying that when civilizations collapse, primitive notions resurface, whether we like it or not.

Ironically, Zac knows that he is not at the apex of the pecking order. Twice he explains that he was just a technician in a small lab in New Zealand. "It was the Americans!" he repeats, who really had the power. If an American bureaucrat were to appear, however, Zac would probably not only cede the alpha role, but also try to curry his favor.

The "last man" genre gives smart authors and filmmakers so much to work with that it's sure to keep resurfacing. Perhaps in another 20 years I'll revisit *The Quiet Earth* and write about how it's a Buddhist movie about death, rebirth, and Karma. The film will probably hold up that long.

Whether it will last until only one of us walks the Earth remains to be seen.