

FREEDOM FICTION JOURNAL

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

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Editor's Note

Hello Freedom Friends,

We are exploding with new talent here at Freedom Fiction Journal. This issue blasts off with 2 gripping tales from first time FFJ authors - Alexandra Burt and Aloysa. These two damsels have a fascinating pulp fiction to share. This is followed with another emotionally engaging story from FFJ's most prolific and artistic author Chris Castle, who never stops to amaze us with his range of impacting studies in human character. And the party continues with another 5 stories all compiled in this free downloadable pdf issue 09.

This quarter hasn't been without its troubles. Monsoon in India is playing havoc with our computer systems; the humidity and moisture delaying a lot of updates. We are very grateful for your patience and the understanding from our FFJ contributors. We only hope you enjoy this labour of love – love being the only thing common to all who associate with FFJ.

Coming up in forthcoming online releases are many more thrilling tales from many new authors, so keep checking our website for these.

On the cards is also an epub endeavour to bring FFJ to your mobile reading devices. So we will offer the epub files as an alternative to pdf format.

Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

Ujjwal Dey

Editor for Issue 09, Vol 03.

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“How Do You Say This In Russian?” by Alexandra Burt

Synopsis: Lost childhood leading to a stolen life, a girl will battle worldly demons while attempting to keep her dignity intact.

About the Author: Alexandra Burt lived the first twenty-seven years of her life in Europe and moved to Texas eighteen years ago. She spent two years in Art School but eventually graduated with a BA in Business Administration. During her freelance career as a translator she gave up the pursuit of literary translations so she could tell her own stories. While working on several short stories and a novel of psychological suspense with a literary edge, she will write without pay until someone is willing to pay. There, all is said.

In this pulp fiction, a girl helps herself in an alien surrounding.

How Do You Say This In Russian?

By Alexandra Burt

As I drove through the mild California night, the flashing orange fuel light reminded me of the reality at hand. I pulled into the next gas station, turned the key and with a sigh of relief, the engine shut off. The Bronco shuttered and shook one more time as if done roaming this earth. I looked up and saw a Choice Mart neon sign of an Exxon gas station. I assumed I was still in Inglewood, but I couldn't be sure.

I looked around the parking lot; there were the usual newspaper boxes, a couple of benches, trashcans and soda machines. A dumpster, a mailbox, a payphone, and more parking spots than this gas station would ever need.



Always aware of my surroundings - a gypsy trait - I spotted an El Camino with two teenage boys about ten spots down. Mexicans. The music trailing towards me reminded me of Russian Polka. The memory of my homeland weighted heavy on my heart. The two teenage boys had been staring at me ever since I had parked my car. The driver had rolled his window down and left his arm dangling in the warm morning breeze. A cigarette without filter stuck between his fingers, the orange tip creeping dangerously near his skin. I smelled the weed as he exhaled a huge puff of smoke. The boys were smiling and talking while looking at me. I spoke some Spanish but I couldn't make out any specific words. I sat in my car and I started to fiddle with my key chain and the attached Russian *Troyka* symbol, three horses. They symbolize the hopes and dreams of all Russian people, the road is the journey in life and the three horses will help you get there. Americans only know *Troyka* as a symbol of Russian vodka. As for myself, they reminded me of my family's profession in Russia; the trading of horses. We were not very successful then and that has not changed for me. The March sun was out, its rays warming the Bronco's roof, weighing heavy on my eyelids. Tired and dazed, I got out of my car, reached for my purse, brushed some crumbs off my black shirt, and walked towards the gas station. The payphone was so close that I didn't bother pulling my keys out of the ignition.

I didn't have many friends and almost none who I could call and who'd offer a couch to sleep on in return. My last job as a nanny had included room and board and once I lost that job, I had nothing. I faintly remembered a few names of friends and I was hoping one of them would take pity on me and allow me to stay for a few days.

My eyes zoomed in on the old payphone. Its receiver was hanging down like a body dangling from a noose. Its metal cable was twisted beyond recognition, the phone book was missing. The receiver was remarkably clean. I put it back on the hook, pulled it back off and held it up to my ear. Surprisingly, there was a dial tone. I needed a phone book and entered the gas station.

Cold air hit me as if I had stepped into the taiga on a winter day. The overhead fluorescent lights spilled a blue tinge over the shelves. I could almost feel the powerful hum of the freezers down to my bones. I shivered. I would never understand the comfort Americans find in cooling rooms to a temperature that would call for heat if it were winter. I crossed my arms and looked around. The usual items came into focus; stacked white-boy college beer, bags of charcoal, a wicker basket full of lighter fluid. Magazines, soda, fruit juices, and water behind glass doors, some panels still foggy

from customers long departed. The middle isles held baked goods, donuts, candy, tampons, condoms, chap sticks, and baby formula. I walked up to the counter and as my lips parted to ask for the phone book, I stopped in my tracks.

The man behind the counter looked familiar. I searched my memory and came up blank. Then I realized that it was not he who was familiar, but his kind. His pronounced brow ridge, the sable skin, the greasy slicked-back hair dyed two shades too dark. He wore a white t-shirt and a white starched dress shirt on top, unbuttoned, the sleeves rolled up. His neck revealed the tattooed image of a bluish chain that, though disappearing under his shirt, I was quite sure, would end up adorned with a larger cross over his chest. My eyes wandered to his hands. They were large, even for a man his size.

His pinky finger, close to the knuckle, displayed a faint yet visible circle with a dot in its center. The meaning was painfully familiar, "I am an orphan", "In life only count on yourself". Its bluish tinge indicated makeshift ink, probably hand-picked with a homemade needle in prison. Some tattoos, like numbers on forearms or tears on cheeks, need no explanation but some are more clandestine. The man's blue cross around his neck identified him as a "Prince of Thieves", a highly honorable tattoo among my people. In combination with the Virgin Mary holding the Christ baby it indicates that the bearer has been a thief since a very young age.

That man in the gas station took me back, way back. He took me back to to my childhood in Russia. In 1992, when I was twelve, our *vardo*, a 35-year-old caravan, had mysteriously burned down. Made from walnut, oak, and pine, ornately carved and decorated, the caravan went up in flames and the fire devoured it before we could save anything inside. My parents and I had no place to go and sought refuge in the only place that would welcome us; the woods. I could have stayed in those woods forever. I loved the rich decay and dark, wet earth. I entertained myself by digging into the top layers with my fingers, spellbound by the underworld of the springy cover. My parents, in a last attempt to secure a winter shelter, made their way to Skopkin, a nearby village, about two hours by foot from Kaliningrad. I waited all day, all night, and the next day. They never returned. I stayed in our makeshift shelter in the woods. I never ventured far away but eventually I ran out of food. I had been on my own for days and I was, at first, not afraid. I finally decided to venture close to town, terrified of what had happened to my parents, but even more afraid of what would happen to me. I encountered a family of travelers who, in exchange for some glass beads and a scarf, went into town and then later relayed the fate of my parents:

On their way to *Skopkin* they passed by a farm and decided to raid the chicken coop and steal a chicken and some eggs. The farmer, digging a sewage ditch behind the barn, happened to hear the commotion of the frantic hens thrashing about. His father's WWI 1910 Mosin-Nagant rifle sent a bullet right between my father's eyes. My mother was shot in her left thigh. It took only minutes for her body to completely drain of all life. Gypsies prefer the unexpected death. In that regard, my parents were lucky.

A few days later I awoke to two stern eyes staring down at me. The creature in front of me wore a black cloak and headgear so gigantic it blocked out the warm morning sun. I thought *Gamayun*, the prophetic bird of wisdom and knowledge, had appeared. I had seen its depiction in Russian folklore books, a large bird with a woman's head.

I struggled to see her face; the sun behind her illuminated her head like the halo of Saint Sarah, the patron saint of the Roma people. She spoke in tongues, words I had never heard before; their ring was foreign to me. I slowly stepped into the realm of reality and recognized a nun in her habit. She took me with her, her hands firm yet gentle. I later learned that the nuns, on their way to a

funeral, passed by the farm and witnessed the shooting. My mother's last words were holding a nun to the promise of retrieving her only child from the woods.

The nuns took me in and educated me. The first English word I ever learned was 'wimple', the name of the starched linen that covered the cheeks and necks of the nuns. The Ivanovsky convent, a concept strange and foreign to me, became my new home. I never ceased to be just that; out of place. I missed my parents, our caravan, and the freedom of moving around as we pleased. The walls of the convent were dauntingly high, the bell towers and brick copulas looked down on me in a cold and disapproving fashion. My days consisted of learning English and studying the Bible. I had to work in the convent's laundry room and barely saw the light of day. I counted the days until I was eighteen when the nuns arranged for my immigration to the U.S.

As I looked at the man in front of me, I would have bet every dollar in my pocket that his back was adorned by cathedrals with steeples and towers. Two, maybe three steeples with spires on top. One would be foolish to think they represent the houses of God. The spires indicate the number of prison terms served. Instead of "May I borrow the phone book" I lowered my eyes in respect: "May I borrow the phone book, *Shishka*?" *Shishka* is Russian, an informal word for a person of great importance.

His eyes showed no emotions, his body did not move. He finally spoke: "Go ahead. Don't take it outside. People steal around here." His accent was deep and wove itself through every syllable and every word. I placed my hands on the counter. He pushed a phone book towards me. His eyes gazed over my hands, then lit up ever so slightly and he added "*Chuvak*", meaning buddy, kiddo. I, too, bear a mark on my pinky, the mark of someone who was all alone in the world. He must have felt an immediate connection; the hardened criminal and the girl walking into his gas station. Within that minute we had established our entire relationship.

I took the phone book and looked up a couple of names and wrote the numbers on the back of one of the business cards from the counter advertising local dog groomers, landscapers and locksmiths. I did not want to push my luck and ask him to use the phone behind the counter. I went back outside to use the pay phone when I realized that my car was no longer in its spot. I panicked. I scanned the parking lot, I walked behind the building, walked both sides. Nothing. After a minute or so, it sunk in; stolen. Gone. The two teenage boys were watching me to steal my ride. Nothing I could do about this now. I went back in the gas station to talk to my newfound friend.

Three hours later the man in the gas station knew my entire life story; being Roma, the fire, the death of my parents, the nuns taking me in, the convent, my journey to America, my mediocre jobs, the last job I had lost. Being homeless. My stolen car. He told me his name was Igor. "Just Igor" he said. Sometimes one word is enough, like Napoleon, Madonna, *Roma*. I told him my name was Katarina but to call me Kate. That my last name Krupin means 'barley' in English and that that struck me as odd because my ancestors had never been farmers. My blood is of the *Ruska Roma*, also known as Russian Gypsies, the biggest Romani group in Russia. I told him that one of our practiced professions was horse-trading. He took pity on me.

"*Chuvak*," he said, "I need someone to stock up the shelves in the morning. Milk, bread. You can shower here and I will allow you to sleep in the back. A cot is good enough for a young girl like you. Not so good for an old man." He smiled and exposed his upper teeth encased in gold.

"*Shishka*, thank you so much. I just need a break, just for a while." I hesitated. I felt obligated to indicate my level of trustworthiness. To steal from him, to take anything without asking would entail my immediate departure, not only from this gas station, but also from the planet as a whole. America isn't big enough to hide from a man like Igor. He offered me a job and a place to sleep, a

huge gesture towards a stranger that wasn't common in America. Destroying his trust was suicide by default. I needed him to know that I was trustworthy and honorable.

"I have nowhere to go, no one in this world, Igor. It is understood. You can trust me."

"Just making sure you understand. I hate to hurt little girls. I'd really hate to do that...." His eyes focused on some invisible target and his thoughts seemed to trail off to memories not meant for the faint of heart. Igor knew what was on my mind. He continuously wiped invisible stains off the counter. He was trying to break it to me without sounding too harsh. "We need to talk about what I expect from you working here, living here, dealing with money and customers and so on."

His perfect English surprised me every time he spoke. It was the accent he couldn't shake. There is no 'w' in Russian and he tended to substitute the 'w' for the 'v'-sound.

"One more thing, Kate. Under the counter, behind that curtain, there is a gun. Never touch my gun. Never. Do not speak of it, do not handle it, don't even look at it. Just know it's there and leave the rest to me."

I just shrugged and lifted my hands, palms facing him. "You're the boss, *Shishka*."

My morning routine included the exchange of old loaves with fresh bread. I had to stock up soda, beer and candy and scan low inventory in a handheld scanner. We were always low on condoms but hardly ever sold the LA Times. I felt safe yet never forgot that the man I was dealing with was a thug. I had a distinct feeling that he was no stranger to breaking barely fused bones. I also had a feeling that our mutual agreement might cost me more than I could afford to lose. True to my soothsayer lineage, I was tested only one week later.

I was sound asleep in Igor's back room when a commotion awoke me one night. I could not put my finger on it - I did not hear glass shattering or gunshots - but my gypsy ways told me to be alert. Igor typically closed the gas station around midnight. He never showed up in the middle of the night.

The first noise I fully became aware of was the freezer humming through the wall. I checked the time; just after four in the morning. I then heard the delivery door in the back of the building slam against the crates behind the door. The back door was heavy - a fireproof door according to city code - and only a colossal force would slam the door into the crates. I heard them topple to the ground. Then the door slammed shut. An image of bells stirred up in my mind. I recognized the jingling of keys and a strange voice spitting Russian first class curse words into the night. Something kept bumping the walls of the narrow hallway towards my room. I pulled a sweater over my shirt and slipped into my shoes.

I opened my door and poked my head into the hallway. Unspoken words died in my throat and trickled down leaving the feel of acidic burn in my stomach. I saw a bright light bulb swinging in the stockroom by the backdoor. The light was so blinding that I could only make out the silhouette of a man. He was walking towards me, his keys jingling on his hip, carrying a heavy load over his back like Jesus bearing the cross through the streets of Jerusalem. I did not know if I should cross myself or slaughter a goat to ward off the evil coming towards me. As the man came closer, I saw parts of his face and his upper body covered in blood as if bleeding from a massive head wound. His chest was marked in magenta, drenched and shiny, the dangling light bulb swinging like a ghostly pendulum from the ceiling. The man's face was distorted, he struggled under the weight of the load. Every step took more strength than the one before. As the man walked further towards me, the smell of metal and salt struck me like a bat.

My stomach started to churn and my knees started to give when I heard Igor's voice:

"Kate, open the door to the freezer room." An array of the foulest Russian curse words I had ever heard, and some new to me, escaped his mouth.

He walked to the room next to mine and stood in front of the door. He was motionless. I then recognized the mass on his back as the body of a large man draped over his shoulders. Judging by the trail of blood following him down the hallway the man must have bled out between the back door and this very moment. I recognized a neck tattoo, or rather parts of it. A sling blade had severed his throat, cutting straight through the writing. His head was swinging back and forth, barely attached, hanging on by tendons, and some spinal cord, like a Halloween prop.

When his arm dangled towards me, I saw a huge hole in his shoulder. Someone had cut out a piece of his flesh to remove a tattoo that was not his to display in the first place. The dead man's boots were muddy. Igor stepped to the right and tipped his head downward.

"Get the key off the key ring, the silver one with the large teeth." His breathing was labored. The man on his back was at least the size and weight of Igor himself.

Igor stood and looked at me. He had ordered me to find the key to the freezer door among the many keys dangling from his hip. They were covered in blood. He must have touched them with his bloody hands when he unlocked the back door.

"I...I don't...Igor, I can't...they are...all of them...I don't know which..." I started to choke on my words. I did not want to touch the blood. If I had to be part of this, I wanted my eyes to be the only witness. I was his now. His accomplice, his partner in crime, the girl who helped him dispose of a body. So be it. But the one who touched the dead man's blood - I would not be.

Igor looked at me, his eyes without emotion. This was business. I was not willing to comply. He dropped the body on the floor, stood up straight, and stretched his back. Igor was spent. I looked down and fought back the content of my stomach. The body had landed on the tiles like a slaughtered animal, reeking of blood, slick and shiny like a newborn. I hit the light switch. The overhead fluorescent kicked on to its full capacity after a few hesitant sputters. The body lay flat on the tiled floor. He was on his stomach but his head was facing up.

Igor fumbled with the keys and unlocked the freezer door, then bent down and pulled the body to the back wall. He turned on the shower and stood underneath the stream of cold water as if it could wash him clean of all his sins.

He stood with his eyes closed, the brackish water running off him, over the dead body below him and down the drain. His white shirt clung to his body, his hair continued to ooze blood. He pulled the body towards the freezer and opened the door, his hands hooking the dead body by the armpits. A visible cloud of cold escaped the freezer and migrated into the room. He shoved the body into the freezer and managed to close the door behind him. The loud hum resumed as soon as he closed the freezer door.

Neither of us spoke. He walked out, down the hall and towards the back door. I heard him start the Lincoln and then take off. He hadn't said another word to me but I knew what I had to do. I gathered a bucket, mop, bleach, and started my shift early. I had to mop the hallway three times. I never went back to bed. Thinking of the hum travelling though the wall into my room made my

hands shake. I knew it was time to think about leaving. Sometimes the price we pay is in no way equivalent to what we receive. That's not gypsy wisdom, just plain old common sense.

But I had a plan. Gypsies always have a plan. I would work as an escort and save up money to rent an apartment. I would be frugal and save every dollar I made. One week after the incident I was on my way to a meeting with a Russian Madam and I needed to impress her. A trip to a Beauty Salon had left me blonder than ever before. A skinny Jamaican girl had dyed my hair, shaped my brows, painted my nails, the whole nine yards. I also bought a black silk blouse, a pair of black slacks and black sandals. The monochrome outfit gave me the illusion of elegance. As I caught my reflection in a mirror, I did not recognize myself. I was now officially broke, but I had cleaned up well and I knew it. Igor had allowed me to borrow his Lincoln for a couple of hours.

Igor was in his back office making phone calls. I was about to tell him I was locking up when the door opened and a Latino boy, barely out of his teens, walked in. He looked familiar but if it hadn't been for the key chain, I would not have recognized him. Three horses. *Tshor*. Thief. *You took my butji, my possessions. No one steals from a gypsy and gets away with it. Not where I come from.*

I turned and scanned the parking lot. At least he did not have the audacity to show up in my car. It was probably long gone, over the border, trafficking first-class coke so college kids could stay up and finish their papers.

I pretended to straighten the cigarette lighter display on the counter. Fate has its way of coming gradually and at its appointed hour. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was the master of my own destiny.

"*Mija*, you are looking pretty today. *¿Cómo te llamas?* What's your name?"

"*Padenie*." Russian for *your downfall*. *Nothing good comes from arrogance. Mijo still had a lot to learn*. He looked at me with those big brown eyes and I felt nothing but the need for revenge. I looked him up and down. His wrist showed the *pachuco* cross and '*tres puntos*', three small dots between his fingers, a popular generic tattoo among Latino teenagers. No connection or gang affiliation whatsoever. Just a kid trying to look cool. I just stared at him thinking he still had time to run if he made his move quickly.

"Where is the big guy? The owner, your boss, whatever...I need to talk to him."

"What about? Can I help you?" I emphasized the 'I'. The parking lot was deserted but for the boy's Mustang. We were about to close for the day. The radio was scratchy, stuck between two stations, aggravating me.

"I need a phone book. How am I supposed to make a call without the book? Is that how you treat your customers? I guess you are not making any money off that payphone and so you don't give a shit. Right, *mija*?"

I give a shit alright. It gets stolen, pissed on, torn up. Nothing is ever enough for people in this country. "I'll get the owner for you. Why don't you tell him all about it. He does not speak any English, he is Russian. I get him..."

"Wait, wait, *mija*. How do I tell him about the phone book? He speaks Spanish?" I just gave him a look, cocking my head to the right, pulling the left side of my lips up. *Yeah right.*

"How do you say this in Russian? How do you say 'why is there no book by the pay phone'?" he said.

" *YA znayu ob etom cheloveke v morozil□nuyu kameru.*" I said.

"What? *Yazanoo otretom chellovecce moro seal juno caeroo?* " He was trying, but got it all wrong.

" *YA znayu ob etom cheloveke v morozil□nuyu kameru* ", I repeated. We went back and forth another three or four times and finally he got it right. *YA znayu ob etom cheloveke v morozil□nuyu kameru.* Russian for *I know about the man in the freezer.*

"Igor?" My voice carried far into the back. "Igor?" Even louder.

Igor came down the hallway and entered the counter through the swinging door. He reeked of cigar smoke. Igor looked at me, then at the boy, puzzled. I nodded encouragingly at the boy. Then I took a couple of steps back.

"*YA znayu ob etom cheloveke v morozil□nuyu kameru.*" The boy spoke slow and clear.

Igor looked at him in disbelief, but just for a split second. Then his brain exploded. If you did not know Igor, you would have missed it.

"*YA znayu ob etom cheloveke v morozil□nuyu kameru.*" The boy repeated it, slower this time. He even smiled. Then said it one more time. "*YA znayu ob etom cheloveke v morozil□nuyu kameru.*"

Igor's right hand parted the curtain under the counter, reaching blindly, as if he knew its exact spot. Never took his eyes off the boy. He pulled out his Luger and he shot. Twice. The shots fired so quickly it could have been one single shot. Then he calmly hit the master light switch. The gas station was officially closed.

A red, shiny circle formed in the very middle of the boy's chest. Just one, that's how accurate Igor was. The boy had dropped without saying another word.

I reached for the boy's car keys on the counter. Igor had already started to pull the body down the hall. It was not a through-and-through; there would be no clean up.

I looked out into the dark parking lot. The boy's midnight blue Mustang waited patiently by the front door. I am a gypsy, a horse trader. The Mustang, compared to my old Ford Bronco, was a definite improvement. My people would have been proud of me. They always told me to fear a goat from the front, a horse from the rear, and man from all sides.

I grabbed my purse, walked to the Mustang and got in. I started the car. I pulled out of the parking lot and off I went. The Mustang neighed gently into the night.

**** THE END ****

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“According to Lizzy” by Aloysa

Synopsis: Love is blind but the ego sees more than what is visible.

About the Author: Aloysa lives, works and writes in Salt Lake City, Utah. Currently she is working on her first short-story collection “Twisted Tales of an Untainted Mind” that she hopes to complete by the end of 2011. Who knows what happens then! Don’t forget to check out Aloysa’s photography blog The Illusionist (<http://illusionist1.blogspot.com>).

In this drama, the psychological aspects of attraction and betrayal are explored in a thrilling way.

According to Lizzy

By Aloysa

She finds him in the kitchen, stirring something in a glass. She looks at him, lost somewhere inside herself, trying to preserve the moment of tranquility. He shows her the glass filled with water. Something round and white is on the bottom of it. She steps back when she sees it.

She turns away from him, goes into her bedroom that she already called theirs. She comes up to her dresser, cups her hands around candles, not to shield them from the wind that suddenly starts blowing in the room, but to try to feel their heat. She is shivering from the sudden cold that fills the room.

He follows her into the bedroom, explaining. His words are hollow. Nothing of what he says makes sense. She feels as if she is in a dream, a terrible, unspeakable nightmare in which everything she ever wanted is being taken away from her.

It simply cannot be true, not according to Lizzy.

&&&

Lizzy was born during a winter storm. Her mother, with an honorable name Elizabeth, went into premature labor, birthing a creature resembling a rabbit. Doctors, gathered around Elizabeth's bed, consulting each other, and concluding that the creature was a healthy, although premature, baby-girl with a certain facial deformity.

They wrapped the girl in clean and crispy sheets and showed her to Elizabeth. Unfortunately for the girl, her mother's body, drained of vital fluids and robbed of energy, was already dead. Elizabeth's lifeless eyes, her non-beating heart did not react to the tiny body of her daughter put into her hands.

Lizzy, named after her mother, was sent to an orphanage where she grew up wishing doctors would have whisked her away and declared her stillborn. She wished she had never been born, not with the face resembling a rabbit. She dreamed of waking up one day with a beautiful face, her rabbit like lips, jugged yellow teeth and pointy ears gone. But none of it happened. She looked small, ugly and frail. A beautiful person that she dreamed of, that could have been her, has become mute, strangled into an odd submission of ugly Lizzy.

She learned to hate beautiful people - men, women, children - it didn't matter who they were as long as they were beautiful, their faces perfect, their lips plump, their teeth straight and white. Beautiful people were living their lives while all she could do was watch them.

Every time a beautiful person walked into the diner where she was a waitress, Lizzie's heart stopped beating. It wasn't jealousy, or anger, or longing. It was cold, growing hunger. To muffle this hunger Lizzy ate. She ate obsessively, shoving pancakes, sausage, bacon - anything she could find - into her rabbit like mouth.

&&&



It was a time when spring lingered beyond its season, distilled into pleasant warm days of sunshine and chilly nights. One of those days, the front door of the diner opened, and a young man stepped inside.

He was tall, tanned and muscular. His blond hair was fashionably shaggy. He was wearing blue jeans that emphasized his muscular legs and tight butt. His leather jacket was draped elegantly over one shoulder. A black t-shirt wrapped his well-built body as his second skin.

He approached the bar, picked out one of the stools in the corner, sat down, slowly turned his head and looked at Lizzy, his dark eyes focusing on her. The young man not just looked at Lizzy, he actually saw her - not her rabbit like lips, crooked teeth and pointy ears - but her blue eyes. He looked at her for a long minute, and Lizzy felt flickering, stinging fire in his eyes.

For a minute or so, Lizzy was mesmerized and lost any ability to control her need to stare. She felt a swelling in her chest. She saw beautiful people before but no one like this young man. She stared at the stranger's flawless tan skin and imagined its velvety smoothness under her hand. She wanted to touch his face, brush through his golden blond hair. She desperately needed one sweep of the hand across his strong and broad shoulders.

That core of inner strength she always seemed to locate when she was faced with beautiful people was gone. She fell in love with him the way a person falls in love for the first time with something very beautiful. She imagined he was created for her, Lizzy-Rabbit, the way that notes were created for music.

The young man looked at Lizzy as if he knew what Lizzy was feeling. For a very brief moment, Lizzy's heart shot a jolt of blood through her already constricted veins. She grew restless and expectant. She sensed something about him, she could not explain. She spilled coffee. She dropped pancakes.

Then it happened. He stood upright, he looked into Lizzy's eyes and asked her if there was a motel close to the diner. He drove fifteen hours and he needed rest. No motels for two hundred miles, Lizzy explained. The diner was in the middle of nowhere. He could stay with a local perhaps.

His inquisitive look made her shy. Her own thoughts caused the knot in her gut. But in spite of this sudden timidity, Lizzy suggested the young man could stay in her house.

That night they made love, and she showed him the direction in which to move. He listened carefully and followed her instructions. He had enough tenderness to give her some respite. She wanted him to stay longer. She needed the moment to last because she knew that weeks, months, years go by quickly, all in a blur. But moments last forever.

Later, she noticed that he disappeared into the hallway. She laid in bed, waiting for him. This wait made her shiver, gave her some kind of thrill.

She got out of bed and went looking for him.

&&&

She is drifting, lingering in the room, softly kicking the corner of her dresser, thinking thoughts she cannot turn into words. Her unblinking eyes are focused on the young man who is standing in the middle of the room holding the glass filled with water.

He is as beautiful as he had always been, but his mouth had acquired a pinch.

She is rocking back and forth, trembling from cold.

Her apprehension increases. It is a bitter irony: he had been the one person in the world she had been able to trust, to open up to - and all the while he has been keeping a secret from her. Because of that very trust, Lizzy had never suspected his secret, which would have been obvious to her in any other person.

He does not see that Lizzy pulls out a hammer from the dresser. She hits him right into his pinched mouth, splashing his blood all over her nightgown and slippers. A sickening sound of cracking bones is suddenly a divine music to her.

Clawing hunger that trapped her a minute ago, starts slowly to release.

Lizzy looks up and studies herself in the mirror. She smiles and sees her yellow crooked teeth and rabbit like lips. She picks up a glass that he dropped on the floor. It holds his glass eye.

****** THE END ******

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“Speech Bub” by Chris Castle

Synopsis: Two kids, comic books, an awesome adventure and haunting memories.

About the Author: Chris Castle lives and works outside London. His primary influences include Ray Carver, Bill Murray, the films of PT Anderson and the Y: The Last Man graphic novels.

In this moving drama, we see a budding friendship of growing years.

Speech Bub

By Chris Castle

I'm going to write it all down now, once and for all. It won't make any sense, as much to me as anyone else, but I have to get it out. It's been too long. But as much as anything, I'm writing it for Bub, because no one else will.

I came home and it was the same. My mother, a nurse, would either be working or sleeping. It was only the two of us. The few hours we managed to collide for were the best times. She'd trade stories, patients, porters and crazies, all of it. We'd eat ready meals at our broken table and all I had to do was listen and laugh, which came easily. A stay for a smile.

My mum traded up a lot, I guess. A husband who drank and ran to a series of deadbeats who didn't drink and still ran. There were only two things to her; me and her patients. I like the way she cared for strangers as much as she did for me. She said it was the connection between people, time and places. Sure it sounds hippy, but my mum was like that. Pretty and goofy, like a friend's older sister; forever in touch, forever out of reach.

But like I say, those times were few and far between. The one constant around us was the hospital. It was always going to be full and my school accounted for a lot of that. Sal Alma was the poison to all my mothers' antidotes. The kids who formed groups did so because they hated the next guy more. I stood away from it all; away from the jocks, the geeks, the Goths and the dealers. I stumbled into class and I bolted out into the streets.

What I had going for me, which meant I only got beat from time to time, was that I could draw. Everyone knew it. In art classes I was on the walls, but in other classes I became famous for drawing my double sketches. That's what mum called them. She'd pin them on the fridge each week. It was never anything cruel or spiteful. I drew my history teacher in a chariot, a cheerleader shaking her ass in a full stadium. People liked it, teachers and kids. Requested them off me. And it was one of two things that led me to Bub.

My mum died, quickly and suddenly at the hospital. An 'incident' the police said, as I was hauled out of class, into the principal's office. I was halfway through sketching my history teacher on a horse and I was just up to the flared nostrils. A junkie she was treating lunged forward and stabbed her. They tried to save me the details but then asked me to identify the body. I did. Her skin was pale and white and she still looked beautiful, even then. The junkie, whose name was Daniel Blackweather, was captured on scene and was going to jail. I was told my mother's sister was moving over to look after me for the final year before I turned into an adult.

She was a nice lady, my aunt and we got on as best we could. We ate meals and talked and then we returned to our own small worlds. I went to my room and saw my mum's pale skin everywhere, in the wallpaper, the sheets. I turned up to school but I didn't draw anymore. People asked me and I refused. This led to fights which I started to enjoy. Soon I was known for something else and was left alone because of it.



One day I was sitting at the far end of the fields, eating the sandwich me and my mum made whenever we were together in mornings; cheese, peanut butter and cucumber. I tried to still like it, but nothing tasted the same anymore. I heard some shouting from someplace and for a minute I wasn't sure if it was in my own head or not. I looked up and saw figures by the chain fence that separated the classrooms from the fields. The school day was long over. I stood up and walked over; looking at the shadows of them against the sun, thinking it would have made a good sketch. Like one I made the summer before when me and mum walked the fairground by the beach, when it was hot and cheap and beautiful.

It wasn't screaming I heard but cheering. I knew the three boys who were pinning him up. They were the regular bullies and I knew their names, even though I never spoke to them. They took the kid, tore his shirt sleeves and tied him with them, same with his trouser legs. They walked away from him, an even twelve paces and shook empty a net of footballs. The kid wasn't crying. There was a gag, his tie, in his mouth, but his eyes were dry. He was just...watching.

They began to fire the balls at him, one after the other, rat a tat tat. The first few missed but they soon found their range. First they started at his head, then his chest, his gut. Then his nuts, his knees, his shins. They got pretty good. The kids eyes started to swell, but that was just a reaction to the pain. He wasn't crying. Same way he was gasping but not calling out behind the rag. As I ran over, I figured this was just someone that was already used to taking a lot of pain from people.

I didn't call out or challenge them. Why would I? I punched the closest one in the back of the head, kicked the next one in the shins. They were kids who knew how to fight but I was too much that day. I hit out for the kid, my mum, the junkie, the ...needlessness of things that happened. And I beat each one of them until they lay on the floor, still, amongst the footballs and the wide spread net. I kept going even after they were down until I looked up, looking for a ball to kick into them, when I saw the kid, still and looking right at me.

He was shaking his head. He wasn't scared for himself, or even what he saw, he was just letting me know to stop, that it was enough. I stopped as soon as he did that. I didn't know why. It's hard to stop that suddenly when you're bloods up. It was like another...antidote. I stopped and I walked over to him. I untied him and let him get his blood back. His cheek was swollen. He lifted his shirt and there were red welts and other earlier bruises not quite faded. He looked back up to me and we awkwardly walked away from it all, just as the day was fading and turning dark.

I found out his name was Mark. Mark Edgeworthy. I say found out, because he didn't talk. That first night as we walked down the streets and alleys I talked, still coming down, more than I had done for months. I figured at first he just liked to listen, was shy and still in shock. Then he pulled a notebook out of his back pocket, the old fashioned ones with the steel spines and the perforated holes, the pencil wedged inside the steel. He wrote down his name and then for some reason we shook hands, like true adults and then we kept walking. I never asked him why he didn't speak. I didn't wonder why I knew that it wasn't because he couldn't speak. But then he never asked me why I helped him. So we built our friendship on not asking questions about each other.

For that summer we saw each other every day, pretty much. We got the fag tag from the blocks, strange looks from the adults, who saw a six foot plus boy walking with a barely five foot kid who looked for all purposes like my secretary taking notes, but when you don't have anyone else in your life, you don't worry about other people's opinions. I bought Mark round for dinner one evening, but my aunt's eye darted from the macaroni to the pad so much the food got cold and the paper ran out. My aunt was glad I was out so much and one freak became a pair, much to no-one's concern.

I never laid foot in Bub's house. We always stopped at the top end of the street and all I knew was he lived a long way down it. More questions that didn't need asking. Sometimes I watched him walking away until he was little more than a dot, like the road was eating him up. Sometimes I wanted to follow him but had feeling the street would stop me, eat me up the same. It was the only time I ever felt scared.

The other thing me and Mark had in common was that we loved comic books. Me, I remember my mum bringing me a stack home from the hospital and leaving them by my bedroom door when I missed her. I came home and scooped them up and didn't leave my bedroom all weekend. Me and Mark walked into a store one day and made a beeline for the same shelf. He never had the cash for them, so he'd stop in four different shops in a row and read one in each before he got kicked out. Each week he'd read a sequence of four, so by the turn of the month he'd have read everything on the shelves and be ready for the next batch.

One day he wrote something down; it was after a comic run and we were both exhausted and bursting to talk/scribble about what we'd read. I always let him go with the first question and when he put it down, I smiled and for the first time, took the pencil and drew a speech bubble around the question.

"That's a good question, Bub." I said. It was the only time I saw him laugh. Silently of course. He'd grin all the time when we talked, but this was the only fully fledged beaming smile. And for all the trouble he had put on him, he had the most perfect straight white tooth smile. I couldn't help it, I smiled too as I handed him the pencil back and later as I walked home, I realised it was the first time I'd smiled since the day before my mom died.

So it went on, the summer. We'd cycle out to the lakes, the parks, anywhere there were no people and it was beautiful. We climbed old mineshafts, caves, anywhere we could find where we weren't supposed to be. We hatched plans, admitted which girls we liked; Bub would write his down and put the book behind his back and we'd count 1, 2, 3, until he showed me the paper as I said out loud. Talked about comics and guessed the heroes future for the next six issues. Who would get married, who would die, who we would be, given the chance. We talked until dark and well past it and neither of our homes worried or waited for us; we didn't want to be there and they didn't want to have us. It was perfect.

Then, at the height of the summer, Bub told me Comic Con was going to be arriving at our local mall the following Saturday. The biggest travelling convention of comic book fandom was going to be slap bang in the middle of our dead end plaza. Writers, artists, costumes and over 150 stalls, all there and all free. Bub's writing was so frenzied, I had to tell him to slow down and write in capitals. He was breathing heavy and quick at the same time and after he finished I was...speechless. All I could do was grab his pencil and write 'wow' on the sheet. And Bub read it, took the pencil back and very carefully drew a bubble round it and finished it off with an exclamation mark. He smiled and I laughed so hard I doubled up cramped on the floor.

We cycled to the creek on our bikes with the bag full of leaflets in our bag. We unfolded the map and marked out what we wanted to see, x marked what didn't interest us. We read through the titles, sat slacked jawed at some of the promos for upcoming events. It was going to be perfect. Then Bub looked at me very carefully, straight-faced and pale. I turned round, thinking someone had found us, but there was no-one there. When I turned back he was holding up the notepad, his hands straight and forceful, like when he wrote down Laura Bricks name the week before.

“You want us to steal?” Was all I could say. I felt myself go pale, and then shook myself out of it as his head nodded forwards slowly. He looked nervous and hopeful, the same way he’d done the first day I’d met him. And...defeated too. I didn’t want that. I breathed in, straightened my back.

“Good idea Bub! It’s a once in a lifetime deal, right? A one shot! We’re never going to have the cash to get them right?”

I saw the colour come back into his face. He nodded and began to scribble on his pad again furiously. It was the first time he’d ever taken the lead in our friendship and I was...proud of him, I guess. We sat and planned away, my voice shouting and echoing along the creek for what seemed like forever with the promise and the excitement of what we were about to do.

Down at the creek we planned it. We marked the places we would take from, how we’d break apart and work our way down and through and meet outside. We even decided on what clothes to wear; the baggiest, spaciest outfit we could come up with. We grinned at what we would wear, how stupid we’d looked. Each afternoon for six days we sat and schemed. The night before we shook hands, not awkwardly as before, but easy and natural. Then we cycled back under the stars, into the town, past the plaza, the posters and we looked over it all and then back to each other, but for some reason, right then, neither of us smiled.

The queues were around the block. People came from the town over, muttering in different accents, wearing costumes or school team jumpers. I stood a few feet from Bub, who looked even smaller in his baggy clothes, as if he could run between people’s legs to the front. The morning edged agonisingly on, until we finally filtered into the foyer. Guards checked for spray cans and confiscated lighters. Bub was just going in when he pulled a piece off his notepad and dropped it on the edge of the bin. Soon I was at the same spot and I casually picked up the ball and unscrewed it. ‘Good luck’ was in the bubble, five exclamation marks after it. I smiled and folded it into a neat rumped square and headed in.

I wish I could have enjoyed it. The cut outs were ten feet high of my heroes, authors from inlay covers actually sat and signed, sifted through crowds and shook hands. There were speeches and men in costumes and music played anthems from films and people cheered and hummed along. But all I could think of was the plan. I was cold even as everyone else complained about the AC. I walked in a daze, the map heating and growing soft in my pocket. I looked for Bub everywhere, but I couldn’t find him anywhere. I went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. I was breathing too quickly. I took out Bub’s message. I looked at it, over and over. And slowly my breathing slowed and my heart calmed and I realised it wasn’t the message but Bub’s letters, ones I’d grown so familiar with, like my own voice, and I turned to the door and walked out.

It was easy in the end. Amongst the commotion and the excitement slipping a comic down my top was a piece of cake. After a while I almost started enjoying it, the action, the turns and slips. I hoped Bub was getting the same kick as I was. The hour passed so quick it was only the announcer calling the midday seminar that brought me back to myself. I began to head to the doorway, still light, each magazine fitted perfectly against my skin. I was ten feet from the door when I made my mistake.

It was a few paces from the foyer. Nowhere near me and Bub’s planned route. A shelf of one-off specials, featuring Bub’s favourite character and my favourite writer. It was the dream combination we’d written up a hundred times down by the creek. I stood there for a full minute not believing my eyes. The crowds began to filter over to the big draw.

It was my time to slip away. I stood still. I turned, I reached forward and I took it. I turned round and just put my coat over it. I began to walk and there was a part of me that thought I was going to

get away with it, even as I saw a steward move towards me. I walked steadily to the door, hell straight to the security guard and I closed my eyes...and I heard another yell. I looked over and saw Bub kick over a stand, another, and then he ran to the door. The security guard ran past me and onto Bub, who was quick and small and left the doorway open for me. I broke into a sprint and in amongst the confusion, me and Bub bumped into each other by the door and stared at each other like a pair of strangers. Then we both broke out and ran into the street, the sun and away from the town, onto our bikes. We bombed away as the guards came into the street, chasing us, into a bus turning the corner, a bus of latecomers who swarmed over them. And we cycled away, into our good fortune and out into the open space.

The next day was perfect. We sat on the creek, laying them all out, holding them up to the sun, me hollering, Bub writing furiously. Looking back at it, I couldn't say we read more than seven or eight that day. But instead we just celebrated what we had done, what we held in our hands, our treasure. And after the weight and the heat of the morning, of the night before, we couldn't stop talking, writing, grinning, until long after dark. We cycled under the stars, uneven and wayward from the extra weight and we finally waved goodbye like we'd just met and knew the future was in our hands.

The next day our local police officer, Deputy Smith, arrived at my house. He spoke to my aunt, and then knocked on my bedroom door. The comics were laid under my bed. I didn't say a word. I just looked at him, watched his eyes skip, his lips move. I knew I was in trouble but all I could think was; Bub, Bub, Bub.

I didn't see him for a week. All our places, nothing. I expected a day, maybe two or three, but not this long. I asked my aunt if she'd heard from his parents but she just shook her head sadly and went about the housework. I received a letter, Bub's letters strange on an envelope, my address looking alien. I opened it and all it said was a time and place. And something else; to bring a sketch pad and pencil. I folded it and put it in my pocket. I felt a stab against my finger and pulled out the other note; his good luck message from the convention day. But the good luck seemed small, the letters weak and the exclamation marks looked more like a warning than anything else.

I arrived at the creek early, waited until I saw Bub pull up on his bike. He was riding slowly and he climbed off unsteadily. He wore a woolly cap pulled down as low as it could be. He walked over to me but I could already see the split lip, the black eye. He stood opposite me and I barely recognised him. Not the cuts and bruises but his eyes. He looked older, older than me, older than anyone I'd met.

I started crying. I couldn't help it. I tried to think of the last time I'd cried before that afternoon. I walked out into the space between us and I hugged him and I held him until I realised he was flinching. At first I thought it was me and what I was doing. But as I pulled away he saw how confused I looked and shook his head. Then he pulled up his t-shirt and showed me the sea of welts and bruises and cuts.

"Jesus, Bub!" I blurted out, the tears making my voice muddled, uneven. "You didn't have to get involved. If you'd just left me to it." My voice rose, angry. "I was the one who broke the plan. You should have left me. Then..." I wanted to say more but I couldn't. Snot bubbled in my nose and my eyes burned. I looked down, I looked away. I realised then, I must have looked just like Bub: defeated. I felt him put his arm on my shoulder. He held his other hand out and I realised he wanted the sketchbook and pen. But he put it down and pulled out his familiar pad and pencil. I was too confused to think, about any of it, too upset. I just shook my head, trying to think of something to say.

"Thanks for the letter. You shouldn't have spent your money on a stamp." Was all I could say. And in a way it was true. It was the first time I'd ever got a letter addressed to me. It made me feel like...I was my own person or something. I looked up to Bub. He held up his pad, something written on it.

"You stole it? After all this, you stole it? Jesus Bub!" I said. I was so shocked I started laughing out loud. He flipped the pad. Instead of a speech bubble, it was a quote;

"How else do you think I got this shiner?"

"Jesus Bub. I'm going to have to start calling you Punch-line now, huh?" I said and he grinned awkwardly, his lip curling up and staying high and bloated. I reached into my ruck sack and pulled out the plastic rag. I handed him the comic. The one-shot that was still under my coat when the policeman arrived, away from my stash. Because it wasn't mine. It was Bub's. Even beneath all the scars and damage and mess, his face lit up when he saw it and without anymore questions, we sat on the bank and he read it there and then, cover to cover.

I watched him then, carefully turning the page by the tip, delicate as my mum when she used to press flower petals between the pages of her yellow cookery book. I watched his eyes flicker, his brow rise and fall for another few pages, at the end of the chapter. I saw him buck up from lying to straight-backed with the last chapter. And slowly, carefully he closed the book, after reading the inside dust jacket. He looked up and just for a second he looked young again. His eyes were light and wide and the caked blood slipped away and there's only him, Mark Edgeworthy, as I remembered him. Bub. He wrote something down carefully.

"It was worth it, Bub?" I smiled, but it slipped away quickly. "How can all that be worth it, Bub? Look what they did to you." I waited until he wrote back, almost as I started to speak. I read out loud what he wrote.

"It takes me away, Clem." I said, jolting at my own name out loud. I'd met so few people; I didn't ever remember having to say my own name out loud. Bub moved awkwardly, stiffly and gathered up the sketch book and pen. He handed them to me. I looked up, but didn't know what to say. Bub wrote for a long time, turning a page, another. When he was done, he handed the notebook for me to read. I read it and felt my stomach turn, my head grow light. At the end I looked up, at Bub, covered in blood and bruises and pain, Bub my best friend, before or since, and I nodded and opened up the pad, unscrewed the pen.

I don't know how long we sat on the creek. It was the first time I'd sketched since the day my mum died. I began awkwardly; feeling the weight of the pen, getting it stuck in the paper, my fingers, slipping to the grass. But Bub guided me, sat at my shoulder, by my side, nudged me when he thought a sketch should be a drawing, a drawing a portrait. No more doodling on this pad. I drew and I drew, stopped at the end of each page and let Bub fill in the speech bubbles. And even though it was my mother's story, he guided me, steered me to where I needed to go. And when her story finished, Bub wrote the epilogue, finding the junkie's headstone, me with a spray can in my hand, my message clear. The drawing the simplest, best thumbnail sketch I'd ever done.

That night I looked at the sketchbook for a long time. I fell asleep holding it and that night I had dreams that came straight from the paper. I woke, startled and then returned to sleep. But they didn't break. Instead I dreamt more and more, the entire book, in sequence. And when I climbed out of bed at dawn I felt as if the book, which had fallen to the floor, was inside of me now. The sketches felt like memories in my head and I staggered to the wash basin, feeling both heavy and

light at the feelings I was holding onto inside of me. I cycled to the creek to tell Bub all I'd felt from the night before but he didn't show.

The deputy visited in the meantime. He told me the man who killed my mother had died in prison. He didn't pass on any of the details. He left and I sat on my bed, stunned, knowing exactly how he had died. Exactly how Bub had intended for him to die. I walked in a daze to the kitchen and reached under the sink. I looked at the can of spray paint that had no reason to be there and turned it in my hand. It was the perfect blue colour that we had visualised for the tombstone sketch on the final page. I got on my bike and headed for the cemetery

I headed back to the creek each day until he cycled on up over the hill, three days later. It was almost a replay, him unsteady, slowly, the pulled down hat and the long sleeved shirt. I looked at him. Where the old scars had healed, new ones grew over the top, like a tracing a little off centre.

"Bub, we've got to do something about this." I said. "I'll call the cops again, the school." I'd rung the police before, but nothing came of it. I talked to my aunt, but she shushed it away. I kept talking as Bub took out his paper and pencil, but I knocked it out of his hand. I felt the sting on my fingertips where I'd clipped his hand. For a moment I wondered if it was going to bruise and I felt sick. We stood there, looking to each other, down at the pad. I bent down and picked it up, gave it back to him. He smiled, nodded, but put it back in his pocket, waiting for me.

"The sketch book, Bub. I took it and dreamt it all. And now its feels like it's inside of me. I mean I know what happened and what you wrote but even the fiction felt real, too. And now it's come true! The junkie died, just like you told me. What you told me, I-" I looked up but he was just smiling. But it was a different smile. Again it made him look older, like he understood something no one else did.

He didn't reach for his pad. Instead he walked over to his bike, reached into a plastic bag. He walked back and handed me another sketch book, a pen. I didn't want to take it. But Bub pushed it into my hands, until I was holding it without realising it. He sat next to me, just behind my shoulder and I waited, even though I knew what he wanted. I opened my mouth and my voice, dry and quiet, said the words, even though I didn't want to hear them.

"Do you want me to draw you, Bub?" I asked and I felt his hand reach over my shoulder, take the corner of the pad by the tip and carefully lift it to the first blank page.

I don't know how long we sat there for, or even all of what we wrote. I just remember feeling it. Bub guiding my hand, his words triggering me, the pen in my fingers. The book was thicker than the last, the drawings bigger, more elaborate. A two page spread when we burst from the store, a fold-out for the creek where we sat. And it went on, each of us remembering different details that made up our life together. The pages filled and it grew dark. I remember climbing on my bike, almost asleep at the saddle and looking over to Bub, who looked alive and bright, as if he'd just woken up. We cycled back to town and when it came to break away, he simply waved and then peeled away, too quickly for me to say anything. He disappeared, the lights on his bike shining and then turning down the long dark and hungry street.

I slept with the book on my chest, though I can't remember when I was awake and when I slept. I was lying still, all of what we'd done together rolling over me, neither starting nor stopping. I climbed out of the bed not knowing what the time was, just pulling on my clothes to get ready to cycle to the creek, though I knew Bub would not be there, would never be there again.

I waited for a day, then two, three more. After a week, my aunt told me Bub and his family had moved away. I sat and listened though it didn't matter to me. They had moved away. He had got hurt so badly he'd run away. He was in a home. He was dead. All I knew was we had something that last day on the creek, something inside him that made me draw him out of where he was and into someplace else, some place he wanted to be. Someplace he could be happy. Somewhere he'd escaped to. What do I believe? The facts, the truth, or what I know inside of me? I never found Bub again. He disappeared that final day by the creek, pulling into the night, covered in blood and bruises and smiling to me.

Where is he? To me he's everywhere; in the sketchbook I keep with me, my memories, in my heart. And now I've finished his story, he is in my words. And now the story is finished and his notebook, the one I hold in my hands now, all metal spirals and perforated sides, is full, I finally close it shut; now it is all at an end.

****** THE END ******

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“If Only They Could See Her Now!” by KJ Hannah Greenberg

Synopsis: Ambitions and expectations collide to form an impressive outcome in this space drama.

About the Author: KJ Hannah Greenberg is usually too busy parenting her teenage sons and daughters to contemplate her navel. If she had five extra minutes, she would bake quinoa pie and feed it to her imaginary hedgehogs. Meanwhile, she steals time by sleeping a little less and laughing a little more. On rare, alternate Tuesdays, Hannah and the hedgies fly the galaxy in search of gelatinous monsters and assistant bank managers. Sometimes, they even catch a few. Read more about her at <http://www.kjhannahgreenberg.net/> .

In this fantastic voyage, the societal demands are left behind when an alien life form fulfills a void.

If Only They Could See Her Now!

By KJ Hannah Greenberg

Not only had Kimmy visited star systems far beyond the ken of her race, but she had left behind, in all viable places, descendents who copulated fruitfully and who lived twice the natural life span of her species. Though she had wished for a corner of the community chambers, what she had been granted was something far more wondrous.

The adventure began when Kimmy returned home between trips of campers. There were three shifts and she was on payroll for the entire summer. Though both Ross and Dad had written to her, there was nothing like her familiar hibernaculum to ease her to sleep or to bring on handsome dreams.

Sadly, Dad's handwriting was becoming increasingly illegible. Like many great omnivores before him, he suffered from a combination of Fatty Liver Disease, Lethargy, and The Wobblies. Mom had claimed that he was becoming metabolically retarded, i.e. fat. To wit, Mother had bought Dad a hamster wheel and had showed him how to use it. Shortly thereafter, though, she perished from an undifferentiated tumor. Thus, at present, Dad just glared at the exercise equipment.

As for Ross, who had quilled his baby shafts a full season after Kimmy had shed hers, he was a hottie. The two had met when Kimmy, in the company of Mother and of Anne-Marie, Kimmy's baby sister, had been motoring around town.

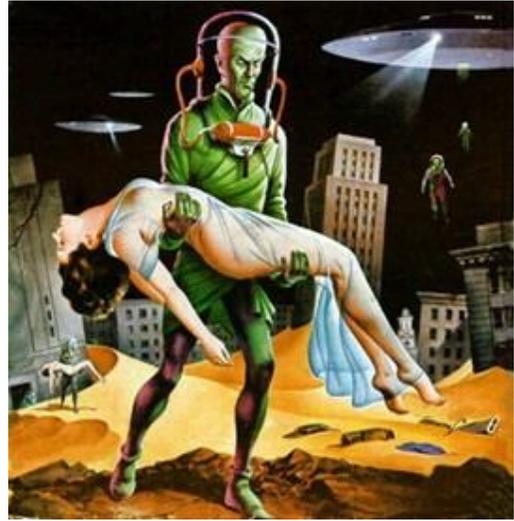
Anne-Marie had claimed it was the lavender that Kimmy enjoyed rolling in that brought Kimmy to Ross's notice. Mom had claimed it was Kimmy's girth; her older daughter already possessed a belly as burgeoning as that of matrons blessed with many litters. In Mother's mind, Kimmy's curvaceousness had suggested fertility.

Regardless of the reason, it was to Kimmy that Ross, the young, svelte hedgie called and it from Kimmy that he received an answer of sylvan song. Despite those facts, the two failed to produce offspring.

When it came to progeny, even Old Ma Kippipunk, the brooder whose pups usually failed to survive the cold, floods, and nest destruction concomitant with hibernation, had better luck, than did Kimmy. Hence, Kimmy had been banished to tend to orphans, at a nearby summer camp. Her Dad refused to let his daughter shame their colony. Dad could not care less than Ross was heartbroken from his desire to keep Kimmy company and to keep trying.

Now that she was home between camp sessions, Dad felt bad. Against his better judgment, he deposited his dishonorable child near the hidihole Ross favored. Dad rationalized, that given his own increasing difficulty with ambulation, it would behoove him to welcome that young male to their nest. If only he could simultaneously shoo Anne-Marie into the paws of some virile stud; someone had to provide the next generation.

Dad hung a daisy chain on the hamster wheel in anticipation of a pending celebration. Certainly, this time, the two young ones would produce a new litter. Maybe Kimmy could permanently remain



home from camp. Maybe, this time, she would be able to properly dedicate herself to the higher purpose of populating the valley.

For her part, Kimmy sat at the entrance of the burrow waiting to be kissed. As she watched her shadow change, she flexed each of her paws, in turn. Ross had commented that her backrubs were both sensual and arousing. What she understood as an easy means to soothe tired limbs that young boy interpreted as seduction. No matter, he was her best hope at being re-legitimized.

However, her shadows, in short shift, merged into the dusk of sunset. At twilight, that most magical, most romantic, time for crepuscular creatures, a muzzle pushed out past Ross' threshold. Unfortunately, that snout was attached not to an amorous hedgehog, but to a gelatinous beast slightly wider than Ross.

Kimmy would have screamed, had she not considered that such a reaction might further debase her family's community standing. Instead, she sufficed with baring her teeth. The alien answered with a series of patterned clicking sounds.

A small piece of paper, a printout of sorts, emerged from its belly. The starman, who was seemingly composed of gummy digits, waved the notice at the hedgehog.

Kimmy doubted that the being facing her could comprehend unrequited lust. In fact, she debated the wisdom of accepting the creature's missive, at all. The thought of returning to gum-chewing, marshmallow fluff –wading adolescent hedgehogs, packed into bunks meant for half their number, though, pushed Kimmy to reconsider the option before her.

She rationalized that the spaceman was no uglier than the geckos she and her charges had observed during an overnight trip to a nearby marsh. Further, the thing might be less intelligent than the dragonflies she and her campers enjoyed for their cookout dinners. It might be okay to accept the extraterrestrial's offering.

If only Ross was there. She would rather rub against that hedgehog hunk than interact with a foreign creature. If only her belly was filled with fetuses and not with adipose tissue. If only that space being would stop farting. Kimmy felt the spines along her back and flanks start to stand at angles from her body.

The viscous entity tinged and tangoed some more. It tried to indicate that it was important for Kimmy to read its note.

At last, the little hedgie reached over, swiped the paper from the weird being and read. In a perfectly understandable language, the star warrior stated that it had eaten Kimmy's lover.

Incensed hedgehogs are not pretty companions. Outraged little beasties are even worse for company.

The jelly critter, from afar, was ill-prepared for the audio and tactile communication being emitted by the small animal opposite it. Never before had it encountered an exasperated, desperate hedgehog. The alien beamed back to its craft.

He beamed Kimmy up with him.

With Kimmy safely snarling behind a thin, impenetrable, yet porous (that foreign race was of the benevolent sort) piece of plastic, the spacer regarded his manual on uncommon species. His

guide, most of which was derived from text developed from Earthly broadcasts that had ricocheted beyond their destinations, referred mostly to humans, and to a smaller degree, to horses, to dogs, to elephants and to the occasional feral cat. There was no mention of the nature or existence of hedgehogs in that record.

Undeterred, the alien punched a few buttons on his keyboard. His screen was quickly covered with all sorts of glyphs, some of which spelled out to him a need to tread carefully with his prisoner. Apparently, hedgehogs were more than the total of their spines.

Accordingly, the space beast lowered the wall caging Kimmy and sounded a rhythm of whirls and beeps in her direction. Hearing only cacophony and appreciating the limited possibilities afforded her by her new environment, Kimmy charged. Her bristling spines, her pointy teeth, her very death, would avenge her beloved and restore honor to her family.

The alien did not leak where he was punctured, despite his jelly-like appearance, nor did he feel any discomfort from Kimmy's bites. Rather, he registered no sensation at all; he was a machine programmed to look like the most widely distributed life form in the Milky Way Galaxy.

His response, to Kimmy's stampede, was to lift her up and tickle her. His display had stated that hedgehogs have vulnerable bellies.

Kimmy growled, giggled, and eventually panted.

A few flicks of a century later, after which tens of generations had partied in her womb, Kimmy was content. Henry regularly brought her lemonade, containing just the right amount of sugar, rubbed her shoulders, all four of them, and insisted on supplying her with edible insects and delectable berries. Less often, he'd park his ship on a planet with usable air and allow Kimmy as many seasons as she desired to scamper beneath some suns.

Per Kimmy's children, it had been a simple matter to impregnate the young hedgehog. His ship was replete with all manners of samples collected from various worlds' populations, including essential cells taken from Ross' body. In fact Kimmy, herself, upon learning about Henry's repertoire of skills, had arranged the implants.

While she lamented, for periods of five years, her inability to inform her people of her procreative success; Henry, by dint of his programming, was unable to return to places already visited, she flourished in the stimulation of their intergalactic adventures and in the knowledge that she had independently populated an entire planet full of hedgehogs. If only her family and friends could see her now!

**** THE END ****

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“A Game of Cubes” by Martin Murphy

Synopsis: In a cosmic drama, 2 contenders will meet to excel in supernatural prowess.

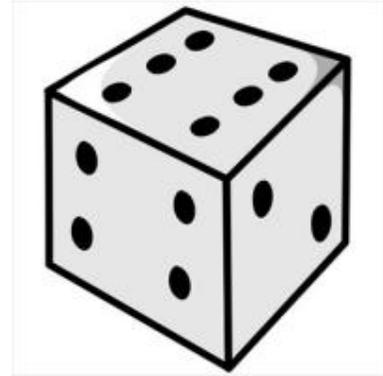
About the Author: Martin Murphy is 37 years old and lives in Cork in the south of Ireland. He has only been writing seriously since last August but has about 15 pieces in fiction and non-fiction. The fiction is mainly sci-fi but he is working on some fantasy as well. His non-fiction is a bit philosophical sometimes and is his two cents on certain issues.

In this fantastical drama, we experience an unknown realm as forces of good and evil collide.

A Game of Cubes

By Martin Murphy

Castor had finally made it to the Celestial Halls. For years he had been the greatest sorcerer of the Age on his home world of Volartis but he had felt intuitively, even then, that there was more that he could be and achieve. One warm night, while meditating in the garden under a full moon and an overhanging canopy of stars he felt a great force move in his being. He had been touched by a great spirit who didn't identify himself but called him to the spirit world. Although unsure and at considerable risk, Castor decided to wade into unknown waters and soon attempt an ascension beyond sorcery which was seen as the highest magic possible. A few days later he was in the garden again, sitting and lost in thought. His small frame bent slightly and his light blonde hair fell flat on his head. His piercing green eyes were for now closed as he opened his mind to the cosmos. The experience lasted only about five minutes but was very intense and then, coming out of it, he knew he had been successful. He could now roam in the Celestial Halls in his spirit whenever he wished and he did and he also got to know the spirits from other worlds.



He was popular and many weeks passed as he waited for the Ceremony of Lights where he would be presented with his staff, the Rod of Ios and given a new name by Lord Ios himself, the lord of this spirit world that would be his celestial name. It would be more true to him than his birth name and reflect something of his essential nature. One evening the special Assembly bell finally rang and they all gathered together in the Great Hall. This particular ceremony only happened whenever someone ascended to the Celestial Realm and so was not very frequent, perhaps once in an age as measured in a mortal world. It was much anticipated and enjoyed but tonight would see a complete disaster.

Lord Ios was wearing his golden crown studded with diamonds and dressed in his shimmering purple and blue robes, for invisible beings are visible to one another. He looked like a lord down to his neatly trimmed, white goatee beard and deep sea-blue eyes which gave the impression of both calm and power. The hall held a thousand celestials and could hold more. Down either side stood tall white columns supporting a high ceiling engraved with curves, patterns and symbols in interlacing silver and gold. Now Lord Ios rose from the long, oak table at the top of the hall and addressed the Assembly. "Tonight," he said in a clear, resonant voice, "we recognise a new being and present him with his staff and give him a new name for he has been transformed from the person Castor, a man and a magician on Volartis to the being Luxus, an immortal and member of this exalted Assembly."

There was a low gasp from those standing because "Luxus" meant "The Illumined Being" and this was seen as a great honour. Many wondered if he would live up to his title. Lord Ios sensed their questions and continued, "I have named him so because he has consistently since his childhood shown a great desire and ability to progress, excel and transcend himself and has broken down boundaries fearlessly like the ancient magical ascensions of any world. He was a gifted apprentice, wizard and sorcerer and he has risen quickly so that he now stands before you, relatively young, as one of you, a citizen of the Celestial Realm and bound to make a great contribution."

Luxus stood and took the praise but troubling questions came to the fore of his mind straightaway as the Assembly politely and kindly clapped their hands; "Was this it?" he wondered, "What if

being a celestial in the Halls under the rule of Lord los is all that I can be?”, “What about Lord los himself - what was his secret?”, “Why was he the only one who had achieved, the final great ascension?” But now he also realised his choice was stark: becoming a god like los or something like a snail. It was 50/50 and, although he had heard rumours that this wasn't the full story, it was the common belief and one he himself adhered too. It was all about risk.

Many celestial beings spent millennia pondering this simple dilemma and of the thousand or so beings gathered there, none had attempted the great fifth, the final ascension - there was simply too much at stake, too much to lose. At every ascension to a higher level of being you risked descent to a lower form such as a mortal or an animal and the higher the ascension the greater the potential fall. How the magic decided was mysterious as was the magic itself. Most celestials were content to be such although occasionally they wondered about Lord los, living proof perhaps that fortune favoured the brave for one thing. Or was it that he just knew something they didn't - that was a persistent question. Lord los couldn't talk about his own experience of course which had been solitary for one thing with no one to advise him since he was the first but he could give general counsel. It was a great comfort and puzzle to many that los had at one time himself been a small boy on an ancient world and now he ruled this universe with no more desires for further ascensions or power or truth because there was no more - he was perfect, complete and divine, he was a god.

Luxus felt a storm blow up in his mind and heart considering this, he would not be an inferior spirit; all his life he had been the greatest and had done much good - why should he stop now? He began to feel angry and reckless but suppressed his emotions and then began to feel ill. However, he decided he was going to attempt Great Fifth tonight and try to look on it like one of the fearless ascensions of his youth. The die was cast. Lord los now looked at Luxus as the Assembly looked on and he read the shadow on new celestial's heart but he was filled with compassion for this restless spirit who in ways resembled himself. Luxus spoke up then and in front of the whole court asked Lord los, “Tell me, my Lord, of the final ascension.” Silence suddenly fell on the gathered celestials like a curtain made of lead.

Lord los looked Luxus in the eye and said “It is the ultimate transcendence but not to be attempted lightly or too hastily!”

“I will judge what is right for me, thank you,” replied Luxus, “maybe this is just the way to do it, achieve the fourth and then soon after the great fifth while the iron is still hot and the intention pure. Do you think I'm ready?”

“No!” declared Lord los, “you are powerful and talented, yes, but you haven't prepared, you have no celestial experience like these others you see before you. And even though they have it they are sometimes slow to even dwell on the final ascension. The risk is too great for you now, Luxus.”

“But if I attempt it, you won't stop me?”

“No, I won't stop you, I cannot interfere with your freewill but this is madness...This is the Ceremony of Lights; you have just been made a Celestial being. Now is not the time to attempt the final ascension. You need time, Luxus, trust me.”

“I hear you words, los, and they would seem like wise counsel but I have seen your intention. You don't wish to have a rival or an equal. You want to reign supreme like a king and have us as your loyal subjects forever. I for one do not wish to be a follower and never have been.”

"No, Luxus, you misunderstand, I'm thinking of your welfare. I don't wish to witness an utter descent for a being as promising as you. You may one day attempt the great fifth as any here may do but for you, now is not the time. See sense please!" Lord los pleaded.

But Luxus would not listen and decided then to formally ask Lord los to perform the great ascension rite. It would only take a minute as time was measured there.

"Lord los, please administer the great ascension rite now."

Lord los sighed heavily and knew Luxus would not be swayed. He closed his eyes and placed his hands on the head of Luxus who also closed his eyes. After a few seconds there was evidence of intense effort on both faces and interior struggle. Mentally, Lord los was reaching out to Luxus who was drowning in a sea of blackness. Luxus was reaching for the light but couldn't ascend or make the connection with Lord los who could guide him. The fact that he was falling into blackness meant that, although he was gifted at the art and skill of magic, his character was defective, lacking wisdom and compassion and with too much pride and ambition. Luxus had overreached himself and didn't have the self knowledge to know that he couldn't truly be a god like Lord los. Lord los tried one last time with the seconds running out to reach him but couldn't and then suddenly all activity ceased.

Those assembled saw Luxus vanish and Lord los opened his eyes. Everyone was horrified. Immediately some came forward and asked if Luxus had truly fallen. Lord los closed his eyes briefly and intuited that the answer was, amazingly, no. Then there was confusion. If he wasn't a god or a simple creature where was he, what was he? Lord los thought again and realised that Luxus had somehow created a third possibility; not existence in this cosmos or any cosmos as a god or a simple life form but instead he had chosen life in the outer darkness, the void, the dead space between and around cosmoses. It was not known if any could survive there but Lord los said it was possible for a spirit at the cost of pain. He warned that Luxus might yet return in some form and that his continued existence as a corrupted being might spell grave peril. Luxus soon called "the cursed" inhabited the empty darkness and wrapped himself in thought and cold contemplation plotting revenge. Evil was being born of a father who assumed the mantle of the "Dark Lord". He now schemed and set out to wreck and pervert everything that Lord los had created.

As expected, there was doubt and anxiety in the Celestial Halls such as there had never been before. Luxus shouldn't have survived but he did and he now posed a serious threat. What would he do now and how could they counter him? Some leading figures hastily met and discussed options. Their best hope was, they concluded, for someone to challenge and confront him soon before he became more powerful and not least because in a few hours they might not know where he was. Right now Lord los would have an idea of his location but who would go? Who could at the very least neutralise him?

Marsirim stepped forward and said he would do it. He was strong and unafraid. What Luxus was to the world of Volartis, Marsirim was to Tevlasym in the previous era. He had been one of the few to learn directly from Lord los who had disguised himself as a mortal then and he had been one of Lord los's favourites not just because he was the outstanding student but because he was generous to his fellows and laughed a lot. Also, the pace of his ascensions was near perfect. He only asked for the rite when he was as ready as he could be and he never tried to go higher than he could at any given time. This was in marked contrast to Luxus who, though brilliant, had been impatient with ascensions and a greater risk-taker. If these two could have been friends they would have been the perfect combination and for a long time they got on well in the timeless halls each sensing that the other had qualities that they were lacking.

But now things had turned grave - it was time for action and courage. Lord los had been mocked and the Celestial Realm was threatened. Lord los couldn't himself deal with Luxus because of the equality principle which meant you couldn't fight a being who was below you in status. An equal from the ranks of the celestials would have to do it.

Marsirim was the only one who volunteered because most were intimidated by Luxus's power and skill. They applauded Marsirim for taking on this great challenge, he would be the champion of the court. Marsirim was, it must be said, very loyal to Lord los and his name meant "Son of the divine flame". He would gladly defend the realm and Lord los. He presented himself before Lord los that evening and Lord los cautioned him "Know this, Marsirim, combat or skill with magic will not decide this. Luxus is likely to risk it all again on a game of cubes. One toss of a die will settle it, at most two or three. Do you still want to do this?"

"Yes," said Marsirim grimly, "it's the only way. I will trust the power of magic."

Lord los was heavy of heart, he had just lost one great spirit, he didn't want to lose two but all he said was "I cannot argue with your logic and I bless your mission. Good luck, Marsirim."

Marsirim then left the hall and went to the fountain to be alone or maybe meet his beautiful mate, Myrrima, the only one he wanted to talk to then. She was there already waiting for him sitting on the marble rim in flowing, layered, green garments. Her long chestnut curls fell down her back and shoulders but she was sad and distracted. She made circles in the water with her fingers and he couldn't see her beautiful brown eyes that had been praised as pools of promise. When he approached she looked up and immediately went to him, throwing her arms around him and kissing him tenderly on the cheek.

"I know I can't talk you out of your decision," she said, "but just be careful. And don't wonder if you can beat Luxus. I know loyalty drives you and you will willingly give up everything to defend you lord and all you know but don't doubt yourself or your abilities either. Do you remember when we first met? "

"I remember that you were beautiful, everyone wanted you and you would talk to none including me. At least you would talk but you hadn't chosen a mate. When I tried and failed and then Luxus came along I thought you would choose him. He was very popular."

"But I had chosen. I chose you but I just wanted to be sure. I had to be sure that my prince was who I wanted him to be because I am the type who only chooses once. Now I know that I have chosen well but I hope that it isn't the last time I see you. To know you are perfect but that at the same time I could lose you is bitter indeed and like a knife in my heart."

"As much as anything I will fight for us then," Marsirim said gently.

"Remember, dearest, that a risk taker like Luxus fears most those who would take a greater risk. And know that Luxus pursued me once too. But unlike you and others who politely withdrew when I turned them down he kept pestering me. When you and I became mates I think he began to resent you as much he did Lord los."

"I don't know how but hopefully I can use your advice and what you say," Marsirim said.

"And don't give into anger," Myrrima advised, "be cool and you will succeed."

"I won't," he replied, "It will do me no good anyway. Thinking of us will sustain me and I will remember your face when I am in the dark - it will be a light for me. I must meditate now and

prepare. My guess is that this will be over soon. Wait for me, dear, and farewell.” He walked away grave and unsettled but also hopeful; Myrrima had given him some insights to ponder.

Myrrima sat alone again and mumbled quietly to herself, “I will. I will wait for eternity if I have to. Come back to me, Marsirim, come back to me,” she whispered with tears welling up in her eyes and trickling down her face. “What has happened to the world?” she asked herself. And then she left, wiping the tears away. How could she tell Marsirim to be cool and not do so herself? All she could do was wait but she promised herself that if Marsirim survived and everything she wished for came true she would work tirelessly with Lord los and others to deal with this new reality. No task would be too great. Silently she prayed to the unknown God as Lord los encouraged those who were willing to do so and who believed in Him. He suggested they address Him or Her as The One, True and Holy God and then make their petition. She did and prayed “Great God, if Marsirim calls on you, please grant his wish if he truly is the greater spirit as I believe.”

Marsirim went to his chamber and meditated for thirty minutes. He had a lot on his mind but stilled his thoughts and focused on what was important; how to deal with Luxus. There were too many scenarios and possibilities so he decided to play it by ear which he was good at. He would adapt to circumstances as they arose and think as he acted. He would be cool as Myrrima had suggested. That’s how you beat a “hothead”. Then, his mind made up and ready as he would ever be, he went to Lord los to be transported to the outer darkness because he couldn’t do it himself. This was done before the Celestial Assembly many of whom had also prayed to the Great God for Marsirim. Marsirim approached the throne and Lord los asked “Are you ready?”

“Yes I am, my Lord, proceed.”

Lord los placed his hands on the sides of Marsirim's head and looked for a moment at this brave celestial who fought for their realm. He and Luxus were so different. If los saw in Luxus some of his talent and power in Marsirim he saw his heart and temperament. Remembering the recent rite with Luxus this felt so different in energy. They even looked like opposites. Whereas Luxus was slight and fair, Marsirim was tall and dark with blue eyes that were fearless and pure. Lord los closed his eyes then and concentrated. Marsirim closed his eyes too. Moments later he disappeared to the disquiet of all those assembled. Lord los addressed the Assembly and said “Would those who wish to join me in prayer remain here.” Not a single individual left the Hall. He continued “Let us pray to the Great God that He will bless Marsirim’s effort.”

“So let it be done,” they responded for they all understood the gravity of the situation. Much would be decided tonight.

Marsirim found himself floating in velvety blackness with round cloudy smudges all around him but distant, then his feet touched solid ground. Looking around himself some more Marsirim sensed life and intelligence in some of these cosmoses but some were negative in their energy. These worlds were waiting for the coming of holy beings. Some were patient. Others grew restless and angry and even disbelieving. These latter ones were alive but palpably evil. Then he realised something else. Luxus being evil would be kindred with these evil beings and worlds in terms of energy and while he couldn’t physically enter them he could send his thoughts into them. He could influence willing minds and organize them. Also, if any people or races in these cosmoses sought a dark God instead of the good Beings that would one day be sent by a god like Lord los, their thoughts would reach Luxus and they could commune. These same people believed that God had abandoned and deceived them and they consequently had rejected Him and now walked the dark path. But other worlds waited patiently for the coming of the Holy Ones.

Marsirim snapped out of his pondering and came back to his present situation. He looked around this shadowy place with no stars and noticed the ground was cracked and broken - and warm when he touched it. It was a cosmic seed. An aeon from now it would burst with great energy and form a fiery energy cloud from which would come galaxies, stars and worlds condensing like droplets and eventually life would come forth on some. Now he wondered how to find Luxus. Then he thought that he might instead bring Luxus to him. So he sang one of the most beloved songs of the celestials. It told the story of the ancient night that Lord los achieved the final transcendence on his own in a cave and ushered in the era of the beings. Sure enough Luxus heard it and recognised the voice as that of one he knew and one of the few he considered an equal when he dwelt in the timeless halls. Luxus went to him and when Marsirim saw him, the singing stopped abruptly.

"Please continue Marsirim, you sing so well." Luxus said teasingly and with some envy. He himself couldn't sing, something counted as odd even when he was a celestial.

"I sang because I wished to find you, Luxus. You have broken the law and become something strange. You should be a basic life form now - harmless, but you are not. Instead you threaten Lord los's realm. You would lead individuals astray and corrupt whole worlds."

"Only if they want to follow me to, Marsirim, I can't compel them to do anything. I merely present them with more options, more than you want them to have."

"Evil is a wrong option, Luxus but you will deceive and flatter and confuse to gain support. Your ultimate aim is to destroy all that Lord los has built. It has taken an aeon for him to illuminate our cosmos and you wish to tear it down."

"I don't think of it in terms of good and evil, Marsirim, just what works. And I merely want to bring a new order to the realm, shake things up. los has had his time. And I for one don't want to be one of his sheep, others may agree with me."

"And you have had your time. Let us end this now. I challenge you to a game of cubes. Lowest sum wins as usual. The loser descends utterly and the winner gains his foe's power. Agreed?"

"Agreed," replied Luxus hotly, indignant at the challenge to his courage.

Luxus tossed out his cubes and threw two ones and a three and smiled. "You can pull out now if you want, Marsirim," said Luxus, "and we can do this dance another time." He stood up and Marsirim could see Luxus just assumed he would agree, that he wouldn't risk it but then he thought of his mate's Myrrima's words and decided he would take the risk. For his part he decided the fact that he could end things here, even with these odds, before reality changed unalterably and Luxus did God-knows-what with his growing power was worth the risk."

"No," said Marsirim, "I will throw my dice and settle this now - for good."

"Really?" replied Luxus, "You would risk everything on these odds? Throw them then!" he said arrogantly and loudly, "Your fall will be much greater than mine and this will be my first victory." Inwardly though he was unnerved but he calculated he had won. Marsirim was clinging to a single percent of hope.

Marsirim then made a simple prayer to The One, True God as Lord los had taught him when he was a child on Tevlasym and asked that he be given only the help that his life deserved and then he threw the cubes.....They rolled and the fates of Marsirim and Luxus rolled with them, they

rolled and Lord los prayed at the altar, they rolled and Myrrima wept at the fountain, they rolled and the hopes of the entire celestial court rolled with them, they rolled and the future of worlds and universes were weighed in the balance, they rolled and the magical energy field vibrated with the chimes of destiny and then, finally, the dice came to a halt and turned up. "One", "Two", and "One"! Luxus convulsed and let out a scream of utter, disbelieving horror but it was instantly extinguished and he vanished like a wisp of smoke in the wind.

Marsirim called on Lord los now in his mind and was brought back before a crowded assembly and greeted with sustained applause. The cheer went up "Marsirim the Great". The celestial beings, long a house of diverse individuals but strict equals, had their first hero, someone they wanted to elevate. In doing so, new possibilities opened up for all of them especially when Marsirim told his amazing tale which became justly famous and beloved. Many recognized the great bravery Marsirim had shown to volunteer and defeat Luxus and that they could all learn from it. Much had been preserved that day and there was joy in the Halls such as there hadn't been in a very long time.

****** THE END ******

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“St. Catherines” by J.C. Piech

Synopsis: A woman wakes up in a strange new world with no memory of how she got there.

About the Author: JC Piech lives in south-east England with her patient and lovely husband. Her writing tends to fall into one of two categories – light and spiritual, or dark and strange. Perhaps it's because she's a Gemini? Or perhaps she's just a weirdo. You can follow her juxtaposed brain mumblings at <http://jcpiech.tumblr.com/> .

In this post-apocalyptic story, a woman discovers darkness on opening her eyes to a devastated world.

St. Catherines

By J.C. Piech

It's hot. The kind of hot that makes me think of my mother's house, with all the double glazed windows shut tight and the central heating drying out all the air. My lips are parched, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. The back of my throat feels like how the edges of my school playing field used to look in the middle of August, cracked and dry, how I imagined African fields must have looked all year round. It takes around three seconds for me to realise how weird all this is. I know that I had fallen asleep last night in my bedroom, with the window open, to make sure the room stayed cold – I sleep well only if the room is cold. My eyes snap open. I'm not in my bed.



Fluorescent light floods my eyes and I can *feel* my pupils shrink down into pinpoints. I can't help but shut them again. There's something around my wrists. Tight. And around my body too. Something tight across my chest, squashing my breasts, they hurt. I feel my body start to shiver all over; despite the heat of the room I suddenly feel tremendously cold. The hairs on my arms stand on end. I can feel my wrists shake against their restraints. I've got to open my eyes and find out where I am but my eyelids refuse. Wherever you are, they say to me, it's not going to be good, is it? You might as well keep us closed, save yourself the trauma. I have to forget about anything else for a moment and focus all of my will on opening my eyes. When I do they're blinded again by the overhead fluorescent strip for a moment, but then I blink a couple of times and they start to adjust to it. I turn my head; the only part of my body not strapped down, and see a row of five empty hospital beds next to me and over the other side of the room is another row. I look to the other side and there are more beds, a long row of them stretching down to a green wall where there's a white door with a small window in the middle of it. The window has a wire grill over it. The white door has a brown splatter stain on the bottom left hand corner. All the beds have black straps hanging down at the sides making them look like white rectangular octopi. The floor is grey tiled. The ceiling is dirty white.

I don't recognise this place and I have no memory of how I got to be here. I've never had to go to hospital for anything before. Sure, there's a history of heart disease on both sides of my family, but I'm only twenty-nine. Did I eat something funny? I guess I *have* been feeling a bit tired lately. Did I collapse? But why am I the only patient on the ward? I don't think there's any such thing as a quiet day for the NHS. And why am I *strapped to the damn bed*?

The fluorescent lights buzz. The clock above the stained door ticks loudly and cuts into my consciousness. Apparently its fourteen minutes past three – whether that's am or pm, I have no clue. The only window in here is the small caged square in the door. There's a sudden noise. My body jolts. I realise it's the pipes.

I'm wearing pyjamas made from itchy, white material. I'm hot again now and can feel my body sweating underneath the coarse fabric. I'm not wearing any underwear. I stare at the window, feeling more pissed off now than scared. Where am I? Where's my stuff? Who bought me in here and then left me, on my own, on this grimy ward, with the noisy lights, and the loud clock and clanking pipes?

A pale face fills the dark square in the door. Maybe I'm not too young to have a heart attack after all. I jump so violently against the straps I'm scared for a moment that my bones are gonna break. The face disappears from the window and I hear bolts being unbolted and locks unlocking, and then the door opens and in walks a tall, thin woman in a light blue nurse's uniform. Her skin is almost the same colour as the ceiling - white, but not white. Cigarette-stained white. She has dark circles around her eyes. Her face looks nothing more than skin stretched over a skull. There's no colour in her lips. By the looks of it, she used to be blonde, but it's almost all grey now, tied up into a tight bun on her head. As she walks over to me her shoes *click-click* on the grey tiles.

"You're awake," she says flatly, emotionless. "Have you calmed down now?"

I look at her, not knowing what she's talking about. Now that she's standing right next to my bed I can see thin blue veins through the paper-thin skin on her arms. I wonder for a moment if she really is a nurse at all, and not just some terminal patient who's playing dress up.

"Where am I?" I say. It comes out in a hoarse whisper. My lips feel like they're about to split open, they're so dry. "Can I have some water, please?"

There's a small cupboard next to my bed. Without a word she bends down and opens the door, takes out a small bottle of water and a plastic cup. She fills the cup and motions for me to lift my head so that she can give me a drink.

"Can't you just untie my hands?" I ask.

"Do you want a drink or not?" is her toneless reply.

I lift my head and she puts the cup to my lips and I drink all of it. I feel like I should thank her. That's what years of conditioning does to you. I don't say it though.

"Can you please just tell me where I am? I have no idea how I got here." I watch as she puts the bottle of water back. "Am I ill? What happened?"

"You can pretend all you like," she says. "But I'm not untying you."

"I... what? *Pretend*?" I say. Panic starts to build inside me. The fluorescent lights buzz. The pipes are still clanking. "For now, I don't care about being untied, okay?" I say. "I just want to know where I am and what's wrong with me." My heart feels on the verge of river dancing.

The nurse turns her back on me and makes her way towards the door. "I'm going to get Dr Klein to come and see you."

I watch her leave the room. I hear her bolt and lock the door. It's not like I'm going anywhere, I'm strapped to the fucking bed. My breasts hurt. I try to move my arms. I try to pull my wrists free of their binds, but it's no use. The clock now reads half past three.

Its quarter to four when the nurse comes back with the doctor. He asks if I remember who he is and I say of course I don't and his face drops a little. He says his name is Dr Johan Klein and then he musters up a smile for me. He's tall with short dark hair. He's unshaven, and has the same dark circles around his eyes like the nurse. But he's handsome. He looks a little chunky around the middle underneath his white coat. Although like everything else that's white around here it's not really white at all.

"The nurse says you don't know where you are, is that right?" he asks.

"Yes, that's right," I say. "I have no idea where I am or how I got here. I just want someone to tell me."

He looks at the nurse. She nods and then leaves the room. Dr Klein takes a seat on the bed next to me and tilts his head slightly to one side. "You really don't remember at all, do you?"

"No!"

He sighs and scratches the back of his head. Then he turns and looks at the clock. "I suppose I could show you a bit of the hospital and then we could go to my office and I'll explain everything to you, if you don't remember naturally. How does that sound?"

"Whatever," I say. "Just as long as I find out where I am, I don't care how you wanna do it."

Dr Klein stands up and starts to untie the straps. He undoes the one across my chest first. His touch is gentle and he looks at me as he loosens the buckle. There's no awkwardness for him in his being so close to me, but I feel uncomfortable and look away from him. Next he undoes the strap across my stomach, then my hips. He undoes the straps that are around my ankles and then my wrists which now sport thick red marks around them. How long was I tied up for? I start to sit up and he says quickly, "Wait, wait! Not so fast. Take it slowly; you don't want to make yourself dizzy. Look, hold on..." He crosses over to the far corner of the room and comes back pushing a wheelchair in front of him. The metal arms on the chair are rusting. There's a hole in the black plastic seat cover exposing the yellow foam underneath. The wheels squeak as they turn. "Hop on this," he says. "I'll show you around."

As he helps me off of the bed and into the chair I notice how long my leg hair is. My fingernails look chewed and brittle. And I stink.

He wheels me out through the stained door and we enter a long, dimly lit corridor which stretches out in front of us, with a row of doors along each side. I hear voices coming from somewhere. They're hard to make out at first, they sound muffled and distant. But as Dr Klein pushes me down the corridor, over the dusky pink carpet, the voices become clearer. They're moans and shouts. Shrieks. Laughter. I'm in a nut house. A light overhead flickers and then goes out, sending us into momentary darkness until we move underneath the next light.

"Is this a psychiatric hospital?" I ask, knowing that I already know the answer.

"You're right, it is," he says calmly. "St. Catherine's." I've never heard of it.

We reach a set of double doors which open automatically as we approach. We enter into a reception area where the desk is empty of a receptionist. There's a large window which looks out onto a small lawn area which is bordered with the silhouettes of statues. Beyond that is a nearly empty car park. There's an odd light outside. It's dark, but not dark like night time. The sky is greeny-yellow grey.

"So..." I say. "It's... four am?"

"No, four in the afternoon," he says.

“Why is the sky so dark?” I ask.

The wheelchair stops and suddenly Dr Klein is in front of me, squatting down so that his face becomes level with mine.

“Why do you ask that?” he says, frowning. He’s looking concerned. I don’t understand why.

“Because it’s a fucking weird colour for the sky to be,” I say, throwing my hand towards the direction of the window. “Have you ever seen the sky look like that before?”

He takes in a deep breath and lets it out as a long sigh. Then he’s back behind the chair, pushing me along again. We go through another set of doors and are in another long corridor where the ceiling is covered with large brown and yellow water stains that run down onto the walls and the dusky pink carpet is going threadbare. Dr Klein reaches into his pocket, brings out a bunch of keys and unlocks the third door on the right. From further down the corridor I hear a high-pitched male voice start screaming “Don’t let us sleep! Don’t let us sleep! That’s when the wolves will eat you! Don’t let us sleep!...”

Dr Klein wheels me into his office and shuts the door, only partly shutting out the screaming voice. There’s a desk and a large, wide grey filing cabinet. On both the desk and the cabinet are dozens of different coloured ring binders full of paperwork. He wheels me up to the desk and then sits down in his chair on the other side. Next to his computer is a framed picture of who I guess must be Mrs Klein and their little girl. They both have curly black hair. He looks at me, studying my face for what feels like a long time. I get self conscious. I’m aware that I smell bad, that I’m not wearing underwear, that my legs are hairy. My mouth is still dry. My hair is greasy.

“You have a beautiful wife,” I say, and look down at my lap.

He makes a sound. A small groan from the back of his throat. I look up at him and his eyes are watery. He leans forward, resting his forearms on the desk. “You...” he starts, but says no more. He hangs his head. Thinking. He looks up abruptly, grabs the framed picture, swivels it around to face me and points at the woman. “You don’t recognise who this is?”

I frown. “No. Why would I know your wife?”

“Yasmin,” he says to me.

Something in my brain clicks into place. “That’s my name!” I say.

He doesn’t smile. “Yes, that’s your name. Do you remember anything else?”

I shake my head.

“Yasmin,” he says again. “Darling... this... this is you.” He points at the woman in the photograph. “You’re my wife.”

I stare at Dr Johan Klein. The handsome doctor with a bit of a belly. I can imagine him being my husband, but I can’t remember it.

“And the little girl?” I ask.

“Our little girl,” he says. “Her name was Marilyn...”

“Was?”

“Yes, Yasmin. Marilyn died. In the war. That was four years ago.”

I look at the photo. The little girl, Marilyn, looks just like the woman holding her. The woman in the photo is beautiful. I’m beautiful. Marilyn looks just like me.

“Four years ago?” I say. “Is that how long I’ve been here?”

He nods and hands me the photo frame. I take it and look at it. I still don’t remember anything, but somehow I know he’s telling the truth.

“She fell ill because of the chemical bombs,” says Dr Klein. “A hell of a lot of people died, Yasmin...” He sighs. “When Marilyn died, you couldn’t handle it. I brought you here because I couldn’t look after you on my own. You kept running out of the house, running into the road, trying to... drink the water, trying to get yourself killed. I transferred from another hospital so that I could work here and keep an eye on you. You seemed to be getting better, slowly. You stopped wanting to die at least. But then, last week, you overheard some nurses talking about how they were bringing in a new patient to the criminal unit. It turned out the new guy was the one who set off the bomb in Cambridge... the one that killed Marilyn? Do you remember? We used to live in Cambridge. When you overheard the nurses, all of the progress you had been making just seemed to dissolve. All you wanted to do was kill the bastard. It took two of the male nurses to restrain you. We had to sedate you. When you woke up, you still wanted to find the man, we had to restrain and sedate you all over again. We kept you sedated for a week.” He looks at me. “I’m so sorry, Yasmin. I never imagined you might lose your memory.”

I look down at the photo and run my finger over Marilyn’s face through the glass. I remember her now. I can’t remember her dying. But I remember little things about her. She had a green coat. And her favourite food was spaghetti hoops on toast.

“Do you remember now?” he asks. His voice is strange, like he doesn’t know whether to be hopeful or worried about me remembering.

I look up at him, and smile. “Yes. But only the good bits.”

A smile breaks across his face. Then he laughs. But it’s not a happy laugh. It almost sounds like crying. Sometimes laughing and crying aren’t separated by much. Sometimes they come from the same place.

“What I wouldn’t give for that,” he says.

**** THE END ****

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“I, Sita” by Shefali Choksi

Synopsis: The Holy Ramayana’s gaps on the feminine filled in.

About the Author: As the world gets smaller and we trot around the globe with increasing ease and frequency, we seem to carry within us quite a luggage; I know I do. My internal landscapes are crowded with the folklore, epics, dictions, cadences, and mythologies from the places I grew up and I find them waiting for me on every corner, every cobblestone of the various countries I tread upon. So I’ve given up and have set down my bags here, in the New Land of Eternal Youth (Fort Lauderdale, Florida), where I share my life with my seventeen year old daughter and three cats. To keep us all supplied with samosas, Khichdi, and cat food, I teach Composition and Literature at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale.

“I, Sita” has resulted when one of those timeless tales stopped me on my way to somewhere important, held me with its glittering eye, and started speaking to me.

In this ancient tale, we hear more from the Holy Sita.

I, Sita

By Shefali Choksi

The Speaking Idol:

Thank you for the flowers! Your adulation is much appreciated, but I am getting tired of all this whining and complaining, and against my husband's better judgment, I am going to break my stony silence. I am no perfect wife, and I wouldn't know one if I met her. And my husband is no gossip who fails to realize what a jewel he had in me.



That smile you see sketched across my face is more a grimace born of tolerating what I usually don't tolerate well. Can't you hear my teeth gnashing behind my marble lips? Is the brittle brilliance of my eyes completely lost on you? Can you at least sense the discomfort of the finery wrapped around me? Of royal scratchy saris, heavy gold weighing down my brow?

I must confess a marked fondness for flowers and have never been happier than watching them grow in our garden in Chitrakut, the only place I really think of as my home, our cottage carved out of untamable wilderness.

I remember one foggy dawn, waking up to the fragrance of *parijatak* that Rama had strewn around my sleeping head, as a joke, a love-play he has always been so good at.

What? It shocks you that a woman who personifies all that is docile and biddable in a Hindu wife dares let her husband's name pass her lips?

Well, here you go: Rama, Rama, Rama! That's all I've always called him; I know of no higher endearment.

And don't listen to the media-hype about our missing the courtly life, the comforts of being urbane royalty. That mantle sat unfittingly on us. As royal children, we grew up in *gurukuls*, in forests, serving our ascetic teachers and their families. We had to leave our palace homes for ashrams, until we were pronounced proficient in all that we were supposed to be proficient in. So getting used to the forest life, tending to our own needs, these were not unfamiliar tasks to us, no big deal.

And anyways, I had always been more comfortable in home-spun cloth than the finery the court life demanded of me. My skin tone, unlike that of my sisters' and court ladies, is earthier, and all those colors, textures, and jewels only brought out the contrast between my darkness and the fairer skin for which they were designed. Once married to the heir prince, I'd be expected to be an active participant in the daily intrigues and politics of courtly life, expected to maintain my own quarters in the palace, quarters to which my husband, after a decent period following the wedding, would be a visitor.

This was truer of Ayodhya, where the court was more urbane than in Mithila. My father, who adored me, had let me build tree houses, enjoy archery, chess, and poetry to my heart's content, much to the clucking annoyance of an entire bevy of governesses, ayahs, and *daimaas* who saw to my sisters.

And Rama knew of my aversion to finery, my disgust of complex niceties, my terror of politics; he knew I wasn't going to pull my talons out of him, like my cousins so eloquently put it. He knew I

loved him with the unseemly, out of control intensity, much beyond the controlled fondness an ideal wife should maintain for her husband.

What is more, he felt the same way about me. He would have been as uncomfortable at having to consider variety for his bed as befitted his princely-kingly status, as I would have been uncomfortable at having him consider such variety. He never actually said that he tolerated the court rituals because it was part of the role written for him, but I learnt to read his impassive mien and knew that particular twitch and blink his face reserved for obligations.

But you should have heard him throw his head back and laugh when we played chess on the terrace during a few stolen hours, once the court had finished with us and before the family dinner claimed the evening. I believed flowers rained down when he laughed like that, more so because he did it so rarely.

I tell you, he was happy, genuinely happy, even vociferous then, more so than I ever saw in the obedient, thoughtful, respectful, somber heir prince, though he always maintained that he was equally happy being my other half and the heir prince, and that both of those selves, opposing as they might have seemed, were necessary to him being Rama.

Of course once the wedding festivities were done, I found myself in a near rage almost all the time. I mean, you should have seen those fights and arguments we had when those women threw themselves at him, day in and day out!

Those women had no sense of propriety! Their slithery garments, their fragrant hair would accidently come undone in his presence; they would bend extra low and gaze into his eyes when offering him a sweetmeat from the *puja* plate; they arranged themselves in alluring postures on the verandah when he emerged to admire a moonrise, something he tried never to miss.

You see, like a true lover's soul, my Rama loved the moon, even before he met me. In fact, he used to tell me that I never looked more beautiful than in the glow of a huge, yellowed, newly-risen full moon. Why, there was that one time when . . .

Forgive me, I digress.

Anyways, so a forest life was no big deal. The big deal was getting used to courtly life and fitting in, somehow. So you see, this faith in my docility is your fault, not mine. I have never been particularly docile or shy. That fault lies with misinterpretation of an old story, and has nothing to do with me.

In fact, when he mentioned the forest mission, aimed at colonizing the wilderness under the guise of an old promise and a curse, no one was more excited than I! I made him promise not to leave me behind on this adventure.

We were terribly young and had no reason to even consider an alternative to a sure and easy victory to notch up in our already enviable belt of conquests.

Chitrakut:

Now the forest, even though I'd imagined it more restful than the court, changes people in strange ways, and we were not made of marble then, like we are now, and were not immune to mazes such wilderness weaves in people who try to own and tame.

As Rama, he only knew how to give; I was the one demanding, even things I knew I didn't have to ask for, like his fidelity to me.

And my demands grew. You see, I was, most of the time, alone with him and our little brother there, and I am afraid I might have taken advantage of their indulgence to me. I hadn't liked sharing my husband with his kingly duties, with his politics! So I asked and he gave: first the blue lotus blossom, then the night-smelling jasmine shrub, then that bird-house, until I asked too much and demanded he kill an animal so that I might have its skin.

Now mind you, we thought of ourselves as the civilized ones, not the barbaric hordes who treat animals like food or game. We believed we were the humble enlightened; we knew our place in the universe was no higher than a beetle's or a deer's or a monkey's. We had decided to tread lightly upon our forest home, to treat all life with respect, to eat only what was necessary, to concentrate on nourishing, not being nourished.

That cottage in Chitrakut is the only place I really think of as being my home. I felt I belonged there the way I never belonged even in Mithila or the sophisticated Ayodhya court. The ubiquitous dust, the never-ending chores, the long trek to the river for our daily water, nothing seemed too onerous there. I remember that cottage as the only place where food was not a big deal, where tending and healing hurt creatures was the nearest thing to politics; grass soup would suffice for the day's meal; the sight of the shrubs we'd planted, dancing in the sun was enough to make us laugh in sheer delight; even as our bodies hardened, our glance sharpened, along with laugh lines bracketing our mouths and eyes.

We were content. I didn't even mind the occasional solitude when the brothers visited and parlayed with the jungle folk, the ascetics, and tribal peoples.

I could imagine the fourteen years pass by thus, without many ripples and I remember thinking that I could make this my permanent home, easily forget my queenly duties, the diplomacy and careful phrases, always premeditated.

Of course, we had our days. I mean, we had our stresses; knowing that if I didn't cook, I would not eat was something I never quite got used to. And this wasn't just a punishment at a *gurukul*, where the guru's wife would punish us for a few days and then sneak some food to us, if we were amiss in our duties. I hated not having anything to read, compute, memorize, or solve. There were days when I could not shake off a feeling of unfairness at having to do ALL the hard work; I would remind myself that these hard days would end, and I did look forward to the end of our banishment on those days. The rough books I'd carved out of the forest, of leaves and barks on which I scratched the most important lessons from our student days, lest we forget them, annoyed me, even to anger.

It was one of those days that changed everything.

I remember I was especially crabby that day. I'd complained about poor Laxman's clothes and tools strewn about the cottage, about having to walk 3 miles to bathe, about not being able to buy a new comb I sorely needed, about my exhausted creativity at having to concoct palatable meals with the few leaves and herbs I had, about the hot, moist air, about the rain my little garden longed for. All morning, I had been looking for a fight, and Rama had not obliged. His refusal to pick up the many types of bait I threw at him goaded my temper further. Laxman silently bounced his wary eyes between his brother and me, waiting for a respite, itching to make an excuse to go down to the river.

"Why," I had screamed at Rama, "the deer in the forests have better hide to cover them than I! Look at that one! Look at him prance in the sunlight! I wish I had his skin!"

Laxman sighed heavily at my thinly veiled demand for deer-skin, and gathered his tools to go down to the river.

In the silence that followed, I knew I'd gone too far and felt the familiar tear-pricking at the edge of my left eye. Somehow, my unthinking words had disturbed the very balance of the universe, and an unexplainable cloud suddenly crowded over the cottage.

I didn't know what to do, only that I must now pay for causing this pain. I concentrated on not crying, not wishing to add to the gathering clouds.

The last time I'd been in a bad mood was when that shapely woman wanted to wed Rama, on the day of the last new moon. But then, I had righteous indignation on my side, and both brothers had let me blow off my steam with patience and thinly-veiled amusement.

You should have seen her, though, undulating from that branch as though she'd been watching all morning long, sensuous, dusky, redolent of un-named, strange, wild fragrances, offering herself to my husband in whatever capacity he'd prefer!

I saw red then; I had stolen my beautiful husband from those courtesans, but even in these deep jungles, there were enticing females galore!

To show you what kind of a person she was, I'll tell you one more shocking thing: once Rama refused her, she offered herself to Laxman, who went wide-eyed and pale at her words.

I hated that poor thing so much, I'd have not accepted her as my sister-in-law, leave alone a co-wife! And this was in spite of my clear understanding that neither brother was even remotely considering taking her up on her offer. The only thing that had kept me from spitting and hissing at her was Rama's cool, firm grasp of my index finger.

Once she was driven away, though, I let the brothers know of my intense, violent response to the shape-shifting beauty, even going as far as calling the poor thing a demon! But my rage was spent, essentially, and I could tell from the glances the brothers exchanged, their extreme appreciation of our humble meal, and their undeserved praise of our cottage, that I was reaping the advantages of being the only female, subject to her mysterious moon-tides.

Then, at least, the temptation was clearly from outside, unlike the present unreasonable, selfish, petty complaints that were clearly rooted within my own breast.

"Don't!" Rama spat at Laxman, as he made to leave the cottage.

The poor boy looked up at his brother in surprised hurt; after all, my mood was not his fault and he just wanted to skip pebbles across the river.

"Sorry. Please don't leave, Laxman. Your *bhabhi* wants a deer skin and I must get it for her, as I am SWORN to keep her happy. Maybe eating venison and wearing the skin will fulfill her wishes," Rama modulated his tone as he spoke to the boy, coldly letting me know he was angry enough to leave the cottage and pursue a deer in the hot afternoon, if it'd relieve him from my presence for a spell.

"I am putting Laxman in charge here while I am gone. Please do us all a favor and don't leave the cottage, and for the sake of my sanity, LISTEN to him!" Rama directed me obliquely, without bothering to look at me full in the face.

I remember I'd just nodded, my head bent for fear that my shameful tears would further upset my husband and scare our brother. What I had thought of as a spat had somehow escalated to cosmic proportions.

I'd have given my last piece of fabric then, to have Rama's hand wrapped reassuringly around my index finger, a gesture he'd wedded me with, seeping forever promises as we followed each other's footsteps around the solemn ancient witness, the fire.

But Rama was already gone and I could see nothing but the empty cottage threshold through my tears.

How was I to know that the forest outside our cottage had been waiting for just such an occasion to pounce on us? That it had never forgiven us for having intruded its wilderness and blotched its uninterrupted splendor with the shelter we'd forced from it?

Too late, I sought to save the day and sent poor, relieved Laxman after Rama, seeking to stitch the torn fabric of our world. Laxman knew, as I did, that no one had called out from the jungle, and certainly Rama would never, ever call his brother to him if he thought the situation fraught with mortal danger. The poor boy drew a line of sincere good will and bounded off into the undergrowth, doubtlessly down to his brother at the river edge to skip pebbles across the waves, as much in hopes of cheering up his silent brother as to comfort himself. That was a compromise I recognized, of his need to leave the cottage, of his duty of following his brother's edict of making me do his bidding, his conceding the afternoon lost.

I let my knees go once he'd left, sinking down on the threshold of the cottage, considering the dirt line of Laxman's bow. I was emotionally exhausted and had no wherewithal to actually repent my bad mood. I should get up and clear the cottage; I should begin the day's meal; I needed some water.

I had reached the water pot when I heard the voice call from beyond the threshold. I remember my irritation returning, as I resented yet another demand to be nice.

My vision must have been as parched as my throat, because for a second, I thought the poor hermit outside the cottage had ten heads! As I blinked to clear my eyes, the cloud hovering over the cottage settled on the roof and the leaves rustled at the discomfort of having to accommodate the shadows.

It was the day, the forest, my unwarranted crabbiness that rose before me that day, like a nightmare demon, begging for something, demanding alms, the empty bowl somehow obscene in its emptiness, and I knew I'd lost, that this was the crossroads where Rama and I left behind ourselves and donned the impossibly heavy robes of King and Queen.

I put on my most queenly smile as I stepped over Laxman's compromise and crossed all that had bound me to my world, thinking to balance my bad behavior with this magnanimous gesture, imagining Rama's relief at it, and Laxman's smile on their return, when I thought I'd tell them of it while serving a specially cooked meal that evening.

In fact, I was blind as ever, and had failed to see the grabbing hands, greedy for me. The forest closed in and I felt imprisoned, lifted, blown away by an impossible being. My cries of disbelief echoed off tree tops and I felt more abandoned than abducted; I felt as though the very earth had

spat me out, discarded me, plucked me off her skin and thrown me away as though I were a pesky insect. I screamed for the earth to reclaim me as much as I screamed pleas to Rama and they tell me the birds heard.

My head remains bowed at the many battles waged in my name. Even as the earth tossed me off, I failed to realize how much I was still part of her, that I was a piece of dice tossed on a cosmic play board, that I WAS the land and my annexation was integral to the boundary expansion mission. I was the extra weighed this mission with rightness.

As I realized this, I screamed out my outrage and anger at having to choose a queen's robes over a wife's poor garment.

If I had realized how much it would cost to choose and change garments, I'd have jumped to the earth from the air, forced my mother-element to swallow me whole. But it seemed my blindness maintained its hold faithfully through my exile, recovery, the journey home, all the way to the banishment.

In Ravana's garden:

It wasn't that I wasn't impressed and dazzled by the too-green, too-healthy topiary of the prison. But it was difficult to believe in it and I can't honestly say that I was comfortable, though I can't really complain of ill-treatment, considering the circumstances. The more I tried, the less believable seemed the dustless leaves and perfect foliage, as though each bough and flower pre-meditated its shape before committing to being born.

And the city itself? I had never seen anything like it! No refuse heaps on street corners, no hint of rotting flesh or vegetation marred the perfect symmetry of the perfectly planned residences, communities, work places, gardens, and palaces.

The people were all beautiful, in feature and deportment. They are a tall people, the shortest of them well over two heads above me. But their stature does not compromise their innate grace, even among the most gauche adolescents. They seemed like logical extensions of their abodes, confident of their rightful places and functions.

I've never been more aware of my scanty garment, stained with mud, some blood (I'd torn off my flower ornaments as I was being carried off), my face and arms smudged with dirt and sweat, feet caked with the forest floor. Indeed, a strange image for an ambassador from the Aryan world.

Even the air seemed to sparkle with clean. It didn't smell like real air, but like what real air should smell. The just-right fragrance of *parijatak* and *champa* blended with just a hint of freshly cut grass, an almost-not-there briny-ocean smell delicately wafting at regular intervals.

Who could take it seriously? The one thing that kept things in perspective was the language. I've always had a quick ear for tongues. As I was led, dulled and dazed with disbelief and exhaustion, I had begun figuring out the phrases without being aware of doing so. It was a strange tongue, glottal and a bit harsh, but as though aware of this, it was often consciously modulated and seemed wordy, woven with formal, flowery phraseology. It took me a few weeks to get comfortable in it and I am afraid I shall always have an awkward accent. As befits a royal ambassador, I painfully sustained the hyperbolic diction, a difficult feat since I refused to change my grungy clothes and insisted I preferred to keep the gardener's quarters, rather than move into the palace.

You see, I wasn't quite sure about what these people wanted, what their stance was, and how they figured my role in their world; Abducted Ambassador wasn't a title or position I had a precedent for.

Whatever they wanted, it must have been really important: the king made time to confer with me for at least an hour every day. He had also respected my idiosyncratic request to house in the gardener's cottage, my refusal to change clothes, my insistence on a vegetarian diet, and had arranged for three or four attendants for my needs.

The weather was as clement as the rest of the place, and for as long as I was there, I saw no rains or storms, or even winds too strong disturb the land's routine. My attendants explained that the gardens were fed through a network of underground canals, some natural, some built. These underground water sources also surfaced as fountains. I had taken to spending my days under a spreading, thriving, beautiful *Asoka* tree, whom I like to think of as a father-tree. The breezes seemed most calming there, sometimes redolent of the wet earth, a fragrance I could find almost nowhere else. As time went on, and the clearer realization of the terror of my position snatched away my sleep, I took to spending even my nights under that tree.

My head bows to it, and the undisturbed smile you see on my face owes its peace to the father-tree's kind shade.

It took me many weeks for realize why the king spent so much time with me. I had bullied my attendants into teaching me a phrase that roughly translated as a safe thing to say to all: "I shall need to discuss all matters with Rama before I make any statements, and I eagerly await his imminent arrival." Strange as these people's ways were, I was sure they'd have contacted Rama and begun some diplomatic dialogue with the brothers.

Did I miss my husband? What sort of question is that? I shall not dignify it with an answer! I was a queen, admittedly expatriate, but a queen nonetheless, and in the beginning, I did take my imagined role of a royal (if reluctant) ambassador quite, quite seriously. As long as I wore that mantle, uncomfortable and scratchy though it was, I could tolerate my abduction and maintain my dignity. It also helped me remind the lessons from my *gurukul*: that royalty was not to be awarded any respite of commonality, even in exile.

Finally, the inevitable day arrived when I understood their king's request. Abduction, it seemed, was a normal method of acquiring wives, not inviting ambassadors. The king (who seemed to hold at least ten people within his being) wanted to marry me!

Why, though?

This question harassed me endlessly and I spent weeks trying to figure it out. I dismissed the possibility of my sudden possession of irresistible beauty, especially not after my time in the forest. And I had seen women far more beautiful than I lounging around on palace terraces, in arboreal arches, on fountain parapets. And anyways, if it WAS my beauty that was so attractive, marriage was hardly necessary and the king had never ever tried to force himself on me in any way, not in words, not in looks, not in gestures. In fact, discounting the actual abduction, he had not attempted to come near enough to touch me (a pity; I'd been fashioning make-shift daggers and arrows from bones and bark, and had used the sleepless hours to sharpen them).

I also firmly believe that the repetition of my eagerness of Rama's arrival had very clearly conveyed my position to him: I was not interested in acquiring another husband, since I found all males, of all species and dimensions, quite, quite inferior to Rama.

They started getting tired of me, and that's when my terror began. They got careless of keeping up appearances. My food was not always ready for me, and sometimes, I'd have to wait for days before it was presented. The attendants caught birds, rodents, arboreal creatures, and reptiles, casually bit off half of the prey's body and spat it out, squirming, at me. Their language got rougher and I suspect, obscene. They farted and burped noisily, stinking, and frequently, especially squatting near me and using the passing breeze to its full advantage.

The women often had friends over now, and they sat in mild sun, exhorting the sexual prowess of their men, especially the king, in loud and graphic tones, thinking, no doubt, to encourage me to reconsider my obstinacy. They super praised the benevolence and magnanimity constantly showered on them by their husbands, lovers, and swains. They laughed often and raucously, rolling around sensuously on the ground, their painted, red mouths wide open, and I noticed that their teeth were rather large, long, and some were even curved, like little tusks.

Seeing my mind unchanged, they got even more careless, and shifted rather too easily from being attendants to sentries. They began handling me roughly, hauling me up every four hours for a forced visit to the privy, tripping over me, bumping into me, so I was always covered in bruises I stopped counting or caring about.

And yes, I did miss my friend, my husband, my Rama ever so much. I'd rest my forehead on the father-tree's trunk and weep silent vows, vowing I'd never, ever, ever nag him at all, never complain, if only I could feel his hand twine warmly around my index finger. I prayed to the goddess, I prayed to the earth, and begged the clouds to carry my message and sincerest promise to him. I sought comfort in holding my own index fingers, switching hands to keep the circulation going.

It is evidence of our un-breakable, timeless, intense, spiritual bond that when this nightmare century of waiting was done, he greeted me first by clasping my index finger in his hand, anchoring my world again, thawing me with the warmth of his presence lashing like quick silver through to my inner being.

Back in the *Asoka* grove, I promised I'd never take for granted the luxury of taking a bath, being able to indulge in self-grooming. In that golden city, I never felt safe enough to bathe, clear my mouth, groom my hair or nails. I did the best I could, surreptitiously, hoarding the secrets of my personal being, for I always felt the ten heads of their king watching me. It was my nails and hair that I'd wanted to clean most; my nails were caked, stubbed, and wounded as I'd resorted to stripping bark to suck on for comfort and to fool my belly into believing in food. I'd taken to keeping my knees and elbows close to my torso and neglected the twigs and insects and sweat in my hair because that would entail raising my arms and moving elbows away from the safety zone. I wished that my nails would grow like talons, and my puny teeth would grow like large tusks. Even my face stopped feeling like my own, and for a while, I stopped cleaning it, letting the sweat, grime, tears, blood, and snot mask it.

But then, I took to wiping my face regularly.

At first, I'd only wipe it roughly with the edge of my soiled, ancient sari when the king came to visit, to ensure he wouldn't misunderstand my expression. But as weeks passed, I realized the importance of keeping my face: I needed to clearly show my resolve at all times, and when I'd wasted away and my face would haunt this grove, my features should be distinct. What's more, I'd abbreviated the sentence I'd rested on, to simply "Rama" repeated with my parched lips and glowing eyes, and I learned to say that word with my whole face.

My head is bowed now, in recognition of the fear that I was losing my sanity in that golden city, in that evergreen grove, beneath that kind tree.

I'd even stopped counting off days.

I forgot what it felt like to be alone.

In the beginning, I used to try to repeat *shlokas*, *astras*, the *veds*, the prayers, the incantations to myself.

When that took too much effort, I began chanting calculations, formulae, tables, numbers.

When the numbers got too complex, I recited recipes, first the complex and rich royal menus, then simply grass stew.

Finally, by the time I saw the divine messenger with folded arms before me (a real ambassador, this one), I'd forgotten the recipes and could only repeat "Rama," my husband's arrival, his existence, his name, my own identity, my designation, my hopes, self, all of it contained in that one drawn out syllable.

I must have looked fearsome and pitiful to the Messenger, though he continually assures me that I looked just the same as now, like my queenly self, just melancholic. I heap manifold blessings on him, not just for his many kindnesses and his loyalty to Rama, but also for his folded arms, for that miraculous, achingly familiar jewel from Rama's brow he first showed me to assure me that he was for real, and for giving corporeal shape to the greatest jewel known to human existence: hope.

I have held on to that brow jewel and not even death will part it from me. When my husband the king thought it necessary to make me walk through fire, I held that jewel to my heart, and it made me comfortable enough to embrace death if that is what was needed. When I went into the forests a second time, I took it with me. I clutched it as our sons were born.

The Forest Again:

Nothing isolates a person like being so ceremoniously rescued. The first hint of the war's end was the faint smell of rot suddenly worrying the leaves of the father-tree. Then, a dried leaf wafted down.

I remember wanting to weep, and being unable. My sentries had been missing (invisible?) for a few nights now, and I noticed that I had not been feeling watched for some time either. I wanted to run away, escape, I knew I must, but I didn't know how to get up without loosening my elbows and knees.

When my husband came for me, he was not alone. But before the others were there, his voice reached me, and at the same time his touch warmed and loosened my joints.

But I knew then, as I've known since, the afternoon I had soiled the universe with my demand had stilled something in my Rama, something that would never be fluid again. I have not been able to completely banish tears and have earned a reputation of being moody, broken, somehow, prone to weeping fits that are as unpredictable as they are unstoppable. My Rama's eyes have deepened and acquired something far away, and his gaze asks questions of the moon.

I sit here at the end of his tale or at its beginning: they tell me our sons have been singing my story all over the known world, extolling my wifely and maternal perfections.

I don't want to hear it; I wish someone would listen to me, instead, the way our Wind Born Friend listened.

I could tell you about my husband and his oh-so-human realities so you'd finally understand his unending banishment from all that belonged to him, a banishment that only intensified with his kingship, vast like the sky and the ocean, before which a man is smaller than a minute. When he finally banished me, he banished himself along, so I wouldn't be lonely. He is husband to an oh-so-human wife who did not realize the cosmic import of her demands. Just because he honored his crown when he put me away in the forests, did not mean that he took another wife, even considered lovers, that he put away the husband in any way.

Tell me, who last saw him laugh out loud? I don't need to see his face to know that the questions in his eyes have deepened. Look at his kingly plate: is it not graced by the same simple grass soup and coarse loaves you see on my leaf-plate? You lament at the hollows in my cheek that rough living has carved; do you not notice the gauntness of his jaw?

Have a care, then, that you complain of both of us when you complain of my Rama's cold treatment of his Sita; we are one, he and I; Creation is not wide enough to separate us.

Our names, said together, encompass the entire world. Even when you speak only one name, the other's shadow haunts it and stands right beside, where it belongs.

Listen to the questions in his patient glance: why should he be forced to test me thus over and over again? These tests promise restoration of harmonies, satisfy proprieties, if passed, but we never know how the tests fared, how the circumstances were perceived, analyzed, what the results were.

I HAD to put an end to the whole business! There was no telling when, how, and what form future tests would take, and I was not willing to add to our banishment. I fear I had failed all tests, contrary to the songs and clichés, failed unforgivably as both, queen and wife. I don't know how to even begin to redress such huge wrongs.

So I have chosen to relieve my husband of these pointless questions, a choice which only my mother can completely understand and help me with.

See how brightly this jewel glows? It reminds me of the moon my Rama is so drawn to. His destiny beckons him to rule the heavens, even as he strides the earth. So of course, I wish to be gathered to the realm my beloved treads upon, so no matter where he goes, he feels me within his very shadow.

Where his feet end, I am right there, where his shadow begins.

**** THE END ****

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“The Historian” by Dan Davis

Synopsis: A new history is revealed and the world is changed.

About the Author: Dan Davis was born and raised in Central Illinois. His work has appeared in various online and print journals. You can find him at www.dumpsterchickenmusic.blogspot.com.

In this futuristic recall, we realise what we remember can be our truth.

The Historian

By Dan Davis

Mitch took another drink of his coffee and winced at the blandness. Like everything else they'd given him to eat or drink, it was flat and unappealing. Yet Dr. Smith sat across from him and drank mechanically, as though she weren't meant to take any pleasure in the act. He wondered when flavor had fallen out of style.

"When did I leave off?" he asked.

She consulted her clipboard. "1975. I believe you stopped at what you called a 'cliffhanger'—the outbreak of World War III."

"Ah. Yes." He closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair—padded with some sort of foam that conformed to the contours of his body. They didn't enjoy food, but they put great value on being comfortable while sitting. Seemed somewhat contradictory.

"Double-you-Double-you-Three," he said. "Was that Pocahontas?"

"Pocahontas was World War II."

"Sorry. This was before my time, you understand."

She smiled sympathetically. "Before mine, too, Mr. Sanders."

He laughed, because she was a genuinely charming person. Flat, in the way most professional researchers were—past, present, and future—but she tried. Not bad looking, either. He'd seen enough women now to know that makeup, like flavor, had become obsolete. Somewhere around the year 2292, she'd told him. Those first few days, she'd told him almost as much as he'd told her.

He rubbed his hands on his pants. Some synthetic material, felt like plastic. He'd worn his jeans the first few days, but had eventually given up the pretense. He wasn't returning to the twenty-first century any time soon, probably never. Smith had cautioned him that reverse time travel, though technically feasible, was still extremely dangerous, permitted only by carefully trained military specialists.

"I guess it was...Patton," he said, making a careful note not to forget. "Patton was World War III. At least, until he died near the end of the war, when the damned Chinese nuked Washington."

"In what year was your capital bombed?"

"1980. Year I was born."

"Did you have any family in the war?"

"I had an uncle who was in Washington at the time, yeah. He told me all about it. The screaming. People just turned to dust. He'd been in one of the shelters; there hadn't been time to evacuate the city. He spent another year there, fighting the invading army, amongst the rubble. Bricks strewn everywhere. Bodies, pieces of bodies." Mitch paused, took another sip of coffee. "He came across



a dog. That was the first thing he told me, 'cause I was so young at the time. He came across a dog once. A German shepherd. Normally they're gold and black, see, but this one was *all* black. Looked like a big black wolf, is what my uncle said. Only after the dog came up to him, and he began stroking the dust and dirt out of its fur, did he see what it really was. He adopted the dog, called it Rex, but it ran off after a couple weeks. He never saw it again. But he talked about it a lot. He loved that dog. On his deathbed, he kept saying 'Rex' over and over again. The doctor said his mind was randomly snapping back to some moment in history, but I think my uncle knew exactly what he was talking about, you know? I think he wanted that dog back. A peaceful figure in a world gone to hell."

He pushed the coffee aside and drank some water to sooth his throat. The blandness didn't bother him so much—water was *supposed* to lack flavor, though there had clearly been no minerals added. He wondered if it had at least been filtered. Surely. This society seemed bent on health; he hadn't seen one overweight person yet.

"I must say, Mr. Sanders, that you have a beautiful way with words." Smith smiled at him, and he could tell that she'd been moved by what he'd said. One of the maxims he'd taken to heart: if you want to hit 'em hard, throw in a dog.

"It helped make my life a little easier, back then."

"You almost make me wish we had people like you now. Storytellers. People paid to create mythology."

"There's a lot to be said for truth."

"Indeed." She nodded. "Truth must always come first." She tapped her clipboard. "For example: Patton?"

"One of the great military minds of the twentieth century. Also a beloved public figure, before and after the war. He would've been President if he hadn't died."

"Why wasn't he in a shelter as well, when the bomb dropped?"

Mitch winced. He'd been a multi-drafter; plot holes had been the bane of his (and his editor's) existence.

"Yes. Well...to understand that, you have to understand the kind of man he was. He ordered the troops into the shelters, see. Civilians, too. As many as they could get. They had, approximately, thirty minutes' warning. So few people not in the know made it. Patton was the kind of captain who'd go down with the ship: he reportedly declared that he wouldn't go into a shelter until every single person in Washington had gone before him."

"Do you believe him to have said this?"

"It's probably rhetoric. Patriotic dribble, like 'Remember the Alamo.' But people *believed* he said it, so whether it's true or not makes no difference. Especially now, since China and the United States have ceased to exist."

"As governmental structures, yes. Their landmasses are more or less the same. Altered some from the nuclear fallout, of course, from your World War III and others. The company funding our

project is based in what you called 'China.' An ancient culture—they still hold to some of the old beliefs."

"How many like me did you say you have?"

"Thirty-eight currently undergoing initial questioning. You are the most recent acquisition."

He nodded. He wanted to ask how his story corroborated with the others, but clearly she had no access to what other subjects were saying; she would've booted him out on his ass, if that were the case. She'd told him that they had subjects from all nations and walks of life; once, they'd gotten a man from a civilization so far back that no one could speak his language. The man hadn't lived long; he'd died of a heart attack after two hours, when presented with a television screen. Since that incident, they tried taking people from the nineteenth century on—people who could at least grasp the *concept* of a television, if not its actual existence.

Indeed, Mitch had been confused by the screen. He knew what it was, but not how it worked or when it had been built; long after 2010, at any rate. Sometime when television became less visual and more...extrasensory. He couldn't even understand how it affected him, other than the fact that he couldn't look at it for too long without his eyes swelling.

The television was like much of the technology he'd encountered in the past two weeks—vaguely familiar, but otherwise alien. The clipboard, for instance. Smith wasn't writing anything, but all of her questions and his responses were being transcribed in some language that wasn't English. It didn't even look like a language—symbols and numerals thrown together in a suggested pattern, though trying to make it out hurt his head. Smith spoke English fluently, but he could tell she wasn't a native speaker. She'd once referred to English as an "ancient tongue," one that she'd been trained in specifically for this project.

Smith shifted in her chair. Mitch, not for the first time, wished she wore a miniskirt; the simple plastic outfit, similar to his own, left too much to the imagination. Pride seemed to have gone by the wayside as well. Yet this didn't seem to be a religious society, and Smith certainly hadn't balked at what he'd told her of Christ.

"Tell me more about the war," she said. "What you can remember, at any rate."

He told her. Images came to him and he spoke them, not caring if they made sense—war rarely did, anyways. Smith—or rather, her clipboard—took notes, her eyes rarely leaving him. He'd never been much of an oral storyteller, and he kept noticing the flaws in his delivery, emphasis put on the wrong word, other words mispronounced or mumbled. But Smith had little from her own time to compare him to, and Mitch took full advantage, inserting small jokes. She remained stoic, occasionally smiling in acknowledgement of his intentions. Mitch doubted very many people laughed here. Those outfits didn't convey a sense of humor.

He took her up to 2010. A second civil war between the states—about ownership rights to alien aircraft buried beneath the Nebraska prairie—had just ended; a valiant Colonel had won for the North, and Washington and New York scientists descended on the relics. "You picked me up before the results were released," he said, glancing at his watch. Two hours had passed, his time. Their concept of time seemed different; he had a feeling it went beyond Einstein's Theory of Relativity, but he didn't make any attempt to understand it. They were letting him live by his own biological clock; that was all that mattered.

Smith nodded and watched her clipboard. When it was done taking notes, she pressed a button on its side. The clipboard whirred and—Mitch assumed—shut off. Smith set it aside and said, "Well, I guess that concludes our initial interview."

Initial. Jesus. Well, he would go crazy if they released him; he knew that much. Couldn't even watch TV. So perhaps it would be best if he spent the rest of his life here. Nobody had much apologized about it, either; the project had been deemed a moral necessity, and it was just assumed that people from past centuries would agree.

"I would like, on a personal note..." Smith shifted in her chair.

Mitch leaned forward. "Yes?"

"Well...could you explain to me, off the record, what it was like? Encountering the reconnaissance team? It is of great curiosity to me, how our subjects react to our initial presence."

His shoulders sagged, but he tried to keep the disappointment off his face. "Well...scary as hell."

She smiled. "I would imagine."

"The sphere just...appeared before me. *Bam.* It wasn't there, and then it was. And the men got out...men in colorful plastic..." He shrugged. "They hit me with that ray, or whatever you said it was. I really don't remember much. Just that brief moment of terror, you know? I thought I was going insane."

She stood. "It's funny, wouldn't you say? Your account of Earth's history is so vivid, but your own recruitment and arrival here is...if you'll pardon my saying it, but it seems so *mundane.*"

"I guess that's the way it goes sometimes."

"Indeed." She nodded her head at him as she usually did, one of the time's polite dismissals. "I suppose, Mr. Sanders, you deserve a couple of days off. Your throat is probably sore. Our session today ran a little longer than usual."

"Will there be tests?" He shivered. The tests were the worst part. They rarely hurt, but he didn't like being exposed like that—physically, psychologically, and other scientific principles that had been invented too recently for him to understand them.

"I don't think so. You earned a break." At the door, she shook her head. "I just can't believe the world's history is so...*strange.*"

"The strangest things turn out to be true. I was kidnapped and taken to the future."

"Indeed. Ordinary for us, strange for you. And what's ordinary for you"—she hefted the clipboard—"and people like you seems so unnatural to us. The British-Brazilian War that you mentioned. An entire war fought over paper rights and—what was his name?—Charles Dickens novels. You have to admit, it seems absurd." She blushed. "Well, to us, anyways. To everyone I've interviewed, it's history—common knowledge."

Mitch was smiling and nodding when her words hit him. He stared at her for a second, and as she was closing the door behind her, he said, "Dr. Smith?"

She turned around. "Mr. Sanders? Is something wrong?"

"You said...you've interviewed more than me?"

"Of course. I'm one of the chief interviewers; I told you this during our first session, I believe. Though of course, I wouldn't expect you to remember *that*, after everything else we've forced you to recall."

"So you've...you've talked to people other than myself?"

"Yes, of course. All of our subjects are housed in this building. I interview most of the English-speakers, as per my training. I should say I've interviewed...almost seventy individuals by this point. It's been fascinating, hearing so many accounts of history, from times before your own to just this past century."

"Uh..." He tried to smile, but it felt crooked, and he let it slip. "Well, you see, I couldn't recall specific details, at some points, you know, so my story might not *entirely* corroborate with what you've heard elsewhere, though I assure you—"

She waved a hand to silence him. "Mr. Sanders, don't worry. We know the human capacity for memory is limited. You can't be expected to remember *everything*; you're even bound to forget a few things, and subconsciously create false details to replace them. We're only looking for the *gist*, as you would say; the details, we can iron out by putting everyone's story together."

"But the others—"

"Are in the same position you are. I assure you. You're all human. We haven't interviewed any *alien* life, not even from the year the Earth was invaded." She mistook his expression of surprise and said, "Oh, that was long after your time, don't worry. I'm sure you wouldn't have forgotten *that*. Not from what *I've* heard of it."

"But...what I've told you..."

She came back into the room and knelt before him. "Mr. Sanders, I can't stress this enough: we understand that your story is filled with holes, and that some of what you have told us may not be true. Don't trouble yourself with it, I beg you. You've given us as accurate a portrayal of Earth's history as has everyone else we've interviewed, all three hundred of them."

"The story has been...the same?"

"Of course! Why, there's only one history, isn't there?"

She laughed. It was a musical sound; Mitch wanted to tell her that she should laugh more often, but by that point he'd fainted.

**** THE END ****

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