

# FREEDOM FICTION JOURNAL

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

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## Editor's Note

Hello Freedom Friends,

Hope all our aficionados are now used to the new format and website. This issue 07 is thus a compilation of the short stories already published on the website.

Quite a lot of new talent and exceptional fiction from Chris Castle and Ken Goldman. The PDF again has the similar look as before and is offered as a free download. It could be used on your mobile electronic reading devices or be printed out.

It would be nice to see the flood of submissions keep pouring in, even though I am kind of buried in the backlog. Hope the authors who had sent in their stories bear with this, we give equal urgency and importance to all submissions and hence nothing gets done in a jiffy, LOL.

Do keep checking the website and the Facebook page for updates and new fiction and comments are welcome of course.

### Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

*Ujjwal Dey*

Editor for Issue 07, Vol 02.

Freedom Fiction Journal | <http://freedomfiction.com/>

## **“The Last Step” by Annette Backshall**

**Synopsis:** Death has fascinated man since time immemorial. If a mortal as us would be so enamoured by demise then what be the thoughts of some immortal. Here the author presents this “wonder of death” very well in a sci-fi concept.

**About the Author:** After a theatre degree and a stretch of teaching English twelve years ago, Annette made the natural progression to professional firefighting and has not looked back. She has an equal interest in the arts and science, which explains her love of science fiction. She has been an active participant with the Katherine Susannah Pritchard Speculative Fiction Writers Group for about four years. Annette lives in Perth, Western Australia and has a pet rosemary bush called Max..

**In this Science Fiction ordeal,** the legacy of a man is discovered in the hostile environment he survived in.

## The Last Step

By Annette Backshall

*Fingers scatter debris and pick through the grimy remnants of human occupation. Bits and pieces are picked up, turned over, dusted a little to expose writing then replaced exactly as were found. A Series VII Log is pulled from the bottom of an upturned locker. Hands fumble open the battered book. A long green light flashes along the left hand margin and a slight humming tells the finder there is power.*

*A picture of the author lights the surface of the first page. A strong, brown, youthful man stares proudly out at the reader. A name fades up beneath. Chief Longarrow, Captain of the Apache Scout.*

**Apache Scout: Mission XII**  
**Captain's Log: Entry # 15,077**  
**May 27<sup>th</sup> 2337 AD**

**05:03:** Today I am 93 years old. I am the last of my crew and I am dying. It is maddening that no longer am I able to thwart my captors. I have relished my slow decline into decrepitude. Withholding the spectacle of death, the very thing my keepers so richly crave, has been a comfort.

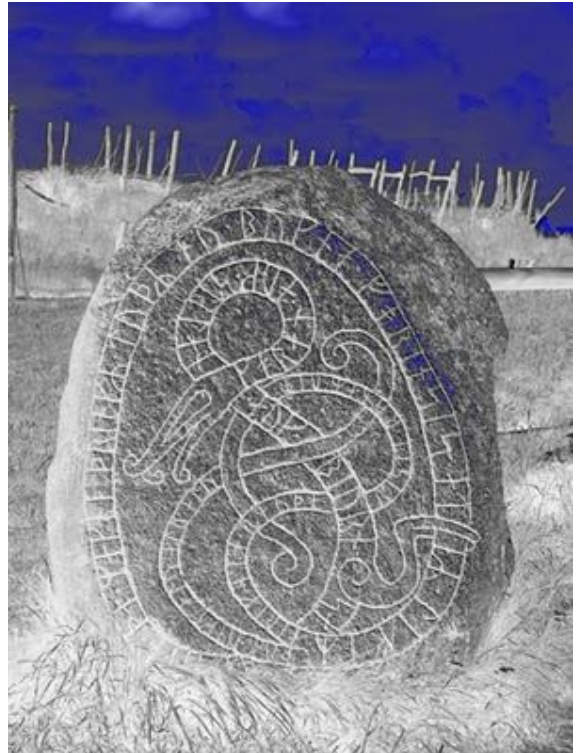
I am afraid. Strangely, not of the death that awaits me, but of dying by myself - alone. I, who have travelled the frontiers of space, as chief and warrior am now as a child; fearful; needing someone to hold my hand. Yes, I crave the simple reassurance of human touch at the outset of my final but greatest adventure.

**07:34:** While I am still able to write, I will say that I hope the circumstances that bring you to this log are not a repetition of our unfortunate experiences. If that be wrong, I am sorry.

If you are at last the liberators we so longed for, take heart, your efforts have not been in vain. There are still many other sentients remaining that will need your help - noble beings who have found the humiliation of being caged as hard as we. I request on behalf of my crew that you return this log to the proper authorities so people know what fate befell us.

**07:54:** I have just called to Friend, informing of my impending death. (Please, you who come after me, be kind to this magnificent being. As you would have read, it has been my only companion for the last five years; my saviour from madness.) Even now it attends me, trumpeting my name, "Cheeeeeepf", as best it can.

Friend subjects me to a long resonating screech; a death cry. It is corporeal and poignant. I cannot be more flattered by the purity of grief that vibrates through my body in waves of sorrow. Grief it seems is a common emotion to all mortal beings.



I am sad that I will never see what fantastical shape Friend must have to produce such terrible - beautiful sounds. What awesome construction of natural evolution could so effectively project such a physical form of communication? My mind has a picture, though I am sure woefully inadequate in majesty.

"So young," Friend sounds after its wail. "To think I am alone once more with that boorish (no equivalent species name in Terratongue) in the cell on the other side of me."

This was Friend's attempt at human humour. Friend has been a good student, and I appreciate the sentiment. It is silent now; no doubt composing a fitting dirge, as has been Friend's tribute for all my crew. I have no doubt that it will be as moving as the others my friend has so thoughtfully composed for my now long past companions.

**11:49:** Friend's cry has alerted our keepers. So, they finally come. I push aside the fantasy once more of somehow taking my life before they arrive. If I could, I would have by now.

I watch them above me gather like vultures and descend from the clear indigo sky in black spirals. They land. They find it hard to settle themselves on the lip of my cage. I've thrown debris and waste up there to rot, it makes a slippery perch. There is ruffling and short sharp chirps, until finally, tucking their great raven wings against their unnervingly humanoid bodies, they sit as still as gargoyles. Only their cool golden eyes move. Their beautiful metallic gazes slide coolly over my shrivelled form. My dark angels await silently for the last breath.

Friend thinks that our cold seraphs are immortal and that the enigma of transience fascinates them. I turn my back on their impassive faces as I have done time after time over the last 41 years. I have no power but this simple act. I have little inclination to throw the contents of my ablution bucket at them, though I feel I should for old time's sake.

**13:38:** Should I be looking back on my life and leaving some acumen? Alas, these pages are strewn with the thoughts of the amateur philosopher. What else have I had but time for thought and this book to serve as walls to echo them? All that is on my mind now is this silly fear. It is the monster beneath my bed come back to taunt me. I have growled, knocked and whistled this to my friend as best I can in its own language. Friend coos calm, and tuts sympathy back through the mesh divider at the top of our cells' common wall. Friend says it does not understand the figure of speech. I explain.

I have been thinking about how the keepers first tried to mimic our environment by reproducing a mishmash of parts from the ship, no doubt to make us feel more at home. Though, seven lockers and no beds were not a comfort. But we turned them over, the backboards made sturdy sleeping bases. Eventually we took out the hang rails and used them as coffins. Carrying vessels for the black angels to take away, to do what they do with the bodies.

I cackle and cough; a horrible sound for Friend who is so sensitive to sound. Friend whistles and titters quietly.

**15:43:** I mustered the energy to hurl the bucket. Ruffled a few black feathers.

**18:13:** My breath is getting hard to draw, my sight is dimming at the edges and I am very tired. I am afraid if I fall asleep I will not wake. How asinine - I should be grateful for small mercies. This fear holds me back, locks open my eyes. To take the last step. It sounds so simple, but it is as if I have to step off into a chasm - a leap of faith. Faith - I have no faith and therefore no hope. I long for the warrior's death that was stolen. I have been reduced to a coward.

**20:18:** Last entry: regret bad writing - hands stiff. Don't want to stop with stylus, sound files can corrupt, but cannot move properly - excuse.

*An index finger taps the speaker icon at the bottom of the log screen.*

"Hear - my friend singing - most beautiful tune; mes - merizing....

"All my knowledge/memories drift by me; become music - light as air, I float on notes.

"I should make a joke for Friend. Say, 'I am not dead yet!' Too tired. Ah! Butterflies flick colour on ethereal wings before me. I hallucinate? Maybe they are the spirits of my ancestors.

"You stay here Friend, I will scout the path ahead."

*The listener bows their head slightly to the sound of slow breathing, a hiccup, a series of rapid breaths.*

"Enough!" the chief says, barely audible.

*Slow breathing then slow shallow breaths, a rattled breath – a pause - and rattled breath.*

*There is a long silence, then a whoosh of air and the beating of many great wings. The flapping fades to a distant flutter.*

*Silence once more, then a low, slow song resonates mournfully from the log.*

*Strong brown hands close the book as the song fades and a hiccupping trumpet turns to a high pitched screeching.*

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## **“The Florist” by Chris Castle**

**Synopsis:** Love is forever and though we yearn or mourn it sometimes – its everlasting quality means that we can always share it, its always there. Here is another brilliant story of life, loss and love by the best man who puts it into words, our very own FFJ author Chris Castle. His stories have appeared in Issue 04, Issue 06 and FFJ’s first annual anthology.

**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 beautiful emotional tale,** we find that while seasons of our life may change, love can bloom in new ways and the flowering happiness can bring joy to its surroundings.



## The Florist

By Chris Castle

I twist the pins in the lock and finally it turns. There's a snap and then I pull on the handle and the door opens. I have broken into my first flat, aged fifty-seven. The door swings open and I step inside, the bag in my hand. I look over the small kitchen, the plates gathered on the side, two cups; one for Lucas and one for Angelica. I stop at the bedroom door and don't go inside. It is just the small kitchen and the hallway I'm after. I look at my watch and work out how much time I have. Then I go to work.

There were two distinct reasons why my wife fell in love with me. The first was because I'm clumsy and the second was because I am a terrible liar. Later, after we were married, she told me one night that she could only ever fall for a man who had as many faults as he did skills. She was telling me this in a certain way; she cupped a hand over my ear and whispered. We had been married a year and two months and we could play such games. That was my gift; to not be perfect.

The first reason happened when I had just moved into a new neighbourhood. I had just started work and had rented the flat at first sight. It was empty and bare and perfect. I washed in the sink when the plumbing worked and ate bread and cheese and ate out once a week. I waited for the sunny mornings and threw my clothes in a big steel pot and washed them the way other people would cook a stew. I watched them swimming in thick swirls, my arm elbow deep in the water, the colours pouring out. Then I would wring them out as best I could and set them over the railings outside my kitchen to dry.

This was the real reason I bought the flat. It had a balcony. It was only three foot by three foot but it was enough. On hot nights I could stand and smoke a cigarette and watch the town come to life. In the day time, the streets were busy and ugly, but at night, half covered and half lit they seemed okay. More than okay; beautiful even.

So that day, I put my clothes down on the railings, set them just so and set off for work.

That night, exhausted, I came back to sleep. It had grown hot and humid and a storm was coming. I put on coffee and pulled a cigarette from my packet and began to pull the clothes in before the rain broke. My fingers ached, that was my first and best excuse for what happened. I was tired, too. But the real reason, as my wife would always get out of me when I told her the story some nights, was because I was smoking a cigarette. Either by using one hand, or blinded by the rising smoke, I managed to brush my clothes, a shirt and two socks, clear off the railing as I reached for them. I wouldn't have even noticed I was so bone tired, if what I did was not immediately followed by a woman's scream.

I immediately looked over my railing, the cigarette in my mouth, causing me to squint for a second. I thought there had been an accident, or maybe even a mugging. I looked over and from the





ground saw a girl look directly up at me. She had green eyes and was holding a paper bag full of groceries, a long loaf of bread peeking out of the top.

"Hey!" she said, holding my eye, even from that distance. "Are these yours?" she said, hooking the shirt with her foot and lifting it steadily out in front of her.

"Jesus! I'm sorry. So sorry. I'll come right down. Sorry." I pitched the clothes into the bowl and pulled the cigarette down to my side.

"Don't. I'll come up. What floor are you on?" she carried this on as other people walked by. Her face still bolt upright, my shirt still balanced on her outstretched leg. It was like she did this every day and nothing was out of the ordinary. I think that was when I started to fall a little in love with her. Because she did not care.

"Six," I said, not thinking anything of telling her, too embarrassed to do anything but what she told me.

"I'll be right up," she said. I watched her shift the bag to one hand and then flip the shirt into her other, outstretched hand. Then she crouched and picked up the two socks. Then she made her way into my building and disappeared. As soon as she was gone, I rushed into the bathroom and straightened myself out, knowing this was the start of something, or at least a chance.

Later, she told me that what won her over on that first meeting were the flowers. I am a florist. My mother and father owned a florist and I was born into flowers. We lived above the shop and from a baby I have always been surrounded by them. Being around the shop as a child was like living in a small glass jungle, countless different species all within reach, all with a small price tag jammed into their stomachs. I would have adventures after closing times, living the life of an adventurer as my parents added the takings for the day at the till. But even that was included; the rattle of the tilling machine, the enemy gunfire whistling over my head. The flowers made my life an adventure from the beginning.

I began to learn from the shop the way other children would learn about dinosaurs or planets. I would learn each flower's name and how they lived; if they were perennial, how many seeds they shed. No fact or detail was too small for me. I would spend one hour before school began and one hour afterwards learning every crumb of knowledge I could.

My favourite nights were the summer evenings before a storm, when the windows would steam with humidity and the flowers would drip sweat the way I or my parents would. My father had a fan running to keep the temperatures on a level, but every so often, just for a few minutes when they were out of the room, I would turn it off and watch the windows steam and the flowers bow and everything would be buried in mist and I would live in a foreign country or more than that, another world for just a few minutes.

My parents died when I was nineteen and away studying. I was studying botany and was reading a text on roses when I heard the news. I remember letting the book fall and looking down at it, thinking 'Hey! I can read upside down, too! I never knew that!' That was the first thing I remember after they told me. Then came everything else. It was a car crash, I was told and on the train home, all I focused on were the flowers I would pick out for them. Once I asked my father why he had bought a flower shop and he patted my shoulder and waved his hand around the shop. I followed his hand and looked at everything that was on display.

"Son," he said, "look around you. Flowers are for every occasion. If there is a birth, a death, a wedding, a test, everyone always needs flowers." His voice always sounded deep, as if he'd just finished smoking a cigar, even though he'd quit when I was born. Flowers for every occasion, he said and was right.

I sold the flower shop and for a year I tried not to look at another flower if I could help it. I stopped my studies and travelled to big cities, avoiding the parks and living in the most built-up, smoggiest, industrial parts of the world. Later, I visited deserts where nothing seemed to grow. Then after that year, I understood something. I missed my parents terribly, yes, but I also missed the flowers. It came to me while I sat in a café drinking a cup of coffee. The waitress went round each table, wiping them down, and when she reached my table she checked the two flowers sticking out of the cracked vase and took them away. She came back with a new pair and set them in front of me and smiled.

"Can't beat them fresh!" she said and smiled to me. I walked into a florist the next day and took a job. A week later, I took the apartment that my future wife walked into on a summer's night, clutching my wet socks in her palm.

She walked into my apartment and saw the flowers. When I finished each day at the florist, I tidied up all the waning stems and gathered them into a black bin liner. The old man who owned the shop was grateful for me doing this, but it was as much for me as it was for him. Each night, instead of dumping the flowers in the blue bin by the back door of the shop, I would carry the bag home and save what I could. Sometimes they would only last one more day, other times, a week. But I always had fresh flowers and for that reason I loved the job.

The place I lived in was small, but I dressed it up to make it look beautiful. Sometimes, when I was tired and could not sleep, I would walk the hallway, the bedroom, and out to the balcony, surrounded by all the flowers and it would feel like I was young again and lost in the jungle of my parents shop. This was what the girl, clutching my wet clothes, saw the first time she walked through my door.

The day I proposed to her was the second reason. We had been living in my small apartment for a year and I knew it was the right time. I worked long hours in the shop and had saved hard. My girl was a locksmith, born and bred, and the family business was going well. We talked of buying a bigger place and with it a future. When we talked this way, my heart soared. We lay in bed, building impossible dreams; I wanted a place with a five acre garden, she wanted a palace with fifty two rooms, just so she could learn to pick the lock on each one. Even when we dissolved into a fit of giggles at the end of our stories, there was still the sense that something was possible.

That night I put the ring in my pocket as she prepared dinner. We each cooked, or tried to cook, one night a week and the other days we left to the fate of the takeaway menu's gathered at my door. Once a week we would eat out and those nights would be the happiest days of my life. But that night she cooked and I couldn't wait any longer.

I watched her pop around the kitchen; that's the only way I can describe it. In a small place like mine, she was like a champagne cork, bouncing off the walls, never stopping in any one place. That night she cooked vegetables while a strip of pork chops cooked in the oven. Pork chops we could both do; they were our winners. The vegetables were something new, and as she put them on the table, she smiled and told me to try them first.

I am not a big vegetable fan. I can eat some; I can push others round the plate like a champion, but on the whole, not for me. I explained this to my mother once, saying I backed the things that

grew above the dirt and not below and as far as I was concerned they could stay where God intended them, i.e. buried. I tried a forkful of the greens and forced them down my throat. I was almost sick. I did not want to throw up and then propose to my girlfriend. I knew this would not be considered romantic. Instead I forced them down, using the old trick of taking a big slug of the drink by the plate to wash it all down. I looked over to her and smiled.

"How are they?" She asked me. Her brow was furrowed and rather than making her look older, they made her look younger, about twelve years old and trying to figure out maths.

"They're great, honey," I said, and pushed another heap to the side, ready to get to work on the chop. I looked back to her and saw her break into a slow, wide smile, like she'd just laid down the killer hand in a high stakes game of poker.

"Honey?" She said, the smile at full wattage. "Honey, indeed. I think that's why I love you, baby. It's because you're such a bad liar."

I looked at her and smiled. I leant forward and we kissed. Later, lying on the kitchen floor, I reached over to my trouser pocket and fished out the ring. I knew she was going to say yes now and I wasn't scared. We were getting married. But we never did finish those vegetables.

We were married soon after at a downtown office. Her father and two brothers stood close by, while my friend from school, Billy Tompkins, held the ring for me. My boss from work closed the shop for the afternoon and we had drinks and a fat cake in the florists. My wife's family cracked jokes about me having the girl's job and her wearing the trousers, but they had a good time of it. That night we went back to my apartment and lay next to each other, watching our matching rings light by the streetlamps outside. We were ready to start over.

If you're lucky, that's the end of the story. For a lot of people, they marry, they have kids, they get old and the story ends down the line. Our story was different. One of the reasons my wife popped like a cork was because she had so much energy. Sometimes she would say she felt imbalanced by it. She would be high for days on end, and then she would be low for a day, maybe two. Sometimes it stopped her working, but her family covered for her. I had gotten used to it from the off, and had looked out for her on those days when even little things, making a cup of coffee or collecting the mail from the mat would seem impossible. Sometimes it would make her cry. But on those days I would tell her why she let me marry her; because I wasn't perfect. And I would hold her hand and she would almost smile and we would wait it out, like a storm, until she was better again.

It was a part of our lives together, a small part, all things considered. For great swathes of time, it was perfect. She taught me how to pick locks and I showed her how to arrange flowers, and we kissed as if we weren't married but starting out. I took over a run down, burnt out first floor building and made it my shop. It was small and popular and kept us going. I didn't take on any help, I was happy to juggle all the sides of it. At night I rang up the receipts and took down the takings and I let myself think of my parents and smile. At night we would eat out and on weekends we would visit places, go to the museums or take in a movie.

We tried for a baby. We moved into a new place that had a garden. At the bottom of it was a tree, sturdy and strong, that we had ear marked for a tree house. We had a small bedroom next to ours that we wiped clean, a blank slate for a boy or a girl. We did not buy toys, but we lingered by shop windows and admired rocking horses or furry toys on department store floors.

On the fridge door we had a piece of paper where we jotted down names; on one side were our favourites, on the other side the ones we swore we would never consider in a thousand years. The good ones, the keepers, we talked about quietly, and when we were done, we would sit and look to each other and think about the future. Then we would carefully write down the name, as if we were signing a cheque for the house. The no-names, the shockers, we went through uproariously, laughing out loud as we tried to think of more outlandish, more terrible things we could possibly saddle a kid with. We would write these ones down in thick capitals, with exclamation marks, the way people wrote closing down signs. I think that was the last time we were truly happy.

We went to the doctors and the doctors ran tests on both of us. Then they ran more tests on my wife. She stayed overnight and I visited her, replacing the flowers they had in the vase by her bed with ones I had picked from the shop. She did not speak but instead held my hand. I asked the doctors outside her door what I needed to know. When I went back inside, my wife was looking at the flowers in the vase with tears in her eyes. I walked over and sat by her and took her hand. Neither of us spoke. Instead we looked at the vase. Flowers for every occasion.

After that, my wife got sick. The bouts grew worse. Her father and brothers visited and tried their best. They never called it depression. Instead they called it 'the sadness'. That's what we talked about in the kitchen while my wife lay in the bedroom upstairs. I hired someone, a middle aged woman who I remembered vaguely from my previous job who had stopped by the shop to buy some roses. I rang my wife every day, at twelve and two. I came home earlier, worried for my wife. Sometimes she would be reading and seem fine. We would watch television or eat dinner, fragile and almost happy. We didn't go out. But on those days she was surviving.

Then there were other days. Sometimes I would arrive home and she would still be in bed and I know she would have not moved except to go to the bathroom, all day. Other days I would find her sitting in the spare bedroom, looking blankly at the walls or worse, sitting in the corner, with her knees drawn up to her chest, trying not to cry. And some days I would see her simply standing in the kitchen staring out to the sturdy tree in the garden, and those were the days that would scare me most of all, because I did not know what she was thinking at all. I would stand by her and she wouldn't even know I was there, even when I called her name. Sometimes I called her 'honey' just to see if it would get a flicker of recognition out of her, but she would just kept on staring right ahead.

I talked about quitting work. We talked about medication, which she was prescribed and mostly took. But there would be days when I would shake pillowcases to freshen them up and pills would fly out from the folds and the flaps. We talked about moving, getting a place that would be better suited to the two of us, without all the constant reminders. We talked about adoption; or I talked about adoption, and my wife listened to me talk, but then it would drift out into silence. Some nights when my wife was downstairs, I would excuse myself and walk up to the spare, white room and sit in the corner, draw my knees up to my chest and try not to scream and cry.

I called my wife at twelve. It was a Thursday. It rang out and I knew something was wrong. On other days it would ring out, but there was something on that day that I felt in my heart. I let it reach the dial tone and then I held the phone's receiver to my ear, feeling sweat rise over me. I put the receiver back in the cradle, my hands shaking and I put my head in my hands. I counted to ten and then reached for my coat, telling Vera, my assistant, that I had to head on home. She nodded without speaking, something she never did, and walked around the counter and opened the door for me. The bell rang as I stepped out and we both jumped at the sound of it, this bell we'd heard a thousand times before. The bell was my wife's idea, a joke, which I had come to love.

I drove home, feeling the way I had done once when I had a fever and was bed-sick for three days afterwards. I reached our house and almost jumped out of the car, leaving the door open. Anyone could have stolen it, I remember thinking later, I had left the keys in the ignition in the rush, but no-one had taken it. Maybe they knew, the people who walked past that day, that it would have been bad luck to steal from us. The bad luck house, I remember calling it later.

I called out her name as I stepped through the front door, something I never did. It was always quiet when I came in and I didn't want to scare her. Our house, by then, had become a fragile thing, I knew that much. But on that Thursday I hollered her name, screamed it, as I rushed from room to room, bumping into walls, the way she used to when she fizzed. I felt tears building in my eyes, streaking across my cheeks, burning my skin. I looked everyplace in the house and she was nowhere to be found.

Then I remembered all those times I had come home to find her looking out to the garden, to our sturdy tree. I thought of this while I was in the spare bedroom and as soon as I did, I understood what had happened. I slowed down. All the fizzing suddenly turned flat. I walked the stairs as slowly and carefully as an old man would do. Once, soon after we had moved in, I had done just that, walked slowly and carefully down the stairs, imagining myself old and still living in this house with my wife, both of us infirm and still together, supporting each other. Helping each other to unscrew bottle caps and listening to the radio. None of that possible now, I knew, as I reached the bottom of the stairs. I walked down the hallway and reached the kitchen. I looked out to the garden and I found my wife, her feet a dozen inches above the grass, hanging from the sturdy tree.

I did the same as I did for my parents, picking the best flowers, making sure everything was perfect. The service was small, but everyone we had cared about was there. We held the wake in a bar of her father's choice and by midnight it was over. I walked back to the house and packed my things. I had sold it at a low price to get a quick sale. After Vera had sorted out another job, I sold the shop, again at a low price. The next day I was moving into a small apartment near to the one I had taken all those years ago, where it had all began. It had a balcony, I made sure of that. One bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom and a balcony. A place that fitted me now. All that was left was the garden of my previous house.

I walked out onto the grass with my shoes off. The feeling of grass under my feet is a feeling I have always loved, and right now, it was all I had to cling onto. During the day I had hired a company to chop down the tree that had taken my wife. Now it was little more than a pile of wood, ready to burn. I dragged a large steel bin from the back gate and put each log in, carefully burning them, one by one. It took me the whole night to burn it down to a bin full of ashes. The sun came up and I looked around. It was a blue sky day. Without the tree looming overhead, it felt like I could see the entire sky, all over the world, forever. All the smoke had cleared and there was nothing but this perfect skyline. And then, finally, I let myself cry.

When I moved into the new apartment, I thought that was the end of it too. I couldn't see beyond my wife and with her being gone, I had no idea what was left for me. I spent three days in the new flat looking over the city, following the traffic and drinking coffee. I had bought a pack of cigarettes and started to smoke again. I had quit when I met her and now that she was gone I would start again. It made perfect sense in my head to think that way.

But it was not the same as when my parents left me. Now, more than ever, I needed flowers. I bought them for the place, not as many and none as colourful but still there all the same. When I woke up at night in sweats, I would sit and look at them until my heart settled. When I cried out of nothing, I would walk over to them and hold the petals the way other people would hold someone's



hand. I knew I was probably crazy but I didn't care. When I could hold it together, I would look through our photographs together and would be happy.

The balcony faced a small two tiered shopping centre. There was a supermarket on the ground floor and shops surrounding it. On the second floor were restaurants and a public library. Some days I would go there and grab a stack of books, music, films. Never music by anyone we had shared, no films we had watched together.

It was on one of those days that I walked past the supermarket and noticed the small flowers selection they had by the door. Eight buckets of wilting flowers, two days from being dead. I walked up to them and inspected each bucket; saw the dirty water, the too tight wrapping. I also noticed the price and whistled so loud a woman looked round and shook her head at me, thinking I had directed it at her. I walked outside and saw how far the pavement stretched before it reached the road. I walked over the road to my apartment and ran the four flights of steps. I sprinted to the balcony and looked back to the space in front of the doors that led to the supermarket. Something in my heart flickered.

I set up the flower stall within a month. At first people would see me and almost edge away, surprised. I didn't use any fancy gimmicks or have a sign. I had spoken to my old suppliers and had simply selected the best flowers. I did not draw people in but simply spoke to the people who looked as if they needed help. I set up for eight in the morning, when the supermarket opened and stayed on until eight or nine in the evening, depending on the light. I worked myself to exhaustion and after I finished up, returned to the apartment and ate, smoked, thought about her, I found I could grab three or four hours of sleep each day.

Business became as quick as it had started slow. I would start to identify regulars, recommend flowers to the men and women who grabbed a bunch to freshen their house or office at the start of each week. There were couples, families with children, and people on their own. I talked to strangers and remained a stranger to them and in that I was happy. It was enough.

I also enjoyed the process of finishing up for the day. Unlike the shop, there were no details to follow. I would put what I had not sold into storage in a nearby lock-up and then simply dismantle the few props, the planks of wood I used, the chair I rested on sometimes, and put them in with the flowers. I would pour the buckets down the drain on the pavement and watch the few petals slide away down with them. I would leave my hands wet and run them through my head, feeling my fingers throb and my back ache.

One night I had finished for the night and had returned to the flat. It was too hot to sit inside and I didn't take my photos outside. I only ever looked at them on the small table inside. I took my coffee and my cigarette and walked out to the balcony. I stood there, thinking about how my clothes had tumbled all those years before and tried to imagine her voice calling up to me once more. I stood that way for I don't know how long, until the workers from the supermarket, the late night cleaners, began to file out into the street. They were Polish mainly, working nights and then some of them taking courier jobs in the day. I watched them all stand around nearby where my stall was set and smoke, make jokes. Then they all waved each other off and left for their homes. All except one man.

I watched him as he said goodbye to his friends and then waited on the pavement. I assumed he was waiting for a ride. I fished my glasses off of my shirt and put them on. He was a younger man, early twenties, blond hair and short. He looked nervous. Then just as I was about to go back inside to my photos, I saw him drop to his knees over the drain I used during the day and draw a

screwdriver from his shirt pocket, the way I had done my glasses, and carefully loosen the drain cover.

He lifted the cover, watching left and right all the while, and then reached inside. He lifted netting he must have set there during the night and held it up. Gathered inside were all of my discarded flower petals. He held them up to the light and then emptied them into his inside pocket. Then he re-set the net and went about screwing down the drain cover. Then as quick as lightning, he pulled himself up and went on his way, down the street.

"Son of a bitch," I said and laughed. I couldn't help it. I turned and walked inside, realising that was the first time I'd said anything out loud, let alone laughed, since I'd moved in.

I checked him the next night and he did the same thing. Every night he went on the same way. The only day he didn't do it was on Sunday night, the day I didn't set up the stall. After the second time, when I realised what he was doing, I started to select the best petals from each flower and separate them from the stem before I set up the stall. In the evening I would stand, a little more to one side now, aware I was now spying, and see him fish them out. Sometimes I thought I saw him smile, other times he did nothing more than take them as quickly as possible, for fear of getting found out. I saw his name badge said Lucas.

This went on for a month. Then I made a decision. A decision you only make when you are alone and spying on a thief whose only crime is to steal from drains. I followed him. I watched him go about his task and then when he was halfway through I left the balcony and made my way down the stairs. By the time I came out he had just started off down the road, giving me enough time to follow him at a distance. He made his way down the main strip, and then down a side road, another, until he finally stopped at a block of high rise flats. When he went inside I crossed the road and waited. All the other windows were dark; it was 4:43 am. All of a sudden one lit on the twelfth floor.

I had followed him on a Saturday night. Now it was Sunday morning. I walked over to a café that was opposite the high rise and ordered breakfast when it opened. I ordered another coffee, another breakfast and the waitress looked me over once and said she didn't know where I was putting it all. I smiled. It was true; it was the first time I'd eaten a meal, a proper greasy, well cooked meal, for a long time. It was almost ten when I saw the boy, walk out of the bottom of the building, arm in arm with a beautiful girl. Both of them wore uniforms and both of them were laughing.

I recognised both of the uniforms. The girl worked at a hotel nearby and he was working for a delivery company. I had delivered to both of them before.

I walked behind them, watching them talk close in each other's ears like they were sharing secrets, until they went one way and then the other. I watched them wave goodbye to each other and then look back to each other once they had crossed the street. Even amongst the bustled of the city, they looked like the only two people that mattered, that were in love. I hoped, imagined, my wife and I had looked that way once. I went back to my flat and slept, exhausted, and didn't wake for seven hours. Another first.

I already knew what I wanted to do; all I needed now was an approach. I felt giddy with the idea, like the times my wife and I had written our imaginary lives out on rough paper. I knew what I had to do, but not the invention. I sat thinking it through, holding my photographs in my hand. I looked at my wife and asked her out loud my questions. I smiled. I started to think like my wife, back when she was still a trainee with her family and catching flak from her brothers. 'The key to success' she



would say as we fought over who got the best bits of the Chinese take-out 'is to be sneaky.' She would kiss me and I would kiss her back. I would look down and see the last chicken ball had gone, proving her point.

I started to map out my plan as if she was still there with me. I pulled out the notepad I used for the day's takings and tore off a fresh sheet. On it I wrote my plan. I crossed out ideas and began new ones. I drank coffee but pushed the cigarettes away, wanting to keep sharp. I worked until it was late on Sunday night and then I folded the paper up, put it in my shirt pocket and readied myself for the working week.

It went like so; I rang up the courier company asking for Lucas, claiming I was from a language course and found out his shifts. I walked into the hotel on the busiest day and took coffee and lunch in the foyer facing the reception where the girls worked. I watched the pattern of them either beginning at eight and working until three thirty, or starting at three thirty and finishing at ten. The girl, whose name was Angelica, worked day shifts, to help her improve her English, when it was most busy. And give the other, older women, an easier ride in the evening, I noticed. The next week I checked in for a night to double check her pattern, and found it was the same. I left Vera in charge of the stall for a day.

That night I lay on the impossibly clean bed and folded my hands behind my head. I knew I was going crazy, but couldn't you go crazy in a good way? I knew my life wasn't what it was, but there was nothing that was going to change that and I understood that. If you love someone, you don't stop loving them, even after they're gone. I still loved and missed my parents. I still loved and missed my wife. Those were the things my life was built around. Doing this, this scheme, would be something else. Something good. I put the plan next to me on the bed. I set a photo of my wife, one from the stack, next to it. Then I put my earplugs in and listened to music waiting, for the next day. It was a Sunday.

I break the lock, it's easy. When you love a locksmith, there are not many things that can stand in your way. I walk in and for a moment I hold my breath. I pad around the small place and see there is no-one there. I breathe again. Then I open the bag I've been carrying and go about my work. I put flowers wherever I can, taking what time I can to make sure they are set right and look beautiful. Outside in the hallway people walk by and that makes me stop, my heart in my throat, waiting for the door to open and one of them to come inside. But I'm lucky. I finish and look around and see flowers everywhere, and then I walk to the door. I fold the empty black bag into my inside pocket and put an ID, one for a gas meter reader that a man left once years ago and never claimed in my hand if anyone stops me. My wife made me keep it, instead of handing it in. She said you never know when a fake ID will come in handy. And no-one ever looks at the photograph. I remember her winking at me after she said that.

I walk out of the building and feel as if I am on fire. I put my hands on my knees and am aware of myself shaking. I know this is a good thing and I am alive and have acted. I steady myself and then walk on down the street. I walk the way I remember Lucas walking when he had grabbed his petals; I put my hands in my pockets and keep my head low.

I reach my neighbourhood. I look at the space where my flower stall will be tomorrow. It is a good thing and it makes people happy. I am proud of it and the work I have done with it. It may be simple the way a baker's work is simple but it matters.

I walk into my apartment and lean against the door as if I'm keeping something out. I slide down and sit there for a second, taking things in. I have broken into a house and left two hundred flowers behind their door. I pull myself up. I make myself coffee and take my cigarettes to the

balcony. I throw them over the side. They fall silently to the floor. No-one stops, no one looks up; it's not the type of city people do that in, not any more. That was a different time. I drink my coffee and watch the day finish up and the evening begin. I walk to the bathroom and shower. I dress neatly, in a suit and put my wallet in my pocket. So many things have ended. One small, new thing has happened now. I take my keys from the tray. Tonight I am going to go to a restaurant and order the biggest finest steak I can find. It is something I have never done before; order the biggest meal on the menu. I pat my shirt pocket. The photo is still there, pressed against my heart. I open the door and I take a breath. Then I walk out into the night and the city.

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## **“The Ambassador” by Alex Russelburg**

**Synopsis:** The dream dreamt into a reality. The thin boundaries of our reality and perceptions. Explored here in a child’s exploration.

**About the Author:** Alex Russelburg is an 18 year old college student, living in southern Indiana. He is currently working on projects of vastly differing genres and mediums, and intends to weave them all together into one cohesive work. “The Ambassador” is the opening chapter.

**In this Fantasy,** a comatose kid will see what he never saw or experienced, yet he craves his old self and old environment.

## The Ambassador

By Alex Russelburg

The hospital room was saturated with light streaming in through the window. It gave everything a white, pure hue. If Freddy Carter were awake, he would have appreciated its simplistic beauty. His father always told him to filter out the darkness. "If you think that the world is good, that's the same as it being good," he would always say. "Perception is reality". Freddy had no idea what those words meant. Perception. Reality. He was only 8, so he wasn't expected to. He just knew that if he only looked at the light, he could ignore the shadows.



If Freddy were awake, he would have looked at the dust playing in the sunlight. The coma kept his eyelids shut, and his consciousness locked away. Even if his eyes could see the dust particles, his mind wouldn't process their dance. Ever since the car accident 6 months earlier, he was incapable of perception and reaction.

His body drew in the light, letting it bathe him. The dust finished its dance, and settled in his hair. He didn't notice. His ears received the sound of the pair of approaching footsteps, but his sleeping mind couldn't comprehend them. One of the owners of the footstep sounds knocked on the door, knowing that there wasn't going to be an answer.

In a sweet, concerned voice, she said "Freddy, there's someone here to see you." The other footstep-maker approached, and entered through the threshold. He was around 20, wearing a hastily put together outfit consisting of blue jeans and a t-shirt with John Lennon's face on the front.

"He looks so different," he said to the female. "I haven't seen him in a year, and he already grew up so much."

"You're his brother, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. I've been away at college. Do you mind if I have a couple of minutes alone?"

"Of course. Just come up to the desk when you're ready to go." She left the room and returned to her post.

*Who are you?*

The man walked slowly to the bed, and sat down on the edge. He rested his hands on his knees and stared at the reflection of the lights on the floor.

"Freddy, remember me?" he started. "I haven't seen you in a year, bud. It's been a really long time."

*I can't see you. I can't remember you. There's nothing even here. I don't think I'm even here. What? Who?*

"I met a girl while I was gone, Fred. You'd like her. She's a lot like our aunt." He looked up from the floor directed his gaze toward the door. Then he quickly glanced over toward his brother, and then the wall opposite the entrance. He rotated around counter-clockwise, now sitting on the corner of the bed, looking to the left.

*I'm not where you are. Why am I hearing you? Am I?*

"Her name's Rachel. Her family's kind of strict, but she has this incredible sense of freedom. I don't think she even knows she has it. I think... I think I might love her."

*What is hearing?*

Freddy's brother paused for a second, and turned toward him.

"Freddy... I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't here for you before. I... I'm sorry that I never really understood you. I just... I don't know. There's no excuse."

He reached out, and held his little brother's hand. By this time, he was crying.

"When you wake up, I'll take you to church. If that's what makes you happy, then that's what I want for you. You can pick out a bible, too." He thought for a second, and continued, "It's just that I've been dealing with a lot of people lately who don't use the bible the way it was meant to be used. I never wanted you to go down the same path. When you have holy justification for your primal human instincts, there's no end to the evil you can commit. Just focus on the 'turn the other cheek' stuff, alright?"

He got up, waved goodbye, and left the room.

*What are you? Why did you leave? Were you ever even there? What does that mean?!*

"It means that you're still tied to your old world. Let go." The voice cut through the darkness, like it was the only thing that existed. It was commanding, but sympathetic. Like it understood what he was going through, and that it had the power to make it better.

*Am I speaking? Can you hear me? What is speaking?*

"I hear you. Let go of the old world. Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

He did. At first, all Freddy could see was darkness. Then his perception started to evolve. He could see that he was standing on soil, from which long, thin blades of grass started to emerge. The grass kept growing, stopping only when it reached Freddy's knees.

"What do you see?" the voice said again.

"I see a meadow. The grass is tall. It's the brightest green I've ever seen." Freddy turned around, and saw a young man standing behind him, wearing blood-stained jeans, a ripped t-shirt, and an oversized brown jacket. He kept his hands in the jacket's pockets.

"Nice to meet you. Name's Gordon. I look over this world."

He removed his right hand from his pocket and extended it toward Freddy. He ignored it.

"What do you mean? What is this place? Am I in heaven?" he asked.

Gordon took his hand back, and looked at the void above him. Freddy only saw an expanse of blackness above them. Even though there was no light, the meadow appeared as it would at noon, with no depreciation in the color. "Yeah. I guess you could call this heaven," he said.

Freddy had no reply. He decided to avert his focus away from Gordon, and toward the flowers. They looked familiar, but he was sure that he never saw them before. They had thin petals that reached out, trying to reach for the skies. Yet, holding on to the earth, trying to keep it from dispersing into nonexistence. They were organic, yet frail, like glass. Logically, they shouldn't have been able to sustain their shape. If the rules of gravity applied here, that is.

"What are you looking at?"

Gordon's voice jolted him to attention. Freddy looked at him, and then looked back. The petals changed their shape, but to Freddy, it felt as though they've always been that way.

"The flowers. I know that's what they are, but they don't look like it."

"They look exactly like what you think a flower is supposed to look like," Gordon said. He continued, "Anyway, don't you have some questions? Most people do, you know."

Freddy didn't speak.

"Well..." Gordon said with a sigh as he rolled his eyes, "If you don't want to go first, I guess I will. As I said, I'm Gordon. While I was alive, I was a soldier. That was immediately before the shift, so I'm going to assume it's still in your future. So I guess I should say 'I WILL be a soldier'. Confused yet?"

He was.

Gordon tried again. "Look. This world. This is completely separate from the old one. That world's gone now, or it will be, or it already was. Something like that. That old world, the one from before the shift, that world never even existed. Get it yet?"

He didn't.

"Okay... Think about it this way. This world seems like a dream, right? It's not. This world's as real as you can get. The old world, the physical one, it was a construct of the human mind."

"My mind?" Freddy hesitantly asked. "Did I just make everything up? The real world... It isn't real? I created it?"

"Everyone created it. It was nothing more than a dream. It became corrupt, or in your case, it WILL become corrupt. I fought in the war to erase it."

Freddy didn't bother to ask why it needed to be erased. He was preoccupied with thoughts of the old world.

*It wasn't real? What is that even supposed to mean? I was there. I felt things. I saw things. Now I don't even know what seeing is.*

"I don't either. You get used to it," Gordon replied.

"What? I was thinking ... I didn't say anything... What?"

"Oh. You were thinking that? I'm sorry. It's impossible to tell, here. Your thoughts, your words, your clothes, your consciousness. They're all at one with this plane of existence. Here, perception is what separates everything."

*This is what reality is? No. This is a dream. I... I don't remember what happened to me... In the old world... I must be asleep.*

"Or dead," Gordon replied. "Did you ever wonder what a dream was? When you went to sleep in the physical world, where did you think your consciousness went?"

*Here. He's saying that I've been here before. In my dreams... Were they dreams? What's a dream?*

*What. Is. Wait. I. Am. All. Who. No.*

Light. Then no light. The meadow caught fire. It became liquid, and Freddy breathed under the ground. He stood on the sun, staring at his reflection.

*I. Am. Never. I. Fall. Against. Dark. Too. Rise.*

Freddy's reflection was dead. And then it never existed. The sun keeps going. The sun always keeps going.

That is why men stand.

*Wait. Calm. Water. Calm. Relax. Relax. Relax.*

A hand emerged from the sky, and pulled him away from the light. It started waving at him. Trying to wake him up. Trying to stabilize him.

A mouth emerged from the palm of the hand, and started to speak, "Kid! Hey, kid! We're back on that meadow. You remember the meadow, right? Look at the grass"

*I am back. I am... not whole... What is whole?*

*What. Grass. Soil.*

"I need you to look at the grass, kid. I need you to recognize it. You can't come back until you recognize it."



And he did. Freddy found himself lying on his back, the grass extending above his body. Gordon stood above him, and extended a hand. This time, Freddy took it.

"What... What was that?" Freddy asked. "Where was I?"

"You were exactly where you thought you were. That's the problem with this place. It's only as stable as you are."

"I don't like that... What if I mess up again? What will happen to me if I forget where I am? Can't someone else do that for me?"

Freddy already knew the answer. No. For the first time in his life, on this world or the previous, existence rested on his shoulders. The ground didn't support him. He supported the ground.

And he still wasn't sure what existence here meant.

Gordon placed his hand on Freddy's shoulder. "If you're strong, your home will be too."

"This isn't my home."

Gordon looked in the kid's eyes, and could tell that he meant what he said. He didn't want to be here. He wasn't strong enough yet. Gordon gave him two pats on the shoulder, and put his hand back into his pocket.

"Practice makes perfect," he said. "Once you get the hang of it, you'll start to dig this place. You can do anything you want, here." This didn't console Freddy. Gordon tried a different approach.

"Hey. You want to see Linda?"

"Who's that?" asked Freddy.

"An old friend of mine. She's the one that made this world what it is. She gave us the power to change things. If she weren't here, holding together all of the strings of reality, we'd constantly be shifting around like you were just now."

"... I just want to go back," Freddy said quietly. "I don't know what I miss, but... it's hurting me. There's something that I should be doing. In my real body, not this one. I should be walking around. Learning. Playing. I miss all of that. I miss... I think I miss being real."

"You're probably converting your memories as we speak. You'll be able to go back and forth, but both worlds will be one. Even though it won't be happening in the 'physical' sense, you'll be able to meet your old friends. By the time you get used to this world, you should be able to access your old self," said Gordon.

"But I still won't be real."

"You are real. You just don't feel that way yet. It still feels like a dream, but I promise you, it will get better. Come on. Let's go meet Linda."

"How do we do that?" asked Freddy.

"Close your eyes, and look into yourself. Imagine what it's like to be human, and let go only when you have a firm grasp on that reality."

Freddy looked down at the grass. It was waving at him. Wishing him a safe voyage. He returned the favor, and shut his eyes.

*I am me. I am someone. I can think. I can see. I know where I am. I always know where I am. I am perception. I am reality. I am human. I am spirit. I am. I am. I am.*

Freddy opened his eyes, and the world was reduced to its simplest form. The ground disappeared, and he stood next to Gordon on an infinite expanse of white. There was one structure that towered above them, standing an indiscernible distance away. Simultaneously, it appeared to be right next to them, and as far away as possible. They didn't notice.

"This is existence, kid. This is what it means to be alive, without all of the other crap in the way. It's only you, me, and Linda," Gordon said.

Freddy gazed toward the structure. It towered above him, reminding him of giant structures from his old life.

*Giant structures. I remember them. What were they called? Skyscrapers? I think that's right.*

This thing, this "skyscraper", extended as far as he could see both above him and below him. The top part, the part that began infinitely above him, and stopped at his feet, was different. It was shaped like...

*It's like a pyramid. No, not that. A funnel. A cone. But it's not solid. No... Those are strings.*

Wires extended from a singularity at the very top, and formed a cone around the "skyscraper", with the base being at the same level that Freddy stood on.

"Where's Linda?" asked Freddy. "Is she behind those strings?"

"She's the one holding the strings together. She's the 'skyscraper' you were talking about," Gordon answered, knowing that Freddy never said anything about it. Freddy didn't bring it up. Gordon continued.

"When we tore down the old world and started over, there was a different anchor. It was driven by human pain, so we destroyed it, not knowing what the consequences would be. There was no more pain, but there was nothing to hold the world together. Linda sacrificed herself, and gave up her humanity in order to replace the anchor."

"What are the strings?" Freddy asked.

"They keep us tied to Linda. It's how we stay in control. Sever the wire, and your spirit will detach itself from this world, echoing around your own consciousness until it dissipates."

Freddy understood. He didn't know what half of the words meant, but he grasped the basic concept. He took a step forward. Under his foot, a sea of colors began to stir. They calmed down, and returned to white.

"Neural activity. The colors are your memories, returning to your body through the folds of time and space," Gordon explained. "Keep exercising your consciousness, and you might even get 'em all back."

*Fr. Fr... something. Fre? I'm... Fred. Freddy. They called me Freddy. Can I get back to them? The one's that called me Freddy? I... I want to go home. I don't remember what it is, but I want it back. I want my old life back.*

*Linda. She's keeping me tied here. She's keeping me away from my... from my family.*

Freddy immediately stopped himself. He directed his thoughts to what it must have been like in his old life. He pictured his family, any pets he may or may not have owned, anything to hide what he was genuinely feeling from Gordon.

If he could kill Linda, he would probably be able to go home.

"Gordon... I think... I think I want to get a closer look. You know. At Linda. I want to meet her."

"Go ahead, kid," Gordon replied.

Freddy took a couple more steps. Pause. Keep walking. Stop. Look. Wait. Walk. Walk faster. Run. Run. Run. Run.

Gordon started to chase him. He suspected something.

*He suspects me. He knows. He knows. Quiet! Stay quiet!*

He couldn't. He was going to destroy Linda. He was going to erase this world. Break it, and get back to the old one. See his family. Do something with his life.

Freddy made it to the edge of the wire forest. The gaps between them were more than wide enough for him to run between.

Gordon kept up his pursuit.

"Get back here! Hey, kid! It won't work! Even if you do it, you won't get back!"

Freddy didn't listen. He just kept running. He climbed past the wires, and started weaving around. If he could lose Gordon, he could make it to the center easily.

*Weapon. Weapon. I need a weapon. I need... a sword. Something like a sword.*

A blade materialized in his right hand. He kept running.

*Slower. Slower. I can keep... No... I can keep running. I believe I can, so I can. That's the way it works, right? Yes. But... I don't believe.*

He stopped to catch his breath. Gordon was nowhere to be found. Good, Freddy thought.

*Freddy. Kid. I'm not thinking... You are. Look. If you kill... You don't know... I know. No. If you do what you're getting ready to do, you have no idea what could happen. The old world's dead. No,*

*it's still there. I just came from there. That's where I lived. That's where I was born. I can get back. It's dead. It's dead... It's not! You liar! You fucking liar!*

Freddy collapsed, and fell on his knees. He grabbed his head, trying to stop the thoughts. Trying to stop the pain. The sword fell to his side.

And then he looked up.

A monolith towered above him. *Linda*. The anchor. It held a darkly metallic tone, and was covered with symbols that glowed a neon blue.

Freddy stood up, tears streaming down his face. He picked up the sword, and simply stood. Facing the anchor. Facing the only thing keeping him away from his family. He could strike it, end it, destroy it. He didn't.

And so Freddy stood, facing the cornerstone of reality, the closest that he would ever get to facing God. And he fell the second time.

*Your old home. You want it. This is correct?*

Yes.

*You can't go back. You know this. This is correct?*

Yes.

*You want to kill me. You believe that if you destroy this world, you can go back to your own. This is correct?*

Yes. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

*Then live.*

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“Chance Of Rain” by Ken Goldman**

**Synopsis:** The best SciFi or Fantasy are always the ones dealing with Humanity and Society. Otherwise, we can't feel passionately for the story. And here we have a great divide meeting. The Earth, its ecology – and the love of simple things such as the romance of “standing in the rain” – now made impossible.

**About the Author:** Former teacher Ken Goldman has homes in both Penn Valley Pennsylvania and the South Jersey shore, depending upon the track of the sun. His stories appear in over 525 publications in the U.S. and Canada, the UK, Ireland, and Australia. He has received honorable mentions in Ellen Datlow & Terry Windling's The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror #7, #9, #16, and Ellen Datlow and Kelly Link & Gavin J. Grant's YBF&H #17, #20, and #21. A paperback of his short stories, “You Had Me At ARRGH!: Five Uneasy Pieces by Ken Goldman” (with six stories... Go figure) has been published by Sam's Dot Publishing. Among The Genre Mall's all-time top ten best sellers, it is available at their site. A film based on his story “The Keeper” has been contracted by Australia's Precision Pictures, and his novella “Desiree” will be published by Damnation Books during 2010.

**In this SciFi,** a woman reminisces her beloved moments and the outcome of changing times in a changed world.

## Chance Of Rain

By Ken Goldman



Josephine felt certain her date was going to kiss her. A light drizzle thumped on the convertible's rag top, and "Little Darlin'" by The Diamonds had just come on the radio. The music sounded tinny from the speaker of Warren's new '57 Chevy, but accompanied by the rain drops it would do just fine for background.

Warren had that sheepish look a boy always gets in his eyes when he's about to do something both daring and foolish, as if he were preparing for a swan dive into waters of uncertain depth. Clearly he was weighing the consequences of the bold move required to press his lips to hers while trying to keep his Ricky Nelson aloofness intact. Josephine didn't know any guy who had been able to convincingly pull off that brand of cool detachment when it came time for 'the move'. She supposed such self-assured indifference was a province reserved for rock and roll singers, TV idols, and Elvis, who was, of course, in a class by himself.

Hopefully Warren would not kill the moment by coming right out and asking if he might kiss her. That would mean she would have to play coy, then pull back as any decent girl who had agreed to park at the lake would do on a first date. But if he just reached for her and didn't hesitate long enough to give her time to think about it - or to **seem** to think about it - if he just lightly pulled her closer and made his move smoothly and cleanly, well then...

**"... Well, my love-a I was wrong-a (LaLa LaLa La Laaaa!)To try to love two ... (A boop-a boop-a boop-a boop-a ...)"**



*"Josie ...." Warren spoke her name. The word was all she really required of him, all she needed to hear. Josephine closed her eyes and tilted her head towards her date. She knew the steady beat of the falling rain would take care of the rest, and with any luck Johnny Mathis might croon "Chances Are" from the Chevy's speakers during the next few minutes to capture this moment and hold it forever. **Kiss me, Warren... oh, please, kiss me, kiss me, kissmekissme...***

&&&

"Gran'ma? Gran'ma, you all right?"

The old woman stood alone looking out the window smiling at the downpour. She did not turn toward Jeffrey when he spoke. Having gone into one of her funks again she disappeared to some other place deep inside her head, and whenever she did that her eyes rolled back like a corpse's. Jeffrey's mother had quit trying to bring her out when she got that way, allowing the old woman to remain in the distant place she enjoyed so much to visit. His grandmother scared Jeffrey when she got like that. Lately it seemed she got like that more than ever.

"Grandmom's all right, Jeffrey," his mother reassured him. "She's just watching the rain like she does. She'll come back to us when she's ready." Walking over to the old woman by the window sill, she placed her hand on her shoulder, and bent to lightly kiss her forehead. The woman seemed unaware of any of this.

Jeffrey came to his mother's side. He stood there for a moment before he spoke. The rain showed no sign of letting up. "Gran'ma doesn't want to come back, does she?"

His mother said nothing, just shook her head as if she too had gone to some other place, her own place.

&&&

*For more than an hour Newtown's curio shops held most of Gil's attention, and when he reached for Susan's hand it came as a surprise. Despite their recent engagement it was against Gil's nature to display his affections so openly in public. A June evening's cool breeze along the Newtown promenade had a way of making the passersby disappear when twilight yielded to night, although thunder grumbles from the east threatened to spoil the mood. But the important thing was, if the man felt a sudden burst of romance after a three year courtship, this was good.*

*Susan felt encouraged enough to venture squeezing Gil's hand right back. He smiled one of his tentative half-smiles. A brief moment that bordered on magic passed between them.*

*"To what do I owe this sudden burst of affection? My God, here you are practically pawing me in public. If you only knew how long I've dreamed of you fondling me in front of an audience."*

*Gil stopped walking so abruptly that for a moment Susan was yanked back. "Let's just say that on a night like this I realize what a lucky guy I am, okay? And please wipe that shit-eating grin off your face. You know I don't do 'vulnerable' very well."*

*Susan yanked Gil's arm. "Oh, I don't know about that. You're talking to someone who's seen you naked. Can't get much more vulnerable than that."*

*Gil's arm slid around Susan's waist. "You want to place your bet on that? Watch me. I'm going to kiss you long and hard right here, right now, in front of all these people and God."*



*A light drizzle started. People darted past to seek shelter beneath the storefronts' awnings. Susan feigned a broad snarl, and the expression caught briefly in a flicker of lightning. Low rumbles of thunder followed.*

*"Damn. I knew something would spoil the moment," she sighed*

*The whole world strobed and the downpour came, but the couple made no attempt to get out of it. Instead the two stood on the promenade smiling at each other like a pair of idiots.*

*"The moment isn't spoiled. In fact, I couldn't ask for a better one." Susan could not help smiling at the man's uncharacteristic transformation.*

*"All right. Who are you and what have you done with my fiancé?"*

*He pulled her close and kissed her. He kept right on kissing her as thick dollops of rain pummeled their faces.*

*Gil had been correct. Susan could not have asked for a better moment.*

&&&

The old woman was softly humming a tune, smiling as she hummed.

"You remember that one, Susie?"

The question came so suddenly that Susan flinched. The other woman continued humming a few bars as if she assumed the daughter had been privy to her thoughts. Susan fast forwarded to the present.

"Mom, I don't know what you're--"

The elder suddenly burst into song with a voice remarkably clear if not entirely melodic.

***"...Chances are 'cause I wear a silly grin the moment you come into view..."***

Throughout this exchange the daughter watched the rain, hypnotized by its power to conjure stolen kisses along cobblestoned promenades on summer evenings.

Susan's spell broke first. She turned to her son to see if her mother's erratic behavior had distracted Jeffrey from his Dark Knight comic book. It hadn't. Or maybe Jeffrey was pretending it hadn't.

"That song's a little before my time, Mom," she answered, preparing herself for another Chevy-at-the-levee conversation with the old woman. "I grew up with lyrics like 'Everyone Wang Chung Tonight.' But you've mentioned that tune before. Johnny Mathis, isn't it? Greatest make-out music to come out of the '50's, am I right?"

Josephine's smile broadened. "I insisted the band player sing it the night of my wedding. That was the song I'd hoped might come on your father's car radio the first time he kissed me at Saw Mill Lake. But it didn't happen that way. Things never happen the way you want, not exactly the way

you want to remember them. But, you know, that was all right with me. I knew it the moment your father's lips touched mine."

Susan's mother had selected an interesting choice of words with this version, because the elderly woman had paraphrased a line from that Johnny Mathis oldie. The daughter managed a smile for the woman who probably didn't realize she had made the subconscious connection. For someone whose memory had flown south, bringing the past into happy union with the present was really what rainy days like today were all about.

*But then again* .....That wasn't quite accurate, Susan noted. Not any more. Maybe pleasant reveries were what rainy days *used* to be about before nitrogen oxides had worked their way into the two parts hydrogen/one part oxygen mix, before Uncle Sam realized that his amendments to the Clean Air Acts were a day late and a dollar short. A level five storm like this one was a different breed of animal. It was a regular potpourri of volatile organic compounds as Dan O'Brien on cable channel 38 had pointed out to Newtown County just this morning. Standing by the large bay window would make that argument abundantly clear. Susan and her mother had only to wait and watch. The women did not have to wait long. Three sparrows appeared, first one then another and another. With wings outstretched like feathered angels they were enjoying a cool shower beneath the rain drops. Each did its cute little bird dance in a small puddle. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Just your basic garden variety shit-on-General-Lafayette's-statue-in-the-park breed of sparrow, casually having themselves a little bathe in the spring rain. Or so the three fluttering birds might have appeared at first glance to the uninitiated observer. But that was not what was happening here. Not even close.

The drama unfolding near the front lawn brought a quick halt to the elder woman's reminiscing and to Jeffrey's interest in *The Dark Knight*. Seeing any birds at all had become a rarity even this late into spring. What had first appeared an exuberant dance for two of the sparrows rapidly transformed into fluttering convulsions. The third already lay motionless on its back in the middle of the puddle, stiff as a clock's cuckoo gone belly up. This had been one of those bad rain storms, a genuine level five like the forecaster on cable had said. These sparrows, knowing nothing of meteorological warnings or acidification, were paying for their ignorance. The two remaining birds twitched on the ground, then momentarily became airborne and crashed into one another as if one had waged a cockfight on the other. A tail feather flew off the smaller sparrow. Mottled by the rain the feather fell rather than floated to the ground. The birds collided again mindlessly, then plummeted to the sidewalk like stones while the downpour continued to pelt them.

The sparrows were not really fighting. They could no longer see where they were going because the rain had blinded them, melted their tiny irises right inside their sockets. Black holes remained where eyes had been. In another moment this gully washer would sear the delicate flesh beneath their feathers as if the birds were bathing in battery acid. The small creatures' dance of agony would continue for several minutes until each was cold dead. Susan drew the blinds before Jeffrey might see more. She wished she could also silence the rain pellets slapping against the window. It might have been worse. At least this morning's cloudburst had not burned through the roof like the storm during the last level five. Of course there was still the extremely unpleasant task of cleanup ahead. Birds had originally been a major problem because there were so many of them. Some had died on the roof and fell down the water spouts. But now, not many were left, and their remains usually amounted to little more than a handful of bones. Larger animals presented a greater problem because of new public health laws requiring them burned within twelve hours after a rainfall. That could prove an uncomfortable business with a child in the house. When this morning's rain stopped there might be a stray dog or cat, maybe a squirrel or a rat that had crept to Susan's lawn to die. Such animals normally avoided the rain and were caught unaware. That wasn't so unusual. Many people in the beginning had also been caught off guard thinking an

umbrella and a good slicker would keep the rain from their backs. Susan's young husband and her father had been among those people, caught unprotected in a sudden thunder burst when following a camping weekend, surprise surprise, the sky turned suddenly dark. Death was not as magnanimous with the two men as it had been with the sparrows. Rain death took its own sweet time with people, common knowledge now but unthinkable only a few months earlier. The older ones always went more quickly. Four days it had taken her father to die, more than a week for Gil...

*Gil.*

*"I realize how lucky I am," he had told her, and then "You know I don't do vulnerable very well."*

*But he was wrong. He did do vulnerable well. He **did** it extremely well.*

*And she had joked with him about the rain. She had said "I knew something would spoil the moment." Then he assured her that the moment had not been spoiled, **could** not be spoiled.*

*And then he had kissed her right there in the rain ...*

Susan didn't realize that she was smiling. She did very little smiling lately, certainly not much that had come unforced and on its own.

Jeffrey looked up from his comic book. He might have been watching his mother for some time, waiting for her to say something, anything.

"Were you away like gran'ma?" the boy asked.

She managed to turn her smile into something that fell just short of a grin. It made no sense to rage against the way things were, like some demented King Lear trying his damndest to outshout the storm. What was done was done, and you don't bitch because you can't stop the rain. To select to do that was to select madness. And, after all, the rain called forth memories. Bittersweet memories, yes, but still they were wonderful.

Susan took the long walk across the living room and crouched to hug her son. "Yeah, my little pal. I was away, but now I'm back." She told him this with her cheek pressed to the child's because she preferred Jeffrey not see her while she lied.

Neither she nor the boy noticed the old woman as she opened the door and walked outside, arms outstretched, into the downpour.

&&&

*"Josie ..."*

*"I love the way my name sounds when you say it, Warren. Do you know that?"*

*"Josie Josie Josie Josie!" Warren repeated. "Kiss me?"*

*"Maybe I will," the girl teased. "Maybe..." She added a well-rehearsed giggle. "Not here, though... not here," she told him, then pushed open the Chevy's door. She ran outside, twirling and jumping in the downpour like a little kid.*

*"What are you do--?"*

*"Out here, Warren! Here's where I want you to kiss me! Will you come out and kiss me in the rain? Will you?"*

*She ran laughing from the car towards the lake waiting for Warren's footsteps to follow, knowing they would. Turning to him, she opened her arms so that he might run into them. As Warren climbed from his Chevy, Josephine could have sworn she heard Johnny Mathis playing on the radio...*

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## **“How Tomboy came to be involved in the superhero business” by David Perlmutter**

**Synopsis:** A superhero. A distant planet. An alien race. The modern inhabitants of Earth. The prophet. The tyrant. The politics. The saga. This is a tale that merges Fantasy and SciFi elements into one elaborate mix, using kids to show us the childishness of adults.

**About the Author:** David Perlmutter is a freelance writer and university graduate student living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, where he has lived his whole life. His passions are American television animation (the subject of his forthcoming MA thesis and a projected historical monograph), literature (especially science fiction and fantasy) and music (rhythm & blues, soul, funk and jazz.) This explains why much of his writing is as non-conventional and defiant as it is. He is challenged with Asperger's Syndrome, but considers it an asset more than a disability.

**In this futuristic adventure,** a super-gal will narrate an explosive history leading to an intriguing future.

## How Tomboy came to be involved in the superhero business

By David Perlmutter



**Earth Government Research Station, Cincinnati – November 1, 2248.  
Weekly Report by Dr. Millicent Wolfhound, PhD, Director:**

Significant progress has been made in our efforts to improve conditions in the ionosphere. We have recently determined that an appropriately placed layer of salt can be used in order to dissolve the outlying remains of the smog and ozone of the human era. The distinct lack of manufacturing and heavy machinery in our era has, we feel, negated much of the creation of this ozone and smog, and therefore, allows us to control it with this new method.

There is, however, a new case which has emerged within our quarters, involving a creature which I can only describe as...alien.

It can only be said that it fell to Earth, as corny as that might sound. Dr. Malamute, my associate, and I were on a field research trip when suddenly we noticed a large, solid object, resembling the corpse of one of the smaller breeds of dog, suddenly fall to the ground from the sky right in front of our feet. As it was charred by entry into the Earth's atmosphere, and covered with a sticky, filmy

tar that obscured every orifice around its form, we had no choice but to take it to the lab for further examination.

As it turned out, when we had finished scrubbing and cleaning the form, it was apparent to all of us that this creature was clearly not one of us. Indeed, it certainly was not canine; we were only to determine exactly what it was through research. The creature was a human being, a form of life that has not existed on this planet since their destruction in the atomic radiation blasts which climaxed the Fantasy/Reality Wars in 2040. More than that, it was quite clearly alive, and immensely powerful, as we were soon to find out.

The creature stands just over five feet, and by its manner and dress appears to be one of the “superheroes” our world has been overpopulated with since the aftereffects of the aforementioned blasts. It appears to be twelve years old in age and in side profile looks feminine, although for reasons to be discussed subsequently, we were not able to confirm this until later.

The creature was clad in what can only be described as typical garb for a superheroic human being: a red astronaut unitard and red underwear on the outside of her body with white boots and gloves and silver epaulets on her shoulders. On the chest is what is clearly designed as her insignia- a white colored “T” encased in a fist placed alongside a flattened palm. The outfit was clearly designed to be form-fitting and flattering, as these outfits often are.

She has a seemingly pleasant appearance, possessing lovely short cropped copper hair and piercing green eyes. I say seemingly pleasant because her attitude towards us so far has not been entirely cooperative. Once we were able to return life to her, she stood up and caustically demanded to know who we were and what we wanted with her.

“I’ve dealt with aliens before...” she snarled at us “...and trust me, most of them have lived to REGRET that particular experiment!”

At this point, I made motions to my colleagues to restrain her, but this proved impossible. She possesses immense strength, far more than any of us could ever hope to achieve in a lifetime. She is also intensely swift, as she promptly led us on a fairly intense chase in which we were for the most part unable to keep up with her. Her agility is also intense, as she scaled farther distances that we could not match in single bounds.

Being unable to capture the character physically, we determined to outsmart her with our superior intelligence. Given the fact that the ancient humans were relatively stupid creatures who were easily tricked by diversions, we promptly staged such a diversion and carried it out. We found our quarry soon enough within a field of flowers, apparently composing herself. I approached the creature and engaged her in conversation. At a strategically devised time, and with a strategically chosen word, we captured, bound and gagged her and returned her to our quarters.

Once we had arrived, we bound the creature with the silk of the Terrullians, the hardest substance in the known galaxy. Once she was in place, sitting in a restrained position in one of our upholstered office chairs, we removed the tape we had been using as a crude gag from her face. Her scream echoed down the corridors, evidence of her intensely powerful voice.

Having conquered this initial feeling of pain, her sea-green eyes bore into me like a drill. But I stood firm.

“What do you want with me?” she demanded.



"Some answers, if you don't mind!" I replied "First of all, who are you?"

"My name is Tomboy, and I'm the most powerful being on the planet Moroni!" she said. "Now, if you wouldn't mind..."

I cut her off.

"My name is Dr. Wolfhound, and I am the head of this research facility in Cincinnati, in the United States, on the planet Earth."

The viciousness vanished from her face as soon as I uttered the planet's name.

"Earth?" she answered. "That's the ancestral homeland of my people! But they left there many years ago. And you look nothing like them. What is going on here? Is this a dream? Heaven? Hell? WHAT?"

I calmly explained to her the events of our recent past- the events leading to the demise of the human race in the nuclear activity of the wartime period, and the rise of the current one which I and our people come from. She seemed to comprehend very clearly, alleviating my previous fears about her supposed lack of intelligence.

"But you have not yet told us anything about yourself, " I then reminded her. "Where is the planet Moroni? It's obviously not in our galaxy; that much is clear. And how was your race able to survive there when it was decimated here on Earth?"

"If you let me go, I'll tell you," she answered.

"Will you remain with us, or try to escape again?" I queried.

"I'll stay," she replied. "I need to know more about this new Earth, and you need to know more about me. But mostly, I want these ropes to STOP CHAFING ME!"

This latter, humorous remark prompted a vigorous round of laughter from all of us.

I released Tomboy, as the creature calls herself, on the condition that she commit to recording her life story in daily installments for purpose of reference within our audio history files; in return, we are to educate her and help her accommodate herself to our familiar land. It was a mutually satisfying agreement that we hoped would prove to yield beneficial results for both parties involved.

What follows is Tomboy's first oral history narrative, concerning her origins and how she assumed her current mantle and appearance. This is the venerable Moroni scrolls to which Tomboy has allowed us access. They are her documentation of her journey towards greater good.

### **From the Moroni scrolls:**

First of all, I should say that Tomboy is not my real name: it's the name I adopted as my *nom de guerre* when this world superhero thing got started. My real first name is Torrey; my last name isn't really important outside of my home planet. You probably couldn't say it anyway; I barely can. Too many "x" s and "z"s.

You asked about my home planet, Moroni. It isn't part of the Milky Way galaxy, as you suggested, but of a neighboring system, the Artemis group. This is connected to the Milky Way via a wormhole that exists between our two worlds, which is likely how I got here. There are seventeen planets in this group, each no bigger than your non-planet of Pluto in size, surrounded by a sun of similarly short stature. Each of the planets has a population of a particular set of prepubescent human being types, ranging in age from six to eighteen. Moroni, my planet, consists entirely of twelve-year-olds, of which I am one, obviously.

The history of my race is somewhat long and convoluted, but I will try to give you a thumbnail sketch of it. It really begins back when the ancestors of my people still lived upon this Earth. Following the events of September 11, 2001, an orphan named Harold became convinced that the end of the world was nigh, especially after, it is said, a being from another planet appeared to him in his room. He began to act in a way that "normal" people of that time considered "strange" and "crazy", but what we Moronians consider to be standard operating procedure. He spoke of difficult times ahead and, in that fractious period of time, was able to convince a large number of his fellow twelve-year old orphans to help him settle in a new, uncharted territory he maintained that the alien had outlined to him. Within weeks, and with surprising skill and unity, they had produced a massive machine that was more than capable of transporting them anywhere in the galaxy they wished to go. And that place, as it turned out, was Moroni, which they reached through one of those strategically placed wormholes I mentioned earlier.

It was once they settled on Moroni that Harold's true nature and intent came about. He began to have delusional fears about persecution, and he feared the worst was still to come upon his followers, even though they had fled to Moroni specifically to avoid this. Consequently, once the first settlements were laid out, he took command of all the political and military forces at hand, and secured the best land for himself and his closest associates, which numbered truly only a handful. The rest of the children would not let this stand and, on a fateful night, they sneaked up to Harold's territory and murdered him in his sleep. As a result, a more peaceful and slightly more democratic order took hold on the settlement, one which isolated itself further from the original natives of the planet, treating them as subhuman savages who required conversion to the word of Harold the prophet, revered more in death than in life. They also limited their own contact among themselves and forbade violent confrontation, due to the fact that they had come to power through such a violent confrontation. This did not take into account the frequent and violent raids they undertook against alien races and nearby space stations, whom they deemed to be "heathens" and "savages".

The unchallenged head of the new order was T.Q., once Harold's closest follower and greatest admirer, who, though not participating in the actual murder of Joseph, had authorized it. Once he came into control, things became much more rigidly enforced, as I assume they still are. T.Q.'s first order of business was to command all the other members of the colony to give him various samples of their hair, clothing and finger- and toenails. Once he collected these relics, he commenced building an extravagant machine, which, when finished, proceeded to produce clones of the members. This process was repeated several additional times to produce the current residents of Moroni, who not surprisingly resemble their ancestors in virtually every detail. I know this because until recently, I was one of them.

To distinguish themselves from their clones and assert their authority over them, T.Q. and his circle proceeded to use displays of force and fashion to keep them in line. They dressed in elaborate robes of white, with T.Q. crowning himself with a giant helmet of white. They held elaborate disciplinary hearings for those whom they felt were not living by Harold's word, although they were somewhat lacking in living by these rules themselves. They took the lion's share of the crops produced by the clones in their terraformed gardens, leaving them with only paltry sums to

exist on. And, as I said before, they cruelly abused the actual native residents of the planet, totally disenfranchising them and limiting them to specific “reservations” where their behavior, diet and activity were as severely monitored as were that of the clones.

I hope I've given you enough background so that you'll understand where I'm coming from. Now I'll get back to some of the specifics of my story.

&&&

As I said before, I'm a clone of one of the original settlers of Moroni, a girl named Bethany who looked pretty much like me; she was killed in a messy skirmish with the natives during Harold's time, but her remains were mummified, and here I am. As a clone, I was consequently left to live in a small shack, slaving alongside fellow clones who were abused as much as I was. I wanted to rebel many times, especially when I got that whip stuck into my back, but we know as well as you Earthlings that biting the hand that feeds you only causes trouble you don't need, so I left it at that for the moment.

My main companion (my only companion, actually) was a good friend who needed my assistance as much as I needed his companionship. Fielding was my buddy from the first time I was cloned, and he remained that until he and I got separated and I ended up here. He was what was usually called a “nerd” here a couple of centuries ago and remains a common epithet in our world for the more bookish and “dumb” among us. He was short, with white curly hair and pasty white skin and extensive metal dental work on his teeth, which caused him to spit when he got terribly excited. Nobody was particularly interested in “hanging out” with us, so we made a go of it together in what little free time we had.

Most of that time we were real Nosey Parkers; we tried to get to the truth about our backgrounds from those who would talk, but they wouldn't give us exactly all of the information we needed. And, of course, the original kids were isolated in their Temple of Restoration and barely acknowledged our presence. But they didn't prevent us from discovering their library, which was open to all of us, so long as we did not question the official line being presented there. But me being me, I had to know the **real** truth!

This was how I came to know the truth of my origins, and, ultimately, to question them. I would lie awake at night frequently confronting the hidden subtext behind the history that was officially laid out. Was Harold really as megalomaniacal as they claimed he was, and did they really need to kill him? How did T.Q. know he was destined to lead us, and by what divine right could he claim this? And what exactly did the original kids have in their pants that made them better than us, anyway?

Eventually, I decided that we needed to know the full truth. I was convinced they were lying to us, and they had to be exposed for what they were.

Fielding, bless him, was concerned for me, but I was prepared to take care of myself. I set up a booth and placards proclaiming that the truth had to be known, and denounced the original kids as witches and wizards for their trickery. It wasn't long before they found out, and soon I was dragged off to the Temple for what was politely called a “disciplinary hearing”.

In the hearing room, I was bound to a chair in front of the eight remaining white robed original kids, seated on a dais. T.Q., predictably, was in the center, with his helmet crowning an increasingly silvered head of hair. He commanded the hearing begin, and began questioning me accordingly.

Most of the questions were fine, until a particularly incisive one was asked regarding my politics and whether or not I intended to change them. As always, I refused to compromise my integrity and made it known right away.

"You can't just hide this stuff from us!" I said, accusingly, at point blank range. "We have a right to know these things!"

"**You** don't have a right to know squat! The secrets of Harold are pledged to us and us alone. We will not allow any of you **clones** to have **any** knowledge of his secrets!"

This was sounded off by my arch-nemesis, Trace, she of the bulging, evil-tinted eyes and the constantly changing political positions. I despised her from the bottom of my heart, not only because she seemed not to care one iota for the demands of myself and my fellow clones, but because she constantly insisted on rubbing this inferior status right in our faces. I seriously wanted to march up to the dais and clock her good, but the penalty for a clone striking an original kid was severe. Add to that the fact that I was already in considerable trouble as it was for protesting against the council's wishes, and you can see why I held my tongue.

I had no support on the council since Bethany, the girl I had been cloned from, was dead. And since she wasn't exactly well-liked among her peers, their attitude towards me was decidedly less than comforting.

Peabody, the intellectual and secretary of the bunch, proceeded to make his wishes known next.

"We cannot have her level of **impudence** cascading around our quarters!" he indicated, gesturing violently with his hands. "She must be banished immediately!"

"Allow me to consider your suggestions for a moment before coming to my decision." T.Q. stated imperiously.

"Wait!" I protested. "What about me? You haven't heard my..."

"We don't **need** to hear what **you** think, **clone!**" answered Trace. "**You** matter less to us than the insects beneath our feet! Now be silent while our leader calculates what is to become of you!"

T.Q. placed his hand on his head for a moment. Then he said, quietly but firmly: "She will be banished from our settlement and be abandoned to the aliens. There will be no further discussion of the matter."

And just like that, I was forcibly removed from the chamber to await banishment. As I left, Trace sneered at me with a note of triumph. There was no doubt in my mind that she was responsible for all of this. But I would have to prove that to be believed, and I wasn't exactly going to have the time to do that at that moment.

&&&

They took me out to a hill just outside of the settlement, stripped me down to my underwear, tied me down, and then just left me there. Presumably they thought, if the moon's light didn't kill me in that position, then the aliens surely would.

I remained there for several days, during which time I became severely psychologically despondent and physically weak. There seemed to be nothing I could do to escape my fate. Why,

I wondered, would I be so unjustly forsaken, especially since Harold had promised to take care of everybody on an equal level?

It was several days before anyone even attempted to come to my rescue. And, surprisingly, it was exactly the same people that I had been taught to fear- the planet's aliens- who helped me. A group of them, spouting off in their native language words like *shiksa* and *meshugganah* that I didn't understand, conveyed to me their intentions to take me into their care. With some reluctance, I agreed. And so we set forth onto what would become my new base of operations.

&&&

Huddled in a blanket in an effort to ward off the chill of the night, I was ushered into a friendly alien tent once I arrived. I was still clad in that blanket the following morning, when I was ushered into another, larger tent to meet the chief of the tribe.

What impressed me the most about the aliens, especially as I got to know them, was their well developed sense of comradeship and friendliness. They were all identical in appearance with light green skin and bulging craniums and eyes, and wore copies of exactly the same red uniform. And yes, it is the same as mine- I earned it when I joined the tribe, but I'll explain how **that** happened in a minute. Anyway, they treated me with far greater kindness and support than anything I had received as an "inferior" clone in the colony. I suddenly realized the hypocrisy undergirding the entire political system I had come out of. How dare the original kids consider these beings "inferior" to them when, when it came to looking after the affairs of others, the opposite was very much the case!

Nowhere was this made more clear to me than when I met the chief himself. He was older than the others but wore a similar uniform, albeit with more medals on his chest, as well as projecting the same friendly appearance. I bowed respectfully to him, as I had been accustomed to doing with the original kids.

"No need, you crazy kid!" the chief said. "We don't do that here!"

To say I was taken aback would be stating the obvious to the greatest degree possible. I gulped and tried to address him the way he wanted, or at least what I thought he wanted.

"Well, what is it exactly that you do?" I asked.

"We talk!" he replied.

He came up towards me and shook my hand. For once, I actually felt important.

"I am the chief of the Malfeasants!" he said, indicating the group around him and presumably the whole race. "They call me Scheimer. And they call you..."

"Torrey," I explained. "I used to be part of the kids' colony, but they expelled me. Unjustly, I might add."

"Well, you can stay with us if you want," Scheimer answered. "As long as you don't tell the colony about us protecting you and everything. We aren't exactly the best of friends."

"Don't worry about that." I said. "I don't exactly have influence around there. I'd much rather be one of you than one of them. You've treated me with more kindness than they ever did, anyway."

"That's great!" said Scheimer, getting up and pinching my cheeks like the grandfatherly figure he was. "Especially since I need a new apprentice."

"Apprentice?" I asked.

Scheimer explained. It was the tradition of the Malfeasants to train their young people in the mystic traditions of the tribe, as well as exposing them to supernatural powers within the land of Moroni which they used in battle with their enemies, including, unfortunately, my people at one time or another. After all, we were technically trespassing on **their** land, but the kids had been resourceful and beaten them back, as was the case now. The Malfeasants were immensely strong, could run extremely fast, fly through the air, duplicate and multiply their corporeal forms, and assume multiple and various physical and psychological identities. They shared the secret of these abilities with no one outside the tribe. Therefore, if I wanted access to these abilities, and hopefully to use them to find some way of getting my revenge on someone who had wronged me, I would have to join them.

"You shall have the honour of revenge," he informed me.

"Why do you think I want revenge?" I asked.

"That was the main desire of most of the other expelled kids that we found," answered Scheimer. "But they didn't want the kind of responsibilities that come with being part of the tribe. They weren't interested in living with us and knowing all that it takes to be a fully rounded Malfeasant. I hope that's not what you want, because I think you have potential to be one of the best of us. And I say that having trained quite a few of the best in my day!"

"Like I said, I'd rather be respected over here than be dirt over there," I replied. "I would love to be part of the tribe- and be the best person I can be!"

"Then welcome to the club, kid!" said Scheimer. And we shook on it, in the old fashioned Malfeasant tradition.

&&&

And so it was that I moved in with Scheimer and began my training to assume the mantle of being his successor as leader and a full-fledged member of the Malfeasant tribe. It went smoothly, save for the occasional interruptions of Scheimer's wife, who, though initially suspicious of me, quickly warmed up to me and supported my aims. When that happened, they would spend long hours arguing over minute details of their lives. At first, I feared the worst, until they assured me that it was only good-natured *kvetching* (whatever **that** was) that they used on a regular basis to relieve tension and stress. As soon as I'd been there long enough, I started doing it too.

The Malfeasant tribe is ancient, extending back long before the kids settled on Moroni, and it was no wonder that they had little but ill will for the so-called "trespassers". Fortunately, I experienced none of this hostility; it was reserved solely for those they were fighting against, our common enemy- the original kids.

As part of my training, I read extensively through the tribe's history, and gained familiarity with their ancient words and scriptures. In addition, I learned the secrets of their strength and mystical abilities through practice with Scheimer. I didn't master everything right away, of course, but, slowly and surely, I advanced my way up the slope of knowledge. I gained the ability to shoot fire



out of my hands, became fast enough to elude captors, agile enough to leap over, above and below any obstacle, and strong enough to decimate a steel beam with one well placed karate chop. With this also came mental quick wittedness and a vicious, macho assertiveness I had never before felt, but which now gave me the confidence to topple giants. Of course, Scheimer insisted that this last power was something I had to control to avoid becoming a stuck-up, arrogant *putz*, which had always seemed to be the fate of those he had trained before. We worked on this as well until my emotions were fully in my control and not in thrall to my inner psychologically “animal” nature. This was essential to controlling the rest of my powers, as Scheimer noted constantly: the rest of the cycle of actions would not come into place until this obstacle was overcome. And pretty soon, it was.

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With my powers fully established and my emotions under control, I was invested as a full and valued member of the Malfeasant tribe. I was given my uniform, the one I’m wearing now, with the personalized touch you see here in the centre. I was also given my tribal name: Tomboy. Typically, tribe members have two names- the name given to them at birth, and the name placed upon them when they are fully invested into the tribe in their youth. And since the name was a clear reflection of my personality, I was okay with it.

My original aim- to seek revenge on those who had wronged me- had amplified with the growth of my powers. But at the same time, Scheimer’s insistence on my maintenance of control over my emotions negated many of my outward signs of anger, with the exceptions of periods when I felt fearful or intimidated, as you well know by now. Nevertheless, my desire for revenge was coupled with my desire to flex my newly gained muscles in the name of justice and, to that end, I knew I had to return to the kids settlement, even though I knew I might be punished or killed if I was caught.

Scheimer was all for me using my powers for good as soon as I told him my intentions; better I do that than concoct some evil jazz, he said. But he suggested that I disguise my Malfeasant identity under the civilian guise I had assumed in my former life- the better to regain my friends and lull enemies into a false sense of security. As I usually did, I agreed with him 100% on this one.

So, after selecting some sturdy threads not unlike the threadbare ones I had worn as a clone, I went back to the kids’ settlement, determined to earn myself a place in their world, whether the original kids liked it or not.

&&&

It was late at night when I went on my adventure and everyone, even the guards, was out cold when I made my way back, so it was a lot less trouble getting back in than it would have been otherwise. Quickly, I made my way back to the hut I had once shared with my pal, Fielding. Happily, he was still there when I knocked softly on the door. To say he was surprised- or more accurately, stunned- to see me would be the understatement of the millennium.

“Torrey!” he practically shouted when he saw me. “How did...?”

I covered his mouth and ushered him inside.

“Not so loud, you idiot!” I whispered harshly. “You want to get both of us in trouble?”

“Sorry.” he said apologetically. Same old Field’. I knew I could trust him.

"How did you survive being exiled?" he asked me when things had calmed down. "And where have you been all this time?"

"I was with the Malfeasants." I answered. "They rescued me."

"The Malfeasants? You mean the **aliens**?"

"They have names, you know! I do, 'cause I'm part of the tribe now."

"You **joined** them? You mean they actually let you **do** that?"

I don't know what it is about boys that makes them so slow and stupid. Why is it so hard for them to comprehend things the first time you tell them? Anyhow, I rolled my eyes and continued.

"Yes, they **do**," I replied to Fielding's asinine question. "But you have to have the stuff to last. And then you get to wear **this**."

I removed my outer garments and displayed my Malfeasant uniform in front of his astonished eyes.

"Wow!" said Fielding. "They dress better than we do!"

"And that's not all!" I added brightly. "They also locked me into the secret of their superpowers."

"Like what?" he asked.

I proceeded to demonstrate my strength by karate-chopping his front hall coffee table in half, and then my speed by **very** quickly retrieving the tools to repair it and doing just that in the space of a couple of minutes. The whole ordeal left him stunned, but only briefly.

Then I proceeded to explain my intentions, and he was all for it. Promptly, I appointed him my deputy and instructed him to begin searching for criminal activity for me to intercede in- in the morning. It was too late to do it at that time, obviously.

I followed him upstairs to where I assumed I would be sleeping, but he directed me back down.

"You sleep in the closet, at least for now." he said. "We don't want to get the two of us in trouble, right?"

I got the point.

&&&

And so, with the dawn of the day, my auspicious non-paying career began. Most of the time I posed as a wandering loafer, giving a variety of assumed names as aliases. But when it came time to go into action, the outer clothes came off and Tomboy was in business. The uniform was all together now, complete with my own addition of the cleft fist insignia on my chest, to show the bad guys I was tough and meant business. And there was a lot of business to take care of.

Harold had originally wanted everyone to live fairly and distribute wealth evenly, but when T.Q. and the rest of the original kids seized power, things got plenty out of hand. There was graft,

gluttony, gambling and corruption at all levels of the settlement, and it was the clones who suffered the most in trying to satiate these wicked desires. As I made my loafing way around town in my secret identity, I found many corners where I overheard secret plans being plotted for the moonlight hours. Then, at night, I returned to those strategically chosen areas and proceeded to give the miscreants what for. If my speed and punches didn't finish them off, the fireballs typically did the trick. At the end of my workout sessions, I'd be asked who I was, and I declaimed loudly:

"I'm TOMBOY! And if you know what's good for you, you won't want to deal with me AGAIN!"

Most of them didn't, because, within a couple of weeks of my return to the settlement, crime was uncovered- and thwarted- at an astonishingly unprecedented rate.

Needless to say, there was great curiosity as to who Tomboy really was. Was she a respected member of the community, or an outsider, a menacing alien? Was she working out of the goodness of her heart, or to line her pockets with stolen chump change? Was she a friend- or a foe?

No one wanted answers to these questions more than T.Q. and the original kids because, as Tomboy, I was not only usurping their function as the masters of law and order, but I was also openly flaunting my muscles, defying their curfews, and criticizing the way they ran things. That they did not like, especially those who were, as it turned out, dealing on the side in enterprises of an illicit nature.

T.Q. ordered the elite guards to search every standing structure in the settlement, two or three times if necessary. This went on for a few weeks until every lead they had was exhausted. The majority of that time I spent in Fielding's closet, not wishing to be found. When it got to the point where Fielding's house was overturned top to bottom, with no regard for his feeling in the matter (and, miraculously, no sign or trace of me found), I felt incredibly guilty for causing him and everyone else in the settlement all this pain. But if I didn't want to have Tomboy out in the open and mocked, I would have to clam up about what I knew, which I did.

But it didn't matter. Soon, everybody would know me. Or, more precisely, both of me.

&&&

It began innocently enough. The amount of crime having significantly diminished, I was able to enjoy a slightly less cloistered existence. Fielding and I, in my civilian duds, had begun to enjoy the luxury of late evening walkabouts, which was what we were doing on the particular evening when the trouble started.

Having stopped at the john to relieve myself, I was abruptly called out when Fielding began uttering one of his patented pained yelps. Rushing out, I saw him being severely beaten by one of the elite guards, flamboyantly dressed like a tin soldier as they all were. Just before he was going to stick his bayonet in the place you're probably thinking he wanted to stick it, I intervened. Not waiting to change, not even stopping to think what I might be doing to myself. I just did it.

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF HIM!" I screamed. And before he could do or say anything, I snapped his bayonet in half and gave him a full-blown, unrestrained taste of my super power. He fell down to the ground after a hook, a cross and an upper-cut, completely lifeless.

"Aha! I thought so!" uttered a familiar voice from my not-so-distant past. I recognized it immediately. The one who had set me up to be exiled. Trace! The devil herself emerged soon

after, in white from head to toe, except for a purple turban incongruously perched on top of her head. Following along dutifully, taking notes like any accuracy-minded journalist, was Peabody. He glared at me with a withering stare that more than conveyed his hatred for me. The feeling was mutual.

"See what I told you, Peabody?" Trace cackled triumphantly. There's only one girl in this universe who could punch hard enough to kill somebody. She has to be TORREY!"

"The evidence certainly adds up," said Peabody, surveying the notes he had taken proudly like a rancher overseeing his spread. "The period of her arrival directly corresponds to the time Torrey was exiled from here, with the addition of the average known time for the training and development of the powers of the horrific Malfeasant race."

He then addressed me, "Therefore, I deduce that **you** are not only the banished exile Torrey, but also that superpowered busybody TOMBOY!"

"Well, I might as well get rid of this pretense," I said, referring to my civilian clothes. They came off, and I stood exposed to prying, combative eyes in my super identity for the first time.

We stood each other down, Trace and Peabody at one end and I at the other. I stood stark still, with the exception of pushing back the hair the evening wind had blown in my face with one hand, like a bull preparing to charge at two busybody, backstabbing matadors. But nothing happened. Nothing happened for five more minutes. Then Trace decided to crack wise.

"Hey, Torrey!" she said cattily, throwing her arms open. "If you're such a tough girl, why don't you come over here and wrestle me? Pull my hair out! Scratch my face! Slap some of that he-girl muscle on me! Come on! I dare you!"

Now, any kid worth her salt knows that if you've been dared, you'd better follow up on it. Plus, she'd called my power into question. Even insulted my sexuality with that "he-girl" line. I had to fight back. The fact that she was an original kid be damned! This was personal now!

"My name is TOMBOY!" I thundered at her. "And when I'm done with you you'll be somewhere that'll really BURN YOU UP!"

And so, I charged, bellowing like an enraged bear...

When I regained consciousness several minutes later, there was a streak of red liquid running down my face that was as red as my hair and my uniform. I was sprawled down on the ground, wounded, as Trace was standing above me, holding a large stick in her hand with blood, obviously mine, on it. Clearly, she'd taken me by surprise and hit me when I charged. Without saying another word, she brought the stick down towards me, hoping to crack my bean with it. But I wouldn't have any of that.

I blocked several moves she made with the stick and finally succeeded in prying it from her hands. I broke the cursed thing over my knee and then lunged for Trace again. We punched and wrestled and tore at each other's hair for what seemed like hours. Fielding and Peabody, despite their handicaps, also got it on, and, fortunately for me, my boy won. So did I. After grunting and lunging endlessly, I finally wrapped my hands around Trace's neck and choked the life out of her. I might have been kinder if she hadn't been so mean to me, but a lot of water had gone under that bridge, and the issues between us could not resolve themselves. My strength won out, and she fell dead to the ground next to Peabody, who was barely holding on due to the surprisingly hard beating

Field' gave him. Seems the little guy had more in him than even I thought possible, and he'd fortuitously chosen this moment to act.

"He insulted you," he told me in explaining his actions. "I had to defend your honor!"

"**Somebody** had to, what little's left of it!" I cracked. "C'mon! We need to get these two out of here!"

Before we could do that, though, we were surprised. A dark hooded figure approached us, applauding. He doffed his hood, revealing himself to be none other than T.Q.!

"Well done!" he said to me. "You seem to have beheaded the snake that was holding us in its coils. I applaud you, Tomboy!"

"You **know** about me?" I asked him.

"Well, of course. The colony's been buzzing about you for some time. You and your seemingly weak associate."

"I'm not weak!" said Fielding, defensively.

"I said **seemingly**, didn't I?" retorted T.Q.. "I recognize your dental work on Peabody there. Formidable stuff, that plating."

"Enough of the small talk, T.Q.!" I said. "Let's get to business. Are we going to be punished for this? Because we take full responsibility for this. Anything you want to give us..."

T.Q. raised his hand.

"You're new here, Tomboy, so I should explain to you that we do have limitations on some of our procedures," he said. "We do not condemn killing outright- self-defense is to us an entirely justifiable act. And that's what you and your friend were doing- defending yourselves. So you will not be charged. You will be rewarded instead. I knew perfectly well Trace and Peabody were up to no good. They have been involved in virtually every illicit activity in the colony- it's been that way ever since the settlement began. But every time I tried to restrain them, they would use their votes to block my efforts. Poor Bethany, who you resemble closely, did try more forceful methods, but they caused a riot among the Malfeasants and they blamed her for it, so she was captured and executed by them. But now, you have given our comrades the punishment they brought upon themselves for their misdeeds. We have a chance to clear up the corruption here, and I hope **you** can be part of the cleanup!"

"You mean be the new hero around here, and all that jazz?" I asked.

"Certainly." T.Q. said.

"I'll fight whatever injustice comes to threaten you..." I told him. "...provided you do some things for me as well. First, you make Fielding here and his buddy Torrey, who looks pretty much like me, members of the Council. Second, you give the clones full-citizen status- no more of this stupid caste system. And third, you leave me alone- I need my privacy to think and muscle up for battle, and I get testy when I get bugged. Fighting evil's the exceptions, of course. And if you go back on your word, or anybody else tries to come gunning for me, may I remind you that I'm stronger and

faster than all of your best boys and girls put together. The futility of those actions should be obvious to you.”

T.Q. didn't miss a beat. He extended his hand for a handshake, and I gladly accepted it.

“Under the circumstances...” he said “...and as long as you do not challenge my authority and attempt to depose me, we have a deal.”

“I vow I will not.” I assured him.

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And so, as Torrey, I along with Fielding became the first clones to join the remaining original kids in the Council. T.Q. did the deed in a very public ceremony in which he spoke of the “revelation” he had of how we had brought ill upon ourselves by treating our fellow men (i.e. the clones) so poorly and subjecting them to such indignations. He outlined a new rule structure which would plot out a new better world for all of us. Fielding and I would help him put the meat on those bones soon enough. And Tomboy would have her hands full defending everyone from evil.

This is my life's mission, and the scrolls bear witness to my journeys.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“Ezekiel” by Edward Rodosek**

**Synopsis:** Chances are, you could have met the extraterrestrial, if only you were willing enough. This is a concise tale of a reporter who gets close but not curious.

**About the Author:** Edward Rodosek is a Construction Engineer, Doctor of Technical Science and Senior Professor in Faculty of Civil Engineering, Ljubljana, Slovenia, European Union. Besides his professional work he writes science fiction. He is author of four novels and fourteen collections of short SciFi stories in Slovenia. More than three dozen of his short stories have been published in SF magazines in USA, UK and Australia. Recently he has published in USA, a collection of science fiction short stories – ‘Beyond Perception’.

**In this short SciFi,** a reporter will investigate, looking without a desire to know.



## Ezekiel

By Edward Rodosek

Simon switched off the circular saw and took an armfull of firewood to carry it inside the hut. Although he was only seventeen years of age, he has to do all the hard work now instead of his father who died a few months ago.

When Simon stepped out of the jutting roof he noticed a well-dressed man nearing the farm, carefully stepping around the muddy puddles. Seeing the stranger on his property, Simon stopped and stared at him.

"Are there living... um... the Milner's?" The stranger's accent was so distant Simon could barely recognize his own family name.

"Could be--but maybe not," he said cautiously. "Who wants to know?"

"Oh, pardon me. My name is Albert Vaskas and I'm a reporter with the holovision station KWYS." The stranger took a black box from his pocket, fumbled around with it and then held something up to Simon's face. "I'd like to ask somebody of your family whether they've seen recently anything unusual in the area."

Simon shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno 'nothing about that sort of stuff."

"What gives, son?" At the door of the hut stood a slender middle-aged woman with a gentle, wrinkled face.

Simon dropped the firewood on to the dusty ground. "Mum, this fellow says he's some sort of news hound, from the radio. He wants to know if we've seen anything funny 'round here."

"Anything funny?" Her face betrayed her amazement. "Why would we have cause to see somethin' funny? Ain't nothing strange happens 'round here."

"Well, mum," Simon added, "The only thing could be that big storm at the waxing moon. But didn't do no damage or nothing, mercy be and thank the Lord."

"Oh, I get it. That was just about the time Ezekiel..."

"Listen here," the reporter interrupted her, "I'm not here to ask you about the weather. Someone from the village called our station and said he'd seen some strange lights darting in the sky about



before they landed somewhere around here. He said it was 'near Milner's hut.' Perhaps you know something about it?"

"Lights?" Simon stretched out his hands. "Did you see any sort of lights, mum? Nope? You know, sir, we'd really like to help you, but ain't nothing like that ever cropped up 'round here."

The reporter mumbled something between his clenched teeth and returned his contraption to his pocket. A forced smile emerged in his face; obviously he decided to set up a rapport with them, of whatever sort. He gazed on a wooden trough that was similar to those he'd seen at the other houses down in the village. However, the roof-spout that should have been used to fill it with rainwater was lying idly on the ground.

"I see it must be somewhat difficult to earn a living here. Down in the pub they told me that you folks depend on the rain because you don't even have access to a well. But I guess it rains plenty, no?"

"Yep... off and on," murmured Simon hesitantly, "but sometimes it don't. All depends on the God's mood, you know."

"Well, you'll have to fix up that pipe before the next rainfall."

Simon sniffled and spat on the ground without answering. He didn't like the man though he couldn't say why.

His mother said, "Would you want to come in, sir? We don't hardly get any visitors, you know."

The reporter hesitated but the lad ushered him towards the open door of the hut. "C'mon in, man. Mind the dog dirt. And watch yer head."

The reporter bent his way through the low doorframe, but stumbled over the raised threshold. He surveyed the inside of the hut with his experienced gaze. There was just one large room with a two-level bunk next to the wall. In the corner it was an old-fashioned stove, a hewn table with two stools in the centre, and some cups, pots and frying pans hanging on the walls. There were two old kerosene lamps on the shelves along the wall.

He said: "They'd told me in the village the Milner's had no electricity at all. But I heard earlier the sound of the circular saw; how was it possible?"

Simon wiped his forehead with his sleeve without looking at the visitor. "I dunno 'nothing on what you talking about."

"Make yourself at home, sir," said the woman, "I'm just going to get us some cider. The Lord granted us a good apple crop this year."

The reporter extracted a handkerchief from a pocket and covered a perfectly clean stool with it before sitting down. He swirled the contents of his glass without trying the thick fluid at all.

"Are the two of you alone out here?" he asked.

"Of course not," laughed the woman. "All told, there's six of us in the family."

"Ah," said the guest, becoming animated, "Might I be able to talk with the other four, then?"

Simon looked at him with a smirk. "Try your luck, man. See if you can get a word out of 'em."

"You just leave that to me, lad," replied the stranger and once again pulled out the black box from his pocket. "You just show me where they are."

"Well, over there's Isaac." Simon pointed a dirty finger at the tabby that was basking in the sun on the window-sill. "Melisa I've got tied up out there in the field. I put her post down in another spot each mornin'. I don't see Melchior. Mum, do you know where he's roamin' today?"

The woman smiled happily. "Oh you know him, Simon. He's probably out chasin' moles again. Yesterday he dug out a real big one. And Ezekiel's down there, like always..."

The reporter's jaw dropped. "Do you mean to say--if I understood correctly--that you're going on about animals?"

The woman was visibly offended. She covered her mouth with her hand.

"Look here, man," objected Simon decisively. "It ain't like that. My dad had an accident in the wood but my mum and I ain't alone since--no way."

"You're right, Simon," agreed the woman. "You know, sir, these here are real members of our family, you can be sure of that. We get so much good things from them: Melisa gives us milk, Isaac chases the mice away, and you won't find a better watchdog than Melchior come nightfall. And that's not even to mention Ezekiel! He's not so long with us and he's already done so much good. I could tell you..."

"There's no need to," cut in the reporter dryly, and moved his fingers over the box, making it click. "I won't detain you any longer."

"But," said the woman, "you haven't even tried your cider!"

"And you ain't spoken to Ezekiel yet, man," added Simon. "I tell yuh, he's the cleverest one of all. Take a walk with me down to the basement, if yer up to it. Ezekiel... well... you know, he never wants to come up here."

"No, I'd rather not, thank you," said the reporter sharply and removed himself from his stool. "I'll have to be going now. My photographer's waiting outside and it's getting damn late."

As the reporter was leaving he recollected his earlier experience and carefully stepped over the high threshold--but he hit his head against the low frame. He swore silently, wiped the sweat from his brow and walked across the yard. At that moment the memory of something strange flashed through his mind. In the corner of the hut's kitchen area he had seen a gleaming, obviously brand-new chromium pipe leading up to a tap. He shook his head. The villagers told him there wasn't any groundwater around here.

His driver noticed him and approached; the reporter tumbled into the back seat and sighed with relief on feeling the air-conditioned coolness.

"Such a long way to come," he said to the photographer, "And all for nothing. From now on I wasn't going to be taken in by any more asinine talk of UFO landings."

"I agree," said his fellow-worker. "You better just send one of our junior colleagues out on these useless expeditions; those guys are naïve enough to believe such stories."

&&&

"Well, he's gone," said the woman gloomily. "And he didn't want to try my cider."

Simon wiped his nose with his sleeve. "City folk are so highfalutin; but they're none too bright. You heard him, mum: first he said he wanted to know all sorts of things, then he didn't even want to see Ezekiel."

"Well, he wouldn't know how to talk to him anyways, Simon. You didn't get it either for the longest time. It took you a while to figure out you don't need to talk out loud to him."

"Ya, guess you're right. In any case, I don't think Ezekiel would've wanted us to bring outside folk to him."

"You're darn right. You remember how he didn't want you to show nobody that circular saw that he made for you, and how he wanted you to just use it at night?"

"I know, I know--my goof. But you also forgot to cover up them new taps Ezekiel done for us. But ain't it better now that we've got this real well instead of that old trough? No more bein' sparín' with the water."

The woman sat down beside her son on the block of wood. They were peaceful for a while in their wordless understanding; only the distant sound of crickets interrupted the utter silence around them.

"Whaddya think, Simon," she asked at last, "will Ezekiel be with us for long?"

Simon shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think so, mum. This mornin' I was down there again and he told me somethin'--you know what I mean by that. He let me know his firepod is almost good 'n ready."

"That storm must have been some ugly to him, eh?"

"Must have been, but our Wise Lord took mercy on him and steered him to our fields."

"Ya. But the Lord Almighty done took some mercy on us too when he sent Ezekiel here. He knew we'd shelter him right. Remember all the weird things he needed to fix up that firepod of his, all that stuff he had you draggin' out from town?"

"Ya, I sure do. But at least he always made me some money for payment after we explained him that's the only way around here. And there'll be plenty of it left for when he's gone."

The woman's voice was quiet and reflective. "It's gonna be some boring without Ezekiel around, don't you think? We've gotten used to there bein' six of us in the family."

Her son gazed silently ahead. After a while he started to shift anxiously.

"What's eatin' at ya, Simon?"

"Do you think we committed a sin by not tellin' that man from the newspaper the truth about where Ezekiel's from?"

His mother shook her head with conviction. "Why? The Lord done sent him to us, and this is a thing between Him and we."

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## **“Steamed Fish with Eyes” by KJ Hannah Greenberg**

**Synopsis:** Kids today may seem different, maybe worse; but what goes unnoticed is that parents have changed as well and mostly for the worse. Parenting the impressionable minds of children may just be a lost art form. In this story, a mother encourages the discovery of her kids’ environment by breaking away from the societal herd, giving importance to nature, creativity and all-encompassing love.

**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 inspiring story,** we see Ginny Lou be herself to be the change she wants to see in others.

## Steamed Fish with Eyes

By KJ Hannah Greenberg

Chastised for her perspicacious nature, Ginny Lou insisted on contributing, to block party pot lucks, fish steamed complete with lips and eyes, and on planting, in her front yard, where passersby could see them, beds of wild flowers in lieu of a lawn. Though her astuteness allegedly ranked well with her academic colleagues, her neighbors no more knew what to make out of her clever interpretations of mundanities such as clothes lines and wind mills, both of which ornamented her backyard half acre, than they did out of her offerings of algae-dressed salads or of St. John's wort salve.

In not so discreet huddles, they spoke of the woman whose kids picked and ate weeds, whose husband sat contently, playing recorder, on the boulder his spouse had intentionally set in their yard and who, herself, would rather go on slug walks than get a manicure. It was not so much that they were scandalized as it was that they were baffled.

Peer pressure remained useless in the face of an adult who taught her offspring how to make crowns and bracelets out of white clover instead of pushing them to spend their time earning the local principal's top foreign language award. Bribes to local police failed to reduce the number of disposable diapers she set out in trash cans when those same officers had been befriended by the woman in her national newspaper column. Even sending their teenage sons to drop hedge clippings all over her driveway had proved ineffective; Ginny Lou, maneuvering her trusty, plastic, orange wheelbarrow between her two, garden glove-covered hands, merely bundled up and hauled those bits to her compost pile.

That rascal of a neighbor refused to hire seamstresses to construct intricate costumes, for her children, for the elementary school's annual parade, preferring instead to ransack her husband's closet for shirts suitable for fabric painting. What's more, she deigned to entertain the community's children, at local fairs and festivals, as a storyteller. Hers was a popular home.

One afternoon, Beatrice found what she believed was a foolproof means of revenge. Her plan involving maple syrup, crazy glue, and the viscera of a cat found in a municipal dumpster. She contacted Agrimony, her PTA co-chair and the woman who had built a spite fence between her yard and that of Ginny Lou's. Once more, their little town would experience complete compliance with the understood, yet unspoken, ordinances.

Oblivious to the energies being invested on her behalf, Ginny Lou mentally composed a prose poem about lady bugs while she filled her twig basket with red runner beans. Those legumes and her Dutchman's pipe vines had been her Mother's Day gifts to herself.





A few yards away, her two youngest children and about twenty or so of other people's kids were digging their way to Bancroft or possibly to Toledo. Ginny Lou's oldest daughter was serving as guide among the rows of asparagus fern that filled the borders of the family's vegetable garden, offering handfuls of late radishes and of timely baby tomatoes to those tourists. Her oldest son was showing his friends just where, in their meditation garden, the family had buried their long since deceased, ancient cat, and was pointing out how plantain could be harvested, masticated and applied to bramble scratches if not otherwise spit at siblings.

On one of the benches under the towering oak tree, a friend, from the farm coop, nursed a toddler. Across from her, another mother, parent of energized twins, espoused the relative virtues of family beds and of carob chips. The latter's children were happily plucking petals off of several types of day lilies.

Beatrice regarded the bucolic scene and shuddered. No electronic toys or designer shoes could be seen, even when she dialed the highest setting on Agrimony's binoculars. While she handed that device to her friend, she noted, disdainfully, that her friend's comforter and drapes were last year's fashion. She accepted, nonetheless the can of beer Agrimony proffered in her kitchen and wondered, silently, if her own children might like to learn how to make animals out of stones and nail polish.

A six pack later, the chairwomen of Pemberton Elementary School's Parent Teacher Association even openly discussed the possibility that they might, after hours, hire, for a private party, the same recycled quarry, where Ginny Lou was known to take her children to swim. They thought aloud, as well, about running in lanes of basil, at the community-based agriculture farm, where Ginny Lou was a loyal patron and even dared to giggle over the phrases "home birth" and "breast feeding," which Ginny Lou was known to speak. Thereafter, they compared notes on season tickets for opera and for ballet.

While they enjoyed the serenity brought on by their hops mixed with fermented grain, a handyman, whom they had paid a little more than minimum wage, was making a delivery. Though ordered to deposit the malodorous concoction, personally stewed by Beatrice, to the front stoop of Ginny Lou, mid march, the man had redirected himself to Agrimony's house and had left the foul mess there. Ginny Lou, who was fond of sushi, always gave his sister, a waitress at the local Asian restaurant, a twenty per cent tip. The frosted blonds who hired him, however, sent more food back to the kitchen than they actually ate and often "forgot" to leave any acknowledgement of his sibling's service.

After ridding himself of that nasty business, the man did visit Ginny Lou; he meant to borrow her spigot to wash his hands. He lingered, though, gladly accepting a glass of sumac tea and allowing himself to be gently persuaded to regale the assembled ladies with stories of squirrels, of bats, and of the other creatures he encountered when cleaning gutters, caulking windows or making roof repairs.

In clumps, the children gathered round that visitor. One brought him a crown of pampas grass. Another fetched a piece of dwarf bamboo so that he might have a natural scepter. Two more children ran into Ginny Lou's house and returned with a plate of kohlrabi salad and with a bowl of fresh-picked blueberries, both of which they presented to the man.

After an hour or so of stories about salamanders and of promises to the seated moms that he'd give them a bid on a rustic treehouse for Ginny Lou's yard, the man left to scrape paint on a neighborhood barn. Some agency or another was converting an abandoned farmstead into

condos. A friend who wanted no part of overtime work had invited the man to pick up a few hours' wage.

The children returned to playing with the garden hose and to giving each other "gifts" construed of dried leaves, columbine heads, and assorted small bones dug from recently located owl pellets. They stopped their play, however, when the loud noise sounded.

Beatrice and Agrimony, too, stopped comparing notes on the flatness of their respective personal trainers' abdomens and on the complexions of the stock boys at the local food emporium when they heard that sound. More curious than cautious, those moms immediately made for Agrimony's threshold. Subsequently, the moms and tots in Ginny Lou's yard were treated to another remarkable, well amplified vibration.

Although the children were busy climbing on the sudden mountain of mulch that had been deposited, by a dump truck, in Ginny Lou's narrow driveway, the moms, having picked their way over the gardening material, ran to identify the source of the second noise. Quickly, they discovered Beatrice and Agrimony stuck to an important architectural feature of Agrimony's home. A carpenter and both of the community's teams of paramedics were needed to separate the women from that front porch.

Brief months later, Beatrice insisted that her family relocate to Short Hills and Agrimony, or so it was said, remained institutionalized at an upscale clinic in Maryland. Ginny Lou was invited to replace those women as the singular PTA chair.

Under her guidance, the school's art curriculum began to include lessons on sketching area trees and of stones and the upper grades' field trips began to feature places like the shorebird sanctuary and a nearby soup kitchen. Though Ginny Lou remained powerless to disband the annual parade, she managed to get rules legislated, which limited the expenditures on costumes. She also managed to bring in an herbalist, for a parents' meeting, who lectured on the benefits of dandelions. A few of the community lawns were doused with less weed killer that year.

Although Ginny Lou continued to encourage her offspring and their friends to plant swathes of wild onions where bluegrass might have otherwise been coaxed and to photograph rather than to stone local chipmunks, she failed to conduct her annual apple harvest. So busied had she become with all manners of teacher recognition and with talent night quandaries that she had to send her loyal spouse to the yearly pick-your-own.

By the time that the snow season arrived, Ginny Lou had quit. She'd rather tease poetry out of students and teach her own children how to use cabbage to tie-dye socks than stand up for yet one more round of applause at school assemblies. Besides, no other mother had stepped in to supply the neighborhood's children with information on numbats, on yellow scorpions, and on zooplankton. What's more, she failed to grasp why no other mom stepped forward to fill the lauded position or to provide fish steamed complete with eyes.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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