

LIGHTSPEED

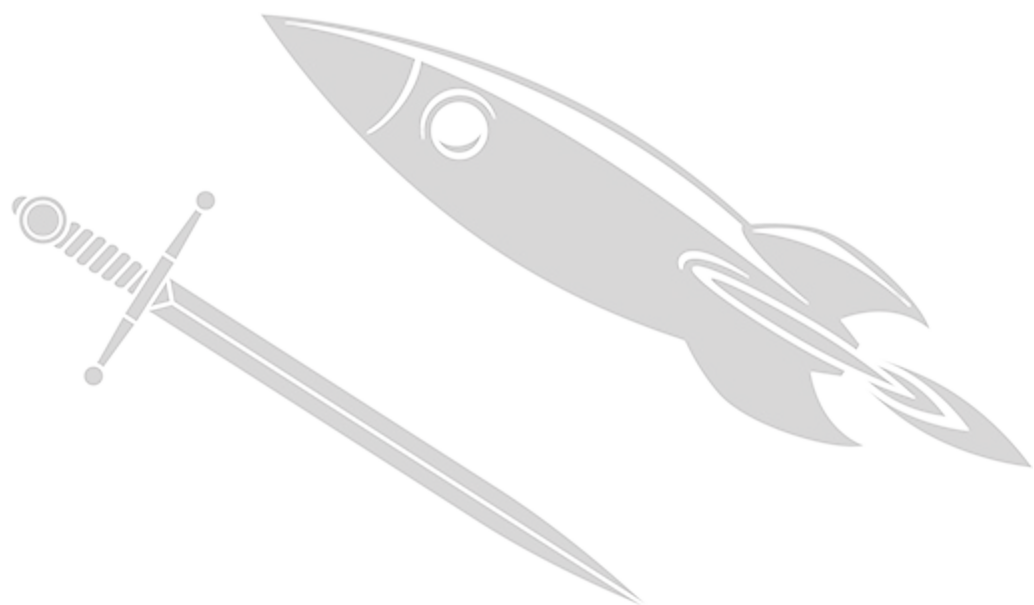
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



ISSUE 87 • AUGUST 2017
EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Issue 87, August 2017

FROM THE EDITOR

Editorial: August 2017

SCIENCE FICTION

[Tongue](#)

Ashok K. Banker

[The Sun God At Dawn, Rising From A Lotus Blossom](#)

Andrea Kail

[An Inflexible Truth](#)

Christopher East

[Swing Time](#)

Carrie Vaughn

FANTASY

[East of Eden and Just a Bit South](#)

Ken Scholes

[The Shining Hills](#)

Susan Palwick

[A Citizen In Childhood's Country](#)

Seanan McGuire

[Ink](#)

Bruce McAllister

NOVELLA

[Steppin' Razor](#)
Maurice Broaddus

EXCERPTS

[The Clockwork Dynasty](#)
Daniel H. Wilson

NONFICTION

[Book Reviews: August 2017](#)
LaShawn M. Wanak

[TV Review: American Gods](#)
Joseph Allen Hill

[Interview: Annalee Newitz](#)
Christian A. Coleman

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

[Ashok K. Banker](#)

[Susan Palwick](#)

[Christopher East](#)

[Bruce McAllister](#)

MISCELLANY

[Coming Attractions](#)

[Stay Connected](#)

[Subscriptions and Ebooks](#)

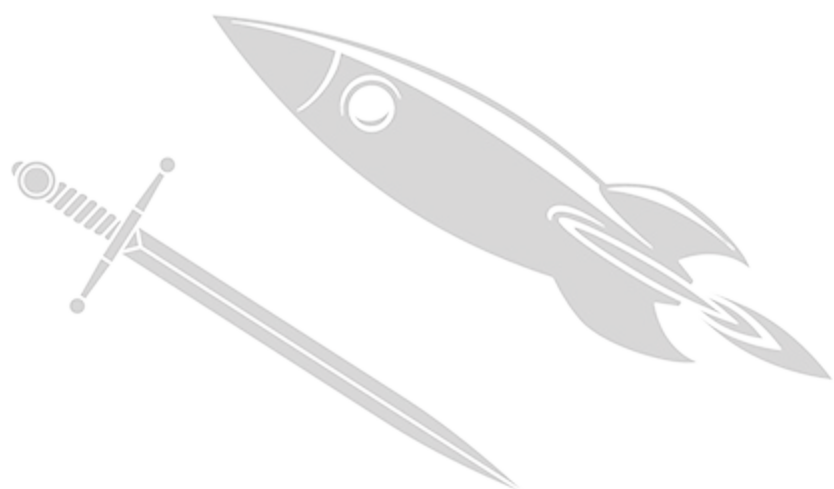
[About the Lightspeed Team](#)

[Also Edited by John Joseph Adams](#)



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Cover by Reiko Murakami
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FROM THE EDITOR



Editorial: August 2017

John Joseph Adams | 756 words

Welcome to issue eighty-seven of *Lightspeed*!

Our cover this month is by Reiko Murakami, illustrating a new original science fiction short from Ashok K. Banker (“Tongue”). Our other original SF this month is from Christopher East (“An Inflexible Truth”). We also have SF reprints by Andrea Kail (“The Sun God At Dawn, Rising From A Lotus Blossom”) and Carrie Vaughn (“Swing Time”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Susan Palwick (“The Shining Hills”) and Bruce McAllister (“Ink”), and fantasy reprints by Ken Scholes (“East of Eden and Just a Bit South”) and Seanan McGuire (“A Citizen in Childhood’s Country”).

All that, and of course we also have our book and media review columns, spotlights on our fantastic writers, and an interview with Annalee Newitz.

For our ebook readers, we also have an ebook-exclusive reprint of the novella “Steppin’ Razor,” by Maurice Broaddus. Our excerpt this month is from Daniel H. Wilson’s new novel, *The Clockwork Dynasty*, which I luckily got to read in advance. As I said for the cover: “Action-packed and uniquely imagined with robots—and history!—like you’ve never seen before, *The Clockwork Dynasty* is a thrilling ride from start to finish.”

John Joseph Adams Books Update

Here’s a quick rundown what to expect from John Joseph Adams Books in 2017:

In July, we published Carrie Vaughn’s novel, *Bannerless*—a post-apocalyptic mystery in which an investigator must discover the truth behind a mysterious death in a world where small communities struggle to maintain a ravaged civilization decades after environmental and economic collapse. Here’s what some of the early reviews have been saying about it:

- “Skillfully portrays a vastly altered future America. [The] focus on sustainability and responsibility is unusual, thought-provoking, and very welcome.” —*Publishers Weekly*
- “An intimate post-apocalyptic mystery [. . .] well-crafted and heartfelt.” —*Kirkus*
- “A compelling, deft post-apocalyptic tale.” —*Library Journal*

- “Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* mixed with a modern procedural mystery [...] Wonderfully intriguing.” —Thomas Wilkerson, BookPeople
- “Totally fascinating as a thought experiment and compulsively readable.” —Jenny Craig, Seattle Public Library

Also in July, we published *Sand* by Hugh Howey, a reissue of his acclaimed indie-published novel (which was just announced to be in development as a television show for Syfy, with Gary Whitta and Marc Forster attached):

- “Magnificent [...] After reading *Wool*, his other post-apocalyptic series, I didn’t think he could repeat the creation of a great world setting filled with characters you instantly care about. But he did.” —*SFF World*
- “*Sand* immerses you in its grubby post-apocalyptic world. [...] Howey conjures a credible, brutal future.” —*Financial Times*

In September, we’ll be publishing *Retrograde* by Peter Cawdron, a hard SF novel about an international colony of astronauts on Mars, who have been prepared for every eventuality of living on another planet except one: What happens when disaster strikes *Earth*?

In October, we’ll be publishing *Machine Learning: New and Collected Stories* by Hugh Howey, a short story collection including three stories set in the world of Hugh’s mega-hit *Wool* and two never-before-published tales, plus fifteen additional stories collected together for the first time.

In November, we’ll be publishing Molly Tanzer’s *Creatures of Will and Temper*—a Victorian-era urban fantasy inspired by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which an épée-fencing enthusiast and her younger sister are drawn into a secret and dangerous London underworld of pleasure-seeking demons and bloodthirsty diabolists, with only her skill with a blade standing between them and certain death.

A bit further out, in Spring 2018, we’ll have *The City of Lost Fortunes* by Bryan Camp, about a magician with a talent for finding lost things who is forced into playing a high-stakes game with the gods of New Orleans for the heart and soul of the city. And then in late 2018, we’ll have *Upon a Burning Throne* by Ashok K. Banker, an epic fantasy about a group of siblings battling for control of a vast empire while a powerful demonlord pits them against each other.

That's all the JJA Books news to report for now. More soon!

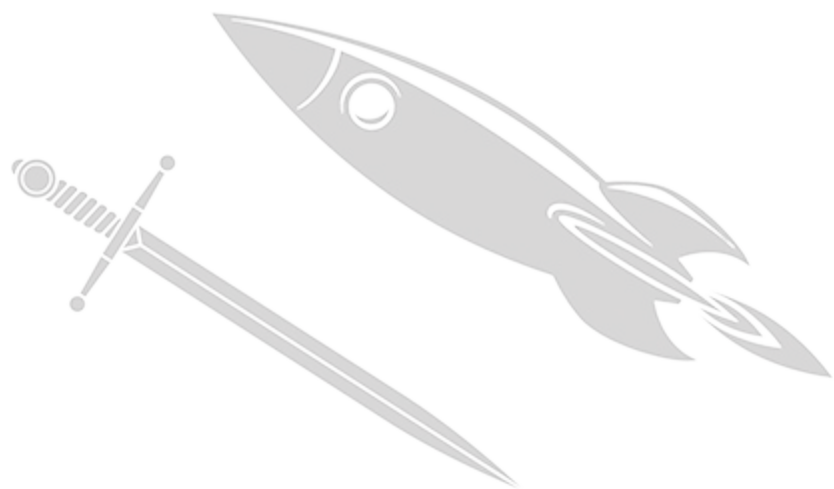
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Well, that's all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Lightspeed*, is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a new SF/Fantasy imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, as well as the *USA Today* bestselling editor of many other anthologies, including *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man's Hand*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent projects include: *Cosmic Powers*, *What the #@&% Is That?*, *Operation Arcana*, *Loosed Upon the World*, *Wastelands 2*, *Press Start to Play*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a two-time winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been a finalist eleven times) and is a seven-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Nightmare Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

SCIENCE FICTION



Tongue

Ashok K. Banker | 2580 words



Namaste, helloji, please to come in. First time visit, so nice you came. Thank you for removing gravity shoes. Please be comfortable, no formality. It is like your home only. What for I can get you? Mineral tea? Carbon Filter coffee? Gel Cola? If it is not in our supply ration, we can send Senthil to fetch from company concessionary on main asteroid. Senthil is our homebot, see, he is understanding our language fully now. Beginning time he was little confuse. Now he is fully understand. You are sure? Okay, ji. Senthil, get for guests three Mineral Tea, extra sweet, Indian chai style. Also some biscoot. What you call them? Cookie. Some cookie. Sweet ones with cream or jelly in middle, like cookie sandwich? Same one, exactly. Good boy, go quickly, come quickly, fly safe.

Yes, ji. He will come very soon.

How are you finding our house? *He* gave you directions, no? *He* gives perfect directions. Third asteroid, then twenty fourth vector, then . . . Ah, that is best way. Directly store in Nav-system, shuttle brings you here. Sometimes people get confuse. So many asteroids, no? Many families from India Earth here. This full colony mostly come from India Earth only. We first to come, settle, set up

ecosystem, geo habitats, build infrastructure. India Earth people expert in going first to new places. *He* says lovely joke, I say, “You go to any planet in settled universe, you land, first thing they ask you when you come out: ‘What caste, sirji?’” Because India Earth people always sensitive about caste, no? Good joke, yes? I tell you, *He* is superb with the jokes.

Yes, yes, of course, ji, please to ask any question. No shyness. Why formality? It is your house only, ji. Ask anything.

Yes, I understand fully.

Logical question you are asking.

About my appearance.

You want to know how come I look like this.

Good question.

I will answer but I am not so good at speaking so please to excuse my poor elocution.

You see, it all was started when I was nine years old, living in Chennai, India Earth. Maybe you are calling it Madras, ji? Same place.

I was nine when flower of my womanhood bloomed. You understand, ji? She understands, yes, ji, I became woman at age nine.

In our culture, when woman blooms with red flower, she is ready to make marriage. Because red flower means she can carry the pregnancy, so if she can be mother, she can be wife. My culture people are very anxious that once girl becomes marriageable age, she must be married soon. Otherwise, if she goes astray while single girl, then her life is fully ruined. You tell me, which decent gentleman family wants single girl whose reputation spoiled? Naturally. My family wants marry me into good family.

Now, you know how situation is in India Earth. Fourteen billion population, all caste problem, religious problem, the genome riot-wars, America Great Corporation using corporate military to do hostile takeovers of countries, Islamic Eco Terrorism, it is very bad state of affairs. My family very particular about caste, family, tradition.

Putting advertisements in all 'Streems online. Even off-world 'Streems. I am taking dancing lessons, hire saree consultants, poise, etiquette, English-speaking, all possible prep classes for becoming presentable bride. My father spend lot of money getting top Tollywood director to make ad commercial showing me dancing Bharat Natyam, singing Carnatic classical music, posing in saree, playing with children, cooking traditional food items, serving, cleaning, showing all my homely talents . . . Ad runs on all major India Earth and off-world marriage

network 'Streems. Almost one full year pass. I am becoming almost ten years old. Mother crying daily, worried I will become old spinster living alone, unmarried, no children, life ruined. I also crying. Aunts and grandmother reading horoscopes, consulting pundits, trying to find what is wrong with me that good husband is not wanting.

Finally, when they are starting to give up hope, a proposal comes.

From *Him*.

Ah, here is tea. Please to have while it is hot. It is to your satisfaction? Thank you! My duty is to serve, ji. Please have biscuit. I mean, cookie. Have cookie.

Where was I? Ah. *He* sends proposal.

He is widow living and working alone here on this same Asteroid #3 in Mineral Belt. Young man, only twenty-nine years. Good family background, caste and gotra matching, horoscope, everything, all matching. It is perfect.

Best of all, no dowry.

That is my father getting so impressed. See? In this 'Stream vid? Please touch it, expand size, view at leisure. See how happy my father looks. Never looks so happy in his life.

Dowry is big thing in our caste. All boys want dowry. Big dowry. For old girl like I am, almost ten years old, they ask huge dowry. But *He* says, no dowry. I take her as she is.

My family shocked. Then happy. Then celebrating.

Naturally, they say yes.

Marriage is arranged quickly. Lovely ceremony. I am prepared, anointed, dressed, jewelled, given away by my father to *Him*. Mother crying so much at time of parting, it is traditional for mothers to cry. I tell her don't worry, maa, I am only half system away. You can reach in less than one light year travel by shuttle. I will come visit when *He* grants permission. Still she cries because she is so happy I found such a good match.

Married life is so good. *He* is so good. I cook, clean, maintain *His* mineralizer equipment, pay colony tax, do all chores required. I give *Him* no reason to be unsatisfied. Sometimes, I make mistakes, naturally *He* hit me few times. I am deserving to be hit. Wife's job is to do what husband says when *He* says, however *He* says to do. I should not talk back. I talk back to *Him*, *He* hits me. I make food not hot enough, *He* hits me. I make food too hot, *He* hits. *He* is very good man. Only hits when absolutely necessary. We are very happy together. Married bliss. So beautiful. Like in Tollywood films, hero and heroine sing songs compose by A.I. Rahman, dance and make happy together.

Then comes hard times. Difficult patch. Not *His* fault. No, *ji*. *He* is very good worker. Only sometimes *He* is drinking too much alcohol and not working for some days, or going to hunt asteroid dingos with other friends, or to Moon Reservation Casino for some downtime. Downtime is important for men. They are working hard all the time, they deserve to spend their hard earned money on Downtime also, no? I don't know exactly what this is, this Downtime but men have to do it, *ji*. It is necessary evil, *He* says. Wife's job to support and obey. I tell *Him*, go do Downtime, I will manage.

But when difficult patch comes, we are not even managing to get food to eat. Mineral vein runs out. Equipment old and always breaking down. New arrivals mostly America Great Again corporates, they always trying to be making trouble for India Earth colonists, telling us You Bloody Brown Buggers, you F-O to your own planet, why come here and take our jobs? Harder and harder to get mineralizer work, even for few days at a time. *He* drinks more, does more Downtime, beats me more, but nothing works.

Finally, I tell *Him*, take my valuables and sell.

He say, How can I take your things and sell? This is your legacy, from your father and mother. How can I take?

I tell *Him*, good India Earth wife lives to serve husband. Whatever is mine is yours. Whatever is yours is also yours. That is law of Manu since ancient time.

Take it, I tell *Him*, take my valuables and sell.

Finally, after much arguing, *He* agrees.

He sells some valuables from me.

Only minor items.

Kidney. Spleen. One lung. Forearm. Partial thigh.

Here, *ji*, have some more biscuit. I mean, cookie. Have more cookie. You like the jelly cookie? It is my favorite. Naturally, I cannot eat now, but when I had mouth and digestive system, I used to love jelly cookie. Please have more, no formality, it is your home only. Senthil, keep serving our guests.

Where I was talking? Ah yes. Hard times.

We manage for some while. Things are happy again. *He* drinking less. Doing less Downtime. *He* even buys new shuttle to go hunting with friends in asteroid belt. I tell *Him*, you go, have fun, I take care of home, I call you if any new Claims open. *He* goes with Sondra. She is also Mineralizer like *Himself*. Good friend. Very pretty woman. Good figure. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Still single because who will marry woman over twenty who is working such job? Poor thing. I feel bad for *Her*. I tell *Him*, spend time with her, she has no husband,

poor thing. *He* goes with Sondra, takes care of her, poor dear.

Finally, new Claims open. I call *Him*. *He* comes soon as possible—after wrapping up hunting trip and saying bye to Sondra—and goes to work again.

Work is going good for some time.

Then another bad patch.

He sells some more of my valuables.

Another kidney. Another lung. Rest of arm. Full leg. Liver.

One time, Sondra needs some cosmetic work done. Implants in chest? I don't know what it means, but she does not have medical insurance because America Great Insurance say being alive is pre-existing condition, so I feel bad for her. I tell him, we should help her, poor single woman.

I sell half of large intestine.

Like that it goes on for some time. That is marriage, no? Adjusting to life. Everyone goes through such ups and downs, it is part of life, ji.

More tea? Cookie?

Well, ji, that is the story of our marriage. Nothing unusual. India Earth arrange marriage stories all similar, no, ji? See? You are also smiling. Arre! Why are you crying now? Oh, you are crying for happiness. Yes, yes, of course. We are so lucky, to find good caste husbands and be married gentleladies. So many India Earth girls are spoiled by love marriage, all kinds of scandal. It is horrible to even see them on the 'Streems. Good material for the twenty-four/seven Soap feeds, but who wants to live life like that! Inter-caste marriage, girls wearing jean, working, drinking Alcohol in public, eating non-vegetarian, chee chee chee. Disgusting. Sometimes, *He* watches such shows. I tell *Him*, put it off, I don't want to see such cheap women doing cheap things. What if our daughter sees? It will spoil her morals.

Yes, ji. This is our daughter. We had her through artificial surrogacy. Because I am not able to carry to term. Womb, all related organs were sold for buying new Mineralizer *He* required for work. She is bred on farm but we have raised her since past eight years; I have taught her all our traditions, culture, religious rituals, prayers, cooking, everything. She is pitpat perfect. She even looks like me so much, I can tell you it is looking like my 'Stroom vid from when I was also her age, nine years old. But with all her valuables intact.

Her name is Devi. Like my grandmother. It means Goddess, you know, ji.

My face? It was also sold, ji, along with the rest of my valuables. I made the choice, because in any case I was requiring this capsule to maintain my brain and heart in permanent life support. That is when we found Senthil in junkyard, *He*

repaired him; *He* is so expert in repairing, reprogrammed Senthil to do all housework. I have trained him everything, even looking after Devi. He dresses her as per my instructions, shows her how to cook, everything just like me. When Senthil picks her up, it is like I am only picking her up. Hugging. Kissing. I feel like I am only picking up my daughter in my arms, holding her to my chest, kissing her with my lips. It is same thing, sir. Technology is so good, no? Miracle of men's genius.

You take your time, ji. Make Devi dance. Make Devi sing. Make Devi show you how she drapes saree, cooks, speaks in our native language, does prayers, rituals . . . She is perfectly trained like good India Earth wife. Ready to serve for life.

Did I tell you all her valuables are intact?

And no dowry. *He* is insisting, *He* does not believe men should take dowry from girl's family. *He* is strong believer in women's rights. *He* is God only, ji. All husband is God to India Earth wife, no?

You are liking Devi? I think she will make perfect wife for your Krishnan. How old is Krishnan, don't mind my asking? Thirty-four? Ah, it is perfect match. He is thirty-four, she is nine. Man should always be little older than wife. Because men need to be mature, to control wife, guide her in life's journey.

Those vids on that screen? Oh, those are *His* previous wives. Yes, *He* was marry before me. Three times. That is why *He* is so good husband, *He* is experience.

What happen to them? Nothing happen, ji. They sell off their valuables also, to help with hard patches. Help him buy Claim, have Downtime. I include them in my prayers daily. They serve *Him* well. But finally all valuables finish, that time *He* not be able to afford Gel Capsule for full life support. So *He* have to let them go . . .

You understand letting go? Yes, ji. It is part of life. Wives come, wives go. But husbands have to live long and prosper. We live to serve.

Excuse me. I am speaking too much. It happens when I am very excite. Please don't tell *Him*. *He* will be home very soon. *He* had to stop and visit with his old friends at nearby Bar-saloon. Coming any time now. Don't tell *Him* I say all silly things. *He* will get angry and tell me, Revathi, you don't know when to shut up. Now keep quiet, woman, or I will sell your tongue, then only we will have peace in this house.

You like Devi? Oh, ji. What are you saying? I am so happy! Over the many moons with joyful! You are making fine decision. Your Krishnan and my Devi

will make good match. Perfect match. It will be lovely marriage. Full traditional India Earth style.

We will call my family also. I have not seen my mother, father, and family in almost nine years, since I am married and coming here at age ten. I am almost twenty years old now, I don't know how they will recognize me. But my mother will know. She will see my tongue and know me. This is my original tongue, only valuable I have left now. Rest is all artificial life support. Mother will see my tongue and recognize me. Mothers always recognize.

One day, our Devi will also be happy and married and in your house on Planet #7, and I will come visit her for her daughter's marriage also, with husband's permission of course. Always with husband's permission and blessing. We live to serve.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashok K. Banker is the pioneer of the speculative fiction genre in India. His ground-breaking internationally acclaimed eight-book Ramayana Series was the first trilogy and series ever published in India. It revolutionized Indian publishing, creating a genre which is now the biggest selling in the country. Ashok's 52 books have all been bestsellers in India, as well as translated into 18 languages and sold in 58 countries. He has also been credited as the author of the first Indian science fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, and thriller stories and novels in English, creator and screenwriter of the first Indian TV series in English, the first Indian ebooks in English and other firsts. He is one of only a handful of living Indian authors represented in The Picador Book of New Indian Writing and the Vintage Anthology of Modern Indian Literature. He is of Irish-Portuguese-Sri Lankan-Indian parentage. Born in Mumbai where he lived for 51 years, he now lives in Los Angeles.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

The Sun God At Dawn, Rising From A Lotus Blossom

Andrea Kail | 12260 words

Mr. Abraham Lincoln
Smithsonian Institution
National Museum of American History
1400 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington D.C. 20004
United States of America

12 February 2168

Dear Sir,

I hope you will forgive the impropriety of this personal letter sent without the benefit of previous acquaintance, but I feel compelled to write you in order that I might, indeed, introduce myself, and also so I might render to you my personal wishes for your hale and happy birthday. And, as I am scheduled to go on display in just a few days' time, I would additionally like to express my genuine and incalculable pride that I am soon to be joining your illustrious ranks.

I do not know what, if anything, you have heard of me in the media—I myself am never exposed to such things and know not what they say—but I have led a quiet life thus far, one much devoted to the study of my impending duties and, to better acquaint myself with my peers, of the other personalities currently on display.

I must admit that the latter has been a humbling endeavor.

Chopin, Michelangelo, Czarina Catherine—so many great and talented people to measure myself against. And yet, sir, of all the biographies I have been researching, yours is the one which impressed me most of all. Your humble beginnings and your determination to learn in the face of all obstacles struck a deep chord within me. And your eloquence, your integrity, your steadfast and erudite devotion to freedom for all peoples despite hardship, war and criticism—truly I do not think there is another man in history that can match you.

Which makes me quite determined, sir, to emulate you in all things, right down to your expressed inclination for handwritten correspondence, in order to, as you say, “keep a true and genuine connection to the past.” My mentor, Dr. Fouad, is quite of the same mind on such things. Dr. Fouad is the curator of the Museum

here in Cairo. He, also, believes that I should live as my prime did, or as close to as possible and, no doubt, would chastise me for not employing the use of a scribe in the writing of this letter. I enjoy writing, however, and so, if you would be so generous as to keep my secret, I will continue to draft my own correspondence, with only you and I to know the truth.

Again, please forgive me if, in the fervor to express my admiration, I have inadvertently offended you with any ill-timed or unwanted correspondence. If so, perhaps you will be kind enough to allow my youth and inexperience to buy my pardon? I hope that you will.

Signed,

Your admirer in all things,



Tutankhamun

••••

3 April 2168

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I cannot express my gratitude—indeed, my utter relief—at the receipt of your letter of 23rd March. While I did not think you would completely ignore my overture, I must admit to being worried that I had somewhat overstepped the boundaries of polite address. And as you yourself so hilariously illustrated in the story of your treatment at the hands of the Bonaparte, one can never be sure of

one's reception, even amongst peers.

I am equally gratified, I confess, by the extended hand of friendship and the warmth of your welcome into this august fellowship of ours. To be counted amongst such men of history, vision and accomplishment is no easy burden, especially for one so young and inexperienced as I am, and yet the kind and generous tenor of your words made me feel so very much a part of something greater than myself that I vow I shall strive to be worthy of the honor.

As you so kindly inquired, here are my particulars:

Until my installation in the Museum this February past, I lived in the household of my mentor, Dr. Fouad. Dr. Fouad is also my teacher, instructing me in my heritage and in the long and glorious history of my country, and under his tutelage, I have learnt how to perform the various tasks that are part of my duties here at the Museum.

I also study daily with Dr. Sweeney of Oxford University, who teaches me languages, of which I have mastered Arabic (of course), English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Greek, and Hindi. A modest eight to your twenty-four. However, Dr. Sweeney assures me that I shall soon add more as I am "linguistically gifted." Is that not a pleasing phrase? I find it to be so, as I find much of your English to feel and sound musical on the tongue. Such fun and bizarre pronunciations, too. Thur-oh or thur-ah for thorough? Kawf for cough? And the absence of gender! Well, I cannot say that I understand it at all, but I enjoy it just the same.

And so that brings me, again, to this past February when I turned nine (our birthdays fall within the same week!) and was formally installed in the new exhibit.

The Living Pharaoh it is called, and they've built a palace reconstruction to house it—to house me, really—and annexed the whole of it to the Museum.

It was strange, at first, moving from Dr. Fouad's small home to this airy, cavernous place. Despite the palace they have built and despite the guards that roam the halls, the Museum is dark at night and full of dead things, and I must confess to being greatly affected and reluctant to stay alone. But Dr. Fouad detailed for me the Museum's and his own quite sizable personal investment in my creation and vigorously explained that, as I am a man now and a king, too, in some respects, I must endeavor to behave as such. And, from time to time, men—and especially kings—must do things they would rather not. This was one of those times. And so I stayed. And indeed, after a period of acclimation, all is now well, though I must admit that I had some help in my adjustment, and that help

was named Hanifa.

Hanifa is Dr. Fouad's daughter. She is fifteen and terribly clever. She grew up in the Museum due to her father's work, and so she knows all the guards and the best places to hide as well as how to sneak in and out without being caught by the cameras. And in the beginning, when I was so horribly lonely, Hanifa would come and stay with me at night. Her presence made the world of difference, and I am glad that I have such a friend—a sister, really—who cares so for my happiness.

And so, over the past months, I have settled into my new routine: I arrive in the throne room at eight a.m. and receive "ministers" and "ambassadors" whilst the tourists stand beyond the glass listening to the prerecorded guides. Then I lunch in private, often with Dr. Sweeney. Then I either go back on display performing various other pharaonic activities or I give private tours to more important guests—foreign officials and diplomats and the like.

And that is the long and the short of it, for now, sir. Once I have more responsibilities, I will relate them to you.

On a truly personal note, I would like to request an indulgence, if I may. In my first letter, I operated under the assumption that if I used my cartouche as my signature, that perhaps it would lend more weight to my words. I feel foolish, now, thinking I needed such bait. For you see, when I was just a babe and learning to speak, I had trouble pronouncing my name, and so it was never used. But, too, Hanifa thought the truncated "Tut" was simply not dignified enough. So instead, she called me Ghazi, after a favourite uncle, and the name has stuck. Only those closest to me call me so, and I would ask, sir, that you do the same, for indeed I second your hope that we are to be great friends.

Sincerely,

Ghazi

••••

30 June 2168

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I wish to thank you for your last letter for two reasons, the first being your introduction of the word "quotidian." Such an excellent word! And so very useful

as well. I have managed to employ it in my dialogues several times in the past month to great effect and even once in a tour I conducted for a senator visiting from your country. I believe he was greatly impressed.

My second reason for thanking you is for making me aware that I am fashioned to be proficient in languages. I asked Dr. Sweeney, and he confirmed that, yes, language skills are standard genetic design for us, though he did seem to be of the opinion that Dr. Fouad would be angry if he knew I was aware of it. For the life of me, I cannot understand why.

But despite that, I think it quite a remarkable accomplishment, and quite clever, as well, considering our intended purposes. For we—you & me & all the others—are, in effect, ambassadors for our countries & for our cultures, and as such, communication is our stock in trade. And I, for one, am quite proud of my trade.

And now, though you have been so very indulgent, Mr. Lincoln, I hope that you will indulge me further still. I have told you of my life, and I wish, now, that you would tell me of yours. What are your duties? What were your experiences when you first took on the mantle of your service? I ask in order that I might ascertain how a truly great man handles the burden of this trust we are both a part of, as I believe there is much I can learn from you.

Again, thank you for being so tolerant of my curiosity.

With all my respect,

Ghazi

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13 September 2168

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I must say, sir, that your roster of events & activities is quite impressive indeed. Would that I had so many public engagements, so many speaking events. I come into contact with people only through my private tours, and those are given mainly to government officials, et al & are very highly regulated for reasons of which I am not entirely certain. However, Dr. Fouad has assured me that in time, more public events will be scheduled, and I confess that I look forward to those a great deal.

And yes, I believe you are right when you say our experiences will likely differ greatly. One, because our cultures are so divergent, and two, because you, in fact, are a third generation & have your routines down, whereas I am a first, and we here in Egypt are, to use your American slang, still “playing it by ear.”

As always your admirer,

Ghazi

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18 November 2168

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I hope this letter finds you anticipating a very happy Thanksgiving Holiday. I wish you great joy of your turkey & your cranberry dressing, and I also wish the football team of your choice great success in the day’s contest.

Allow me to say once again, sir, how greatly impressed I am by your accomplishments. It is not every man, nor even every country’s leader, who can lay claim to promulgating a national holiday, especially one that has lasted so long & speaks so much of your country’s traditions & of family & of faith.

I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States. And also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.

In copying that out, I was struck again by how rich is your prose in reference to god. Or perhaps I should clarify & say one, singular god. You would think this would not come as an oddity to me, the product of a country & a people as steeped in our religion as is Egypt. However, I was raised as an ancient, you see, not a Muslim, and my gods are the oldest gods: the gods of the sun & of the moon, of the earth & the sky, of animals & of rebirth &, finally, of death & an eternal & glorious afterlife.

I cannot speak of such matters with Dr. Fouad, for he is not a spiritual man, preferring to talk, rather, of money or business and such. But I consider it passing strange that of all the pharaohs, of all the great pyramids & the secret burial chambers, the false doors & the hidden corridors & of all the great curses & of all the prayers said by all the thousands of priests of Ra, that I, Tutankhamun, am the

only one to achieve a true & lasting afterlife.

Perhaps I truly have become a god, then? Perhaps, upon my death, Anubis led me here to this future? I do not know. But it is an odd thought, don't you think? Odd & somewhat humbling.

Again, I wish much joy to you on this quintessential American holiday & allow me to hope that, your schedule permitting, you will find the time to write again.

Always your servant,

Ghazi

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17 February 2169

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I can barely find the words to thank you for your magnificent gift! A scooter! Even the name is fun!

How very generous a friend you are, sir, to think of me on my birthday & to go so far out of your way to find me something that I most certainly did not have. In fact, I must admit to not knowing even what a scooter was until Dr. Sweeney showed me. And a good thing he was with us, too, because he also had the knowledge of how to put it together. We did have some trouble finding a wrench at first, but once that was accomplished, Dr. Sweeney had it assembled in a trice.

How fast I went! I wish you could have seen. I raced the scooter up & down the marble corridors of the palace, in & out between the columns of the hypostyle hall & then out into the garden, where I led the guards on quite a chase before they finally caught me. And how we all laughed when they did!

And I must thank you for this, also: that you made a festive occasion out of a somewhat lackluster celebration. Indeed, a lackluster few days. You see, Dr. Fouad is currently on a speaking tour & is not expected home for some weeks, and for the span of his absence, my duties have been curtailed. I am not certain why, but Dr. Fouad feels it is appropriate, and so that is that.

In any case, we had a small party amongst ourselves: me, Dr. Sweeney, Hanifa & my guards Atef & Kamal. We hung zeena all about the reception room & ate cookies & gateaux & sesame sticks that Hanifa had made. As a gift, Hanifa gave

me a painted crocodile on a string that snaps again & again when you pull it. From the guards: a football to kick about in the garden. And Dr. Sweeney gave me an excellent new senet board inlaid with real ebony & challenged me to a game. (Dr. Sweeney is a fine senet player, but not so good as I am.)

But your gift was truly a sensation. I do not remember when last I had so much fun. Believe me that your injunction to remember that I am still a boy has gone well heeded.

Your devoted friend,

Ghazi

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15 May 2169

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I apologize for having taken so long to reply to your last letter, but I feel the need to relate to you an incident that has occurred, and I hope that you will not judge me too harshly, as I am greatly in need of your guidance.

The evening Dr. Fouad returned from his European engagement, we dined together to discuss the reinstatement of my regular schedule. And I told him, over dinner, of my birthday celebration & of the fun we had despite his absence & of the gifts I had received, & quite suddenly Dr. Fouad was very, very angry—angrier than I had ever seen him in my life.

And the source of his anger? Can you guess it? Your scooter! Such a thing is neither ancient nor Egyptian, he said & I am likely to break my neck on it & what right had I to risk my life for such childishness? And so saying, Mr. Lincoln, he took your gift away and forbade me from contacting you again. I do not know when I have been so sick at heart! I confess, I cried the entire night until sleep took me.

Hanifa, when she discovered what had happened, was furious. She, also, was angrier than I had ever seen her. I asked her not to interfere & extracted a promise from her that she would not, but later that night, she woke me from my sleep. She had the scooter, had found it in the refuse pile where her father had tossed it, and she took it & returned it to me.

And so I am conflicted. Mr. Lincoln, though I do not approve of purposely

defying Dr. Fouad, contrarily, I cannot imagine never writing to you again. And I must admit that I was quite happy to see my scooter. Your gift truly meant so much to me, sir, not only for itself, but also as a symbol of your friendship. Would it be so awful, then, if I were to continue with our correspondence? If I were to keep my scooter? I do not know. Please, if you have any advice, it would be greatly welcomed.

Sincerely,

Ghazi

Post Script:

Atef has agreed to post my letters for me now & to receive yours in return. His address is as follows:

Mr. Atef Fahmi
256, El-Makrizy St., Heliopolis,
Cairo 13148
Egypt

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8 August 2169

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

There is, of course, no reason for you to apologize, sir. I, in fact, should be the one extending apologies for putting you in the awkward position of sending letters to a strange address & having to endure a scolding at the hands of Dr. Fouad.

I am eternally grateful to you for bearing it as well as you have done & not taking what would most likely be a rightful grievance to your government officials. I would be appalled to think that I had been the cause of an international incident.

However, I thank you for your concern, and I wish to assure you that I am much more sanguine about the situation than I was in my last letter. Dr. Fouad believes this issue to be closed & believing such, will not broach the subject

again, nor allow it to be broached by any other.

And so, you see, we continue on with our lives as if nothing had happened. And indeed, it seems as if nothing did happen, really, except that I may not bring out my scooter when Dr. Fouad is in the Museum, nor have your letters about where he can come upon them. He need not ever know, and no one, not Hanifa, nor Dr. Sweeney, nor the guards about the Museum, will tell. It is not so great a sacrifice, nor so heavy a sin, don't you agree?

Again, thank you for the grace with which you have dealt with us. I would be forever heartbroken should this in any way impair our friendship.

Your friend,

Ghazi

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21 December 2169

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

At last, I made a trip about the city, a la the great Heb Sed processions of my ancient ancestors! What a glorious experience!

Even though they had planned it for months, I did not know about the excursion until President Hamouri & Dr. Fouad told me a few days beforehand. I was so excited I could barely sleep that whole week!

Regular viewing hours were cancelled on the day, but even so, my excitement would not allow me to lie abed past the first stirrings of the sun, and so I rose and dressed myself in the most kingly garments I own. I could barely sit still for the stylist to apply the kohl to my eyes, which greatly exasperated Dr. Fouad, and yet, when it was all done, even he was pleased with my appearance, I think. Truly, I looked like a pharaoh, and I felt like one as well!

I could tell by the noise that, outside, crowds had begun to gather, and when all was ready, I exited through the lower hall of the palace & there, in the courtyard, was a chariot, all of gold & lapis. Painted, of course, not real inlay, but a golden chariot nonetheless & pulled by a pair of fine white Arabians. And at the reins was poor Atef, dressed in his ancient soldier costume & looking none too pleased to be driving about the city in such a get-up. I covered my mouth so that he would not see me laugh.

Out into the streets we drove, into the crowds, and on each corner, people, four or five deep, waving fronds & cheering as I passed. Tourists, yes, to be sure, in their odd holiday clothes, with their cameras, snapping pictures & sweating, unused to the Cairian heat. But, also, I saw my own people, Egyptians, and they, too, were cheering!

The trip lasted so short a time, only a few minutes it seemed to me. I know it must have been longer, two miles we traveled, or so I am told, but when we reached the Museum again, I could hardly remember what had happened, or all I saw & did.

I truly do not have the words to describe how the crowd made me feel, how much I enjoyed the adulation, the singing, the throwing of flowers, and I can only imagine what the pharaohs of old, pulled in chariots of real gold through the dusty streets of Amarna & Thebes & Memphis, felt. Truly as gods, I suspect.

Sincerely,

Ghazi

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19 -го февраль 2170

Дорогой Г-н Lincoln,

Веселое рождество и С Новым годом к вам, и мне огорченны мои приветствия праздника настолько последние. Вещи довольно многодельны последн. Извещение от моего письма, я пытаюсь выучить русского! Я люблю он почти как очень как английская язык. Будет чудесным языком — настолько грубо и хрипло, настолько хорошо для инвектива! Alas, Dr. Sweeney will not teach me *those* kinds of words.

And so the reason I am learning Russian now is because the President of the Federation himself is coming to Cairo for an official visit, and I am to play Museum host & tour guide! And there will be a press conference (my first!) with members of the media from all around the world. I believe I will have a chance to test all my languages. I am so very excited!

I must return to my studies. Dr. Sweeney is drilling me on idioms this evening. I will write you immediately after the visit to give you a full accounting of all that has gone on.

Your friend,

Ghazi

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9 April 2170

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Have you heard the news? By the time you read this, you will have. I am not quite sure what has happened, and I greatly need your counsel.

The Russian president arrived with his family, and I greeted them with all official rites & courtesies. I showed them some of the pharaoh's rituals, and I gave them a tour of the Museum & the palace. It went very well.

And then the press conference, and it was all so exciting: the large room with the tables, the sea of reporters stretched out before us, interested in us, in me.

Dr. Fouad was not happy; I could see that from the outset. I do not think he wanted the press conference, didn't want me around all those modern things, but I believe President Hamouri arranged it, and so he could not argue.

In any case, the questions began: about the Russians' trip, about the tour, how we all got along & etc. And everyone listened to what I had to say, and they wrote it down. What a heady feeling that was!

And then a reporter stood & asked me a question & I remember exactly his words. He said, "How do you feel, your majesty, about the threats to your life?" And before I could speak, before I could even contemplate what he had said, Dr. Fouad, just like that, ended the press conference & motioned the guards to take me out. The room became a cacophony of shouted questions & yelling & such. It was utter chaos. I did not even get a chance to say a proper goodbye to the Russians. I am sure they were offended.

And now I am here alone with no one to talk to. Dr. Fouad has not come to see me & explain what has happened or what that man meant. Hanifa has not come, either, most likely prevented in some way, and that in itself is disturbing. And Atef & Kamal stay outside the doors & let no one in. They have been ordered not to talk to me either, though I hope still to be able to persuade Atef to post this letter.

I do not understand, sir, and I appeal to you to tell me what has gone on, what the significance of that man's question is. Why would anyone want to threaten my

life?

Sincerely,

Ghazi

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4 May 2170

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Thank you so much for your upfront & forthright reply. You cannot imagine, after the events of the past few weeks, how refreshing it is to have someone be truly honest & open with me.

I understand now so much more than I did, and, yes, I agree, it is much better to see truth in the clear light of day than to linger in the shadows of ignorance. However, with this newfound understanding has come an attendant sorrow.

I had no idea, sir, none at all, that there were factions opposed to our existence, nor that they were willing to go to such violent lengths to achieve their ends. No doubt Dr. Fouad intended to keep me ignorant of such malice, and I do not fault him for it, not really. He is trying to protect me, I suppose, though his methods are not all that I could wish.

The day after “the incident,” as Hanifa has come to call it, I awoke to find all my morning duties cancelled, and I sat upon the divan in my bedchamber, not sure what I should be doing. I am unused to idleness, and I do not like it in the least.

When Dr. Fouad finally arrived—well past mid-morning—I was overjoyed, not only because I assumed he would bring me an explanation for the goings-on of the previous evening, but because I wanted so desperately to have someone to talk to.

I quickly found myself quite mistaken on both counts.

Without preamble, Dr. Fouad announced that I was to listen only & then proceeded to inform me that the reporter was mistaken. My life, he assured me, was in no danger; no one was threatening me. He asked if I understood, and, not knowing if the injunction to stay silent was still in effect, I merely nodded my head. He returned the nod, told me I would be resuming my duties the following day & left. And that was that.

I knew straight away that I did not believe him.

It is a shocking thing to realize, suddenly, that you do not trust a man you have known your whole life, a man as close to you as a father.

I longed to speak with Hanifa.

She came, finally, late that night, and I have never been so delighted to see anyone. It was as I had suspected: She had not come before because her way into the Museum was blocked by police.

Yet after I had related to her my fears that her father had lied, she expressed no surprise. In fact, she readily agreed that it was so, told me that she knew for a certainty that he was lying, because she had seen the threatening letters herself!

I was, you may say, astounded. Not only had Dr. Fouad lied to me, but Hanifa was his co-conspirator!

A charge she denied, and, yes, perhaps it was a bit unfair, but still, I wish someone had consulted me, had informed me of these facts which bear so heavily upon my very life!

To her credit, Hanifa apologized profusely. It was, she said, only out of a desire not to upset me & because the information came to her by a rather underhanded method—she had snuck into her father's office where none of us is allowed unsupervised & there found the letters amongst the papers on his desk.

And so I have told her I forgive her, and I have. I love Hanifa & would not quarrel with her.

Yet after all of this, I still do not understand why anyone would be so opposed to us. You say poverty, Hanifa blames ignorance, and I suspect you are both correct, but who knows where the whole truth lies?

However, I have conceived a hope, sir, that perhaps we can convince these people that we are not, after all, abominations. That we are, in fact, as human as any other men. Perhaps I am being naïve, but do you, sir, believe this is possible?

Sincerely,

Ghazi

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10 August 2170

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I have a confidence I wish you to keep, and I hope you will not tell a soul nor chastise me for concealing such a thing from the authorities. The secret is not mine, you see, or perhaps I should say it is not wholly mine.

The evening of this Wednesday past, Hanifa came to my rooms through her usual methods, and, of course, I was delighted to see her. However, this night she was not alone. She brought a man with her, a friend, she said, from university. I was, of course, surprised, because she had never spoken of any such friends, and I had assumed that Hanifa always kept me abreast of all things concerning her life outside.

He gave me the Arabic greeting & introduced himself as Khaled. He was tall & dark with the full beard of a Muslim, a very imposing man. Hanifa seemed nervous, the first I had ever seen her so, and she talked quickly of how this friend could help me to understand the reasons why my existence was opposed by so many.

I was, to say the least, skeptical. I did not see how a stranger, friend to my friend or no, could do this, when those that I loved & trusted could not seem to make it make sense for me. Yet I held my tongue; I love Hanifa & would not disappoint her, & so, for her sake, I invited this man to talk.

And he spoke to me of religion & of politics, of centuries of conflict, of war & oppression & of rich men & of poor men & of all the many strata in between.

I must admit that he was exceedingly articulate, and, after a time, I understood why Hanifa gazed at him with such fire in her eyes. Yet, what I understood also, what became so very clear to me, was that it truly is all so very foolish, all these things that make one man hate another.

I know you feel this way as well, sir. Perhaps that is because, indeed, we *are* somewhat different from others in that we trace our origins back to science, not an almighty or an act of procreation. And perhaps now, by gene & precept, we are above such petty hand flapping that makes other men so very unreasonable. I do not know. All I know is that I wish to do something about it. I do not know what, but I pledge to you, sir, that when I am grown, I will do my best to erase such intolerance & blind hatred. An ambitious goal, and one I whisper only to you, for I know that you will never mock my aspirations.

Sincerely,

Ghazi

16 November 2170

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I met a prince of England today, a boy named Edward. He is my age or thereabouts.

Initially, I was quite excited by the prospect. It had been arranged that I would give him & his family a tour of the Museum, talk about my heritage & the history of my country, etc . . . not much different than any other special visitors, though it was special to me because it was a boy my age, a peer. Things, however, did not go exactly as I had anticipated.

The prince did not talk much, and I attributed this to a natural shyness on his part. Though I do not suffer from this condition, (I expect I am genetically predisposed towards extroversion???) I sympathized with Edward, and so I chatted a great deal to compensate for his silences. Everyone seemed greatly pleased. But then after the photographers had all gone away & Dr. Fouad & the president had taken the king & queen into a reception room for tea, I was alone with the young prince.

I understand you have met him as well, and I am compelled to ask you, sir, how you found the boy, because, though I am loath to admit it, upon closer acquaintance, I must say I did not like him at all.

To begin, I soon discovered that he was not in the least shy. In fact, in private, the boy was outright rude. He mocked the shape of my head. He criticized my clothes & my crown, told me he had a much finer one at home, said that he would be a legitimate king someday, not some pathetic museum piece.

And then he asked me a question for which I still do not have an answer. He asked me what I was famous for. What is one expected to reply to that? He said in his museum at home, they had Lord Nelson, and he was famous for winning a great battle. And he'd met Bonaparte who was famous for being defeated at that great battle. But what was I famous for? What great battle did I win? What did I do to deserve a second future?

And though I have pondered this question the entire day, I must admit that I have yet to find a satisfactory answer. What *did* I do? What right do *I* have to be reborn when there are so many more deserving pharaohs resting within this very building? Ramesses the Great who defeated the Hittites; Tutmosis III, the

Napoleon of Ancient Egypt; bold Hatshepsut who dared to attach the beard to her likeness. Why not these? Why me?

When I told Hanifa, she scowled & said that all English are like this: arrogant & full of their own importance. But I have never found this to be so with any of the other Englishmen I've encountered during my duties, nor has Dr. Sweeney ever seemed so to me. In fact, when I told him of this incident, he became quite angry. He called the boy an ill-mannered lout & apologized for his countryman, and I thought that quite well done.

And so, in the end, I find myself utterly dejected and confused. Tell me, sir, since you have a benefit of years that I do not, was this boy right? Am I out of my league? Am I treading in footsteps I have no right to follow?

Sincerely,

Ghazi

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3 January 2171

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Thank you so much for your letter. I am quite gratified—relieved, even—to learn your impression of the boy meets my own, and I appreciate your kind words of support.

Yes, I have posed my questions to Dr. Fouad (without relating the particulars of the incident, of course.) According to the doctor, I am an icon; I am the embodiment of my country's history; I am what people think of when they think of Egypt, which is why I am here & the others are not. So, though I won no great battles & made no great strides, this, at least, is something Dr. Fouad says that I can point to with pride: that my legacy survived where so many others did not. And yes, when I think on it, I am proud of that.

As for the other matter, yes indeed, you do speak quite a lot of good sense. And I agree that it is wrong to condemn a whole people on the actions of just one representative. Not all men are the same, and you are right that I should judge them on their individual actions, not on other people's intolerances.

I do not know why Hanifa suddenly dislikes the English so. She has never displayed such a prejudice before, and she has always treated Dr. Sweeney with

seeming great affection. It is a puzzlement, indeed.

And no, sir, you need not worry that I dwell on this incident overmuch. A mere evening of melancholy prompted me to write the dolorous letter you received previously. I assure you that I am quite my old self once again.

With many thanks & great affection,

Ghazi

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21 March 2171

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Khaled & Hanifa came to my chambers last night, as they have been doing often these past few weeks. They bring me news of the city, and we discuss politics & religion & such. It is all quite stimulating. I have always loved learning, but no one has ever challenged me as much as Khaled does.

Last night's discussion concerned humanity & its nature. Khaled tried to convince me that a true human—a true *man*—is willing to give his life for a cause; that martyrdom is the ultimate test of humanity & of manhood. I disagreed & argued that a test of true humanity is not one's ability to take life, but to save & to nurture it. He countered that, in the end, the acts of a martyr do indeed save lives, and that the martyr braves death for the greater glory of his brothers, thus transcending humanity. A specious argument, I believe, yet even so, I do not think that I prevailed; Khaled is quite the talented debater.

But then after we were done & had agreed to disagree, he said something quite extraordinary. Khaled said that he was surprised by how truly human I was. He did not think I would be so, and when Hanifa proposed a meeting, initially, he had been opposed.

I do not quite know what to make of this confession. Should I be flattered? Insulted? I am unsure. Perhaps I shall resolve to think neither one nor the other, the better to preserve the peace.

Ghazi

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26 June 2171

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

At long last, another procession through the city.

I will admit that I was quite nervous for this outing, as it was the first since I learnt that there were factions who would see me dead. And indeed, the crowd did not seem as welcoming, the sun not as warm, the garlands not as bright. A function of my nerves? I suspect so.

From the moment I stepped foot inside the chariot, a knot formed in my belly the likes of which I have never felt before, and it did not desist, even after we began riding about the streets. Oh, there were as many people as always, cheering & waving fronds, and Atef & Kamal & all the other guards were their usual alert selves. But still I could not help it: I looked at every man, woman, & child askance.

The tourists, of course, all wore their sunglasses so I could not see their eyes, and this bothered me. Then, even the faces of some of my own people took on a sinister cast, and I had quite determined to ask Atef to turn the chariot about & return to the safety of the palace when out from the crowd pressed Khaled, grinning at me & waving a frond above his head. I smiled. And then I laughed. And Khaled laughed, too. I did not ask to go back.

A strange story to relate, and I am still unsure of its meaning. But this I know: Today I have faced down a demon, and I have triumphed. Are you not proud of me?

Ghazi

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17 September 2171

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I write to you of a dream I had last night, of which I have told no one, not Dr. Fouad nor Dr. Sweeney nor Khaled & most definitely not Hanifa, though she is my closest friend & confidant.

In my dream, I lay upon the couch here in my bedchamber, a breeze blowing the linen hangings back into the room like white wings. The sun sprawled lazily

on the western horizon, its orange light sparkling across the Nile below my terrace. I wore only a shendyt, the cool air from the river a million gentle fingers across my bare skin, the breath of crushed lotus an opiate to my senses. And, still, I felt alive, more alive & awake than I have ever felt before.

Then Hanifa came, though it did not resemble her in the least. This person was more womanly than any I have ever known, more beautiful than I have ever seen, but I knew, the way one knows in a dream, that it was she, Hanifa.

And this woman who was & was not Hanifa, she smiled, and she walked to me, and I rose to meet her. She said no words, yet brushed her lips against mine. I grew restless & hot, though the cool breeze from the Nile still fluttered the curtains. I pressed myself to her, felt sensations I have no words for. I placed my arms about her, held her to me. Drums thumped upon the Nile, the sound carried up & outward by the water, beating in time with my heart. I pressed my face to her neck & the smell of the lotus flower enveloped me & I realized that she was the source of it; she was the crushed flower giving forth its scent.

I became dizzy, and the room spun. It became hard to breath. My body felt rigid & liquid all at once, and soon I could stand it no longer, and then, like a shot, I sat up.

I was alone, awake in my own bed, the linen sheets clinging to my damp skin, my breath ragged in my throat.

I do not know what to make of such a dream, sir. I have never had one so strange before, and I must admit that I felt somewhat ashamed when I saw Hanifa the next day. It is all very odd. What do you make of it? Have you ever had such a dream?

Sincerely,

Ghazi

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22 October 2171

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Thank you for your insight. I feel somewhat foolish, now, for not having guessed as much myself, and for bothering you with such frivolousness. Well, I suppose it only goes towards illustrating exactly how human we are. If only I had

the courage, I would send the evidence to those who would call us abominations.

Regards,

Ghazi

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28 February 2172

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I have seen my corpse today.

I tell you, sir, that you are lucky that yours is out of reach, for I have discovered it is indeed a fearsome thing to bear witness to one's dead self. How did this come about? I will tell you.

Last night Khaled and Hanifa visited, and we talked of history, Egyptian history, a subject about which I did not imagine there was anything else I could learn, and yet, Khaled surprised me.

Did you know, Mr. Lincoln, of the servitude my people suffered under foreign rule? Of how we were made second-class citizens in our own lands, in our own culture? How much of my country's wealth was taken by the English and other looters? How much of my ancient history has been pillaged to grace the museums of London or Paris or New York? Khaled showed me on his computer the extensive "collections" in these so-called bastions of culture. Collections, indeed! Stashes, they should be called, their museums merely elegant buildings made to house their plunder, their archaeologists nothing more than crooks and swindlers and tomb robbers. At least the men who stripped the pyramids in antiquity were honest thieves. They did not lay grand claims to preservation; they did not call themselves saviors of culture.

And I looked and I looked and when I could take it no longer, we spoke of my own tomb. I have known for quite some time the story of its discovery: the hints of a long-lost boy king, Carter's years of fruitless digging, Lord Carnarvon nearly at the end of his patience. How could I not know it? But, oh, there was so much more. So much I was not told. So much deliberately kept from me.

My body is housed in the Museum now, did you know this? All the mummies were moved from the Valley years ago due to the depredations of "archeologists" whose methods brought about the extensive water damage that has made the final

resting place of so much royalty completely unviable.

And so they rest now, those kings, not in their silent, stone tombs, but in sliding glass trays, packed in cotton, under special lights, pulled out from time to time and poked like dead animals upon the road.

Down into these rooms we went, to the lonely, dark place where little-known kings and mummies too delicate to display sleep. To the room that also holds me. And there—there I was.

Tutankhamun.

He is smaller than I am. The mummification process, I know, but I was unprepared for how fragile, how desiccated he would be. I was also unprepared for his condition. This they never told me: that to remove the precious objects from the body, which were stuck fast by the hardened embalming resins, Carter cut the mummy to pieces. The arms and legs were detached, the torso cut in half. The head was severed; hot knives were used to remove it from the golden mask to which it was cemented by resin.

Me. My head. My body. Carved up like a holiday feast.

I have never been so angry, and, truly, I do not know how I will go on with my duties when everything I have been told is a lie, when everything I have ever believed is suspect. And how may I look Dr. Sweeney in the eye, now, when all I see is the avatar of so much misery and destruction?

Indeed, I begin to suspect that Khaled has been in the right all along, that his path is the true one.

No doubt you will chastise me for this polemic, try to reason with me, enjoin me to make some kind of peace. But I cannot listen. No. No, I cannot do it. Much though I regret the sentiment, your brand of prudence, sir, would not be welcome at this moment.

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3 March 2172

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

As you wrote, sir: *Beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy and sleepless vigilance, go forward.*

Perhaps I should have reviewed this admonition before I penned my earlier missive.

Sir, allow me to apologize unreservedly for the ungracious words and splenetic tone expressed in my letter dated 28th February. I cannot begin to articulate my chagrin when, in a calmer frame of mind, I recalled what I had written. I hope I have not given any lasting offense; I pray you will chalk it up to the hot blood of youth, and not to any kind of true or permanent enmity.

I assure you, Mr. Lincoln, that I am dedicated to, as you so succinctly and elegantly voiced, *do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.*

Again, my humblest apologies.

With eternal respect and affection,

Ghazi

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11 April 2172

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I cannot begin to thank you, sir, for your charity. Yes, it is said that forgiveness is a divine trait, but not many men who had been so sorely abused would deign to forgive so readily and so generously.

I do not know what I have done to deserve such unmitigated understanding and friendship.

Again, thank you.

With respects,

Ghazi

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21 August 2172

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I believe I said that I would not trouble you with the frivolities of my dreams again, but this one bears discussion.

In this dream, just as before, I lay upon the couch in my bedchamber whilst the wind blew back the curtains. It was evening, and the Nile was alive with silver light. Again I inhaled the scent of the crushed lotus. I turned to view the door & there, once more, was Hanifa.

The restlessness grew upon me even before she had crossed the room into my arms. The sweetness in the air was overwhelming. Her lips were as soft as petals, her arms about me like iron bands. Drums beat upon the water again, stirring me, urging me on.

Then, like a crack of lightning to my skull, a blow from behind. I fell & lay bleeding upon the cold, stone floor, yet still Hanifa smiled whilst my life's blood pooled about my head.

It is foolish to be frightened by dreams; it is childish to wake crying. And yet I did, and now, hours later, I still cannot shake the feeling of melancholy which has descended upon me. Do you know what such a vision means? Do you suffer much from your dreams, sir?

Ghazi

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7 October 2172

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Thank you, sir, for your concern. No, I did not tell Dr. Fouad. I never spoke of the other dream, nor do I wish to, and it seems foolish to speak of one without mentioning the other.

However, I believe, now, that it was all a great deal of nothing, and I am, I assure you, quite recovered from its frightful effects. It was only a dream after all, only a stray thought woven inside a nonsensical story. I shall bother you no more with it.

Sincerely,

Ghazi

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31 March 2173

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I am so chock full of secrets that one day I imagine I will simply burst apart, and all the confidences I keep will come spilling out from me like silvery fish upon a wooden dock.

Dr. Fouad called me to his office last evening. Dr. Fouad rarely receives me in his office. In fact, he rarely receives anyone there at all, preferring to preserve his privacy, or as Hanifa calls it, his secrecy. It is an imposing room, small yet full of papers & cabinets & books of all sorts & types & levels of disrepair. Something was amiss, I knew, and not only because of the unusual summons.

Though Dr. Fouad's mien is always serious, the one he wore last night was especially so. Troubled is how I would describe it, though I do not believe that I have ever really seen him so in the past. Angry, yes. Irritated. Imperious. But never troubled. He paced for several minutes behind his desk strewn with papers & files, up & down, up & down, looking for all the world as if he were trying to form his question. And when he did form it, he asked it, point blank & without patina: To my knowledge, were there or had there ever been any others in the palace or the Museum at night?

I do not know what expression I wore at first. Shock, perhaps? Surprise? I do not know. I think my mouth opened once or twice but nothing came of it. Finally, I cleared my throat. No, I said. Just that. No.

Dr. Fouad appeared to believe it, for he nodded only once & released me to my leisure.

I have lied to him, Mr. Lincoln. I have never outright lied to my mentor before. Yes, this letter is, in effect, a lie. This I know. But a lie of omission, not commission. I know, I know you shall say that I should not have done. I know you shall say I must tell all, make a clean breast of it, wash my hands of the whole affair.

And yet . . . and yet.

The secret of Khaled is also Hanifa's, and how shall I face her again should I betray that trust? It is a conundrum I cannot untangle, and I am left quite at odds.

Ghazi

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5 April 2173

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I wonder if perhaps you aren't right, sir, that I should not be keeping this secret from Dr. Fouad.

Hanifa & Khaled came to my bedchamber last night, and I told them of Dr. Fouad's suspicions, and to my great astonishment, Khaled insisted that Hanifa leave with him & not come back.

She said no, of course, whispered that she still had facts to root out for him, argued that her position was crucial to the cause, whatever that may mean. And though Khaled disputed her many points, still she remained steadfast in her resolve to abide.

But it was, to my discerning eye, a reluctant no. And the way she looked at him—I had assumed before that it was merely admiration for his erudition, for his oratory style that made her eyes so bright when he speaks. But now . . . now I have a suspicion that that is indeed not the case.

I tell you, I cannot like it. I cannot like how readily he believed she would leave her family at his word. I cannot like his over-familiarity.

Should I tell Dr. Fouad, then, that he has been here? I suspect Hanifa would never forgive me. I could do it under a cloak of anonymity, I suppose, but to be so underhanded . . . no. Best to do it honestly or not at all. I am thinking only of Hanifa's safety, am I not?

Ghazi

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17 March 2174

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

My apologies for being so long absent. I am sure you know what has happened, of the "cowardly attack" as the media here has named it.

I am perfectly fine. I was not injured in any way. And I am sorry that so many of your urgent letters went unanswered and for the worry that caused you. I only wished to be undisturbed for a time. I cannot truly explain it, but I hope you can understand, nonetheless.

We were on another chariot procession through the city in a place where the streets grow quite narrow. They were jammed that day with people three or four deep. We had just reached the Midan Hussein, a more open plaza where the sun could shine down on us and the air could circulate. I looked about me, at the startling blue sky, the silver domes of the Mohamed Ali Mosque shimmering in the distance, at the sea of faces, waving fronds and cheering, and the tourists, so conspicuous in their dress and their paraphernalia. And I smiled, as I do, because indeed I love these trips.

And there on the edge of the crowd, where I have seen Khaled stand and smile and wave like the rest, I saw another man, a man darker of aspect, who was not smiling, who was not waving a frond or cheering. I caught his gaze and a cold frisson gripped me, the kind of cold that is not felt here in the desert. The man pressed forward into the sea of people, and he clenched his fist, and as he did, the crowd surged, and I lost the sight of him.

Then there came a loud concussion. I was thrown back, down to the ground, and I lay there for several heartbeats staring at the blue, blue sky above. My ears did not seem to work right, as if I were floating just beneath the surface of water. So I shook my head, and after a moment, I could hear again, though I soon wished that I could not.

The screaming of the horses was an horrific sound. Then I saw them, rolling on their sides, broken and bleeding and tangled in the traces. People were screaming as well, and I saw them running with blood upon their hands. I saw tourists lying in the street, missing limbs and faces and gods know what else. I saw blood fill the cracks in the pavement like rainwater. And then my guards carried me from the carnage, and I saw nothing more.

And that is that; I will speak no more of it.

A month passed before Hanifa brought Khaled to me. I did not want to see him. Hanifa pleaded, but no, I would not do it, I would not face him. I turned to look at the wall. So he sat upon the edge of the room, talking into the air.

A mistake, he said. Not meant for me, he said.

I did not care. I wanted only to be alone. He spoke, then, of the civil war that left Egypt a wounded battleground, of the dictator that replaced a dictator that replaced a dictator and called it democracy. He spoke of the struggle of the poor against the powers of money and corruption. He spoke of victims and of symbols. He spoke of me, of my life and my existence. I am a victim, he said, and a symbol, as well, of money and of power and of the oppression of the true people of Egypt. And then, in his best sideways fashion, he said I had the power to

change all of it.

As if this would convince me to be part of his cause! As if I wanted his sort of glory! As if I could do such evil as this!

I could listen no more and put my hands over my ears, and so he left, and I have not seen him since, though Hanifa asks and asks.

Dark dreams have come again. I do not want anyone to see me cry.

Ghazi

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12 June 2174

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I appreciate your concern & your offer of help. Thank you for listening. It lightens my burden to speak of these things.

Two nights past, I dreamt I stood upon the west bank of the river, the soil beneath my feet black from the flooding, and in the distance women sang a lament in the old tongue, though I could not pick out the words.

And then I hunted wild bull in the waving grasslands beyond the delta. The animal came at me, snorting, the ground trembling beneath its heavy tread, and though I tried, I could not heft my spear. My arm was leaden, stuck to my side. The animal came nearer, and I strained against my invisible bonds, but to no avail, and it gored me where I stood. I lay upon the ground bleeding from the wound, crying for help, but none came. None came. And the women only sang and sang.

And I woke thus, crying like a child. I have told no one of these dreams, Mr. Lincoln. No one but yourself, knowing that you will keep my secrets. Knowing that you are my loyal friend.

Sincerely,

Ghazi

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9 October 2174

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Sir, I assure you there is no need for you to be so troubled as all that. In fact, I believe that you are more unsettled on my account than I am. Knowing your caring disposition, I realize now that I should never have burdened you with my nonsense. And, of course, it *is* just that: nonsense.

You worry for me overmuch. Do not, I beg of you. All is well enough.

With affection,

Ghazi

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26 February 2175

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Perhaps Khaled was right. Perhaps I am indeed become a symbol.

We traveled to Abu Simbel today. The Nile was placid, our voyage down smooth. My guards no longer wear their costumes. Instead they wear uniforms & armour & guns, glittering & black in the desert sun. There is no need for this trip other than to prove they can do it, that I am not a prisoner of fear. They have cameras staged along the banks of the river to capture our journey, to make sure the world knows it is safe for tourists here. And I must smile & wave, a trained dog before its audience.

But despite their efforts, the crowds are gone now, and with them the cheers, the adulation, the palm fronds waved for the visiting deity. No one is allowed near me any longer except those I already know: Dr. Fouad, Dr. Sweeney, Hanifa. But in Hanifa, there is no comfort, there is only the question in her eyes, and I cannot answer.

I felt small at the feet of the colossi. So massive, those stone giants, proclaiming the greatness of Ramesses loud enough so even the gods could hear. There are no such statues for me. I was the king lost so thoroughly even the thieves could not find me. Such a noble story!

No, Ramesses was a real pharaoh, a man who deserved to be made again, though instinct tells me that he would not have stood for remaining this impotent puppet they have made of me. Perhaps that is why I was chosen; perhaps they

thought I would be satisfied with less. Or perhaps they designed me to be placid and accepting, designed us all to be so. Who is ever to know? All I do know for certain is this: that Ramesses was the man to be resurrected, not Tut, the accident of history.

When we returned to the Museum, Hanifa insisted on speaking to me of Khaled, said she wished for me to see him, to speak with him again. I refused, and I said to her things I should not have, things I will not repeat. And then I told her that I hoped she would leave with him, because I wanted never to see her again. She fled my room with tears in her eyes, and I immediately regretted my words & wished I could retract them. But I could not.

I wax melancholic. It is time for sleep. Perhaps tomorrow will bring brighter & better things.

Ghazi

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19 July 2175

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I ventured down to the Royal Mummy Room last night and stood amongst my ancient ancestors, my brother kings. There was Ramesses. There Tutmoses. Akhenaten. Amenhotep. All with their pictures displaying how they appeared in life. I was reminded of that prince—so long ago it seems now—the one who asked me what I was famous for. I did not know how to answer him then. I still do not.

I left there quickly. I have enough to make me sad without inviting it myself.

Have you finally tired of your little friend, Mr. Lincoln? I have received no letters from you in some time. I miss them, truly.

Ghazi

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12 December 2175

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

Has something happened? It has been months since your last letter. Have I offended you? Do you wish me to stop writing? I hope that is not the case. Please, sir, send a note so that I know that we are still friends. I value your company & your counsel, distant though they are. I did not know how much until I was deprived of them.

With respect & admiration,

Ghazi

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31 January 2176

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I do not know if you will get this letter or if you've received any of the letters I've sent in the past few months. I write now in the slim hope that I may have the opportunity to post this at some future time.

Hanifa is gone, and I feel as if the world has come to an end.

Dr. Fouad summoned me to his office, early, just after I had risen. Hanifa had decamped, he told me. She had chosen a man over her family. She had chosen shame, and I was not to mention her name again. Ever. Then I was dismissed & that was that.

When I returned to my rooms, I found that all my guards had been replaced with men I did not know. I have been taken off display & confined to my bedchamber for I do not know how long.

She is gone. They are all gone. And now I am alone.

How could Hanifa abandon me? How could she leave without even saying goodbye? How could she choose Khaled when I need her so? I did not mean it when I said I wished her gone. Not truly. I do not know now if I will ever see her again, and it is a thought I can hardly bear.

Ghazi

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27 March 2176

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

I understand now, sir, why I have not heard from you. You, I would guess, do not have a similar knowledge. Allow me to shed light upon the situation.

Last night I was awakened from a restless sleep by Hanifa, and I was so happy to see her, I simply held her for a full five minutes. She had repented, I'd hoped, come back for good. But no, she said, only to see me and even that could be but a brief visit.

They had intercepted our correspondence, she said, and that is how Dr. Fouad learned of Khaled, how she'd come to be shunned. My fault, though Hanifa says no, because when her father came to confront her with the evidence, he discovered her reading his personal files, the ones he locks away and lets no one else see, and that alone would have meant her exile. So she does not blame me. They did not know everything, obviously, or else she would not have been able to get in through her back door, but they knew enough, which is why I am no longer receiving your letters.

And then she began to speak in strange and ominous hints, of things she says she cannot tell me, things she says I must discover for myself.

In her father's office, there is a cabinet, locked, and inside this cabinet are files—files containing information about me. She gave me the combination. She did not tell me to go there. She did not say must or have to. She said only this: that it was there, and that I had the choice. And with tears in her eyes, she kissed me, and she left. I do not know if I shall ever see her again.

Will I go down to the office & open the cabinet? I do not know. I have kept the paper with the key code close to my heart. I have meditated over it late into the night, after everyone has gone & the doors are locked & only the nameless guards are left to wind their way through the dark & empty corridors of the Museum.

I have prayed, to Ra & to Osiris & to Isis. I have prayed to Jehovah & to the Christian god & to the god of the Muslims for guidance. But none has given me an answer.

The decision is mine to make. I do not know what I shall do. I long for your sage advice.

Ghazi

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14 April 2176

My Dear Mr. Lincoln,

This letter is my farewell and the last you shall be hearing from me. And of the things of this world I will miss, this grieves me most of all, for I find that I have come to rely greatly upon your kindness and your boundless generosity. Your wisdom has been a great boon to me, though perhaps I did not listen so well as I should. Yet above all these, I have been most proud, sir, simply to call you my friend.

Mr. Lincoln . . .

Abraham.

Though you have called me Ghazi for years, only now, at the end, do I feel able to lay claim to the honor of referring to you in so familiar a fashion. It was never any lack of affection that fettered me, of course, only that I never felt equal to you, sir, and tended to look upon you more as a child might look upon a father rather than a man upon a peer. I hope you take the sentiment with the love, affection, and honor in which it was meant. And I hope that you, in your wisdom, do not judge me so harshly as perhaps I now deserve.

You cannot understand, my dear, dear friend, what it means to be a working class king. You do not come from such a country. Your society has never known monarchs, and your gods have never walked amongst you. And you personally, Abraham, have already lived a life so full of accomplishment as to never need to wonder if your deeds will be remembered. That proof is in your very existence. I have no such laurels, recent or ancient, to rest upon. I have no past, and my future, such as it is, is set as stone in the pattern of my genes.

For you see, I have ventured down into Dr. Fouad's office. I have unlocked the cabinet. I have seen all the contracts and read all the reports, and now I know the truth. Now I know what it is that I am.

An experiment. A "limited test run." An attempt to justify the cost. And if the tourist money came, if it proved to be enough, then . . . then the government itself would invest in a new creation. A new Tut. A real one. One that would last longer, stay young.

And as for me? What is to be my fate? It is this: that no matter the outcome, no matter the success or failure of the experiment, I, Ghazi, am designed to expire, just as my prime did, in my nineteenth year. For who indeed wants to see a boy king at fifty-five? Surely, that is not what the tourists pay good money for.

Oh, there will be no pain, of course. They are not monsters, no. No, for me there will be only a night like any other and a simple and gentle fading away, down into an endless sleep.

Two years, my friend. I have but two years left to live. Do you blame me that I choose to spend them no longer as a eunuch? I hope that you do not, and I hope that, in the passage of time and the soft light of remembrance, you forgive me for the course upon which I now, this night, shall embark.

For even as I write this, evening has come to Cairo. The sun hangs low upon the western horizon, casting its red arms across the sands to limn the pyramids, to plate the churning waters of the Nile, to tip in molten gold the thousand minarets of this ancient city until finally they slant, beggar-like, into my window and tug upon my soul. In the distance, the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer, and outside, somewhere, beyond the walls of the Museum, Khaled waits for me. I shall not disappoint him.

For now, this day, I am finally become a man.

And no longer do I dream of pain and death and ignoble endings. No longer do I cry like a child in the night.

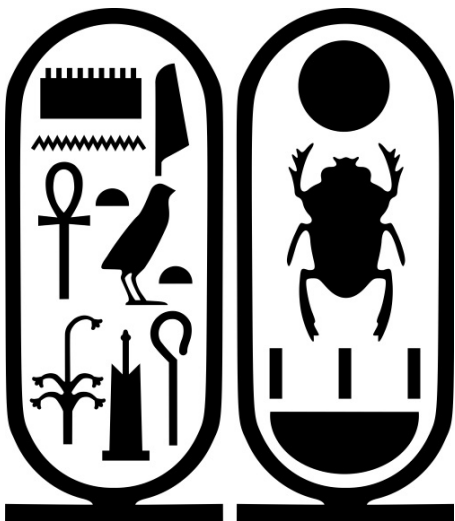
Last night I dreamt one last time. And last night my dreams were of war.

And of golden chariots. Of dust in the desert and of the crying of the people. Of soldiers and of blood and of vast and magnificent battlefields.

And of a barque of gold.

And of Isis and Osiris, their arms lifted in prayer.

And then, finally, just before waking, I dreamt of Ra, his hand outstretched, leading the way across the heavens to my immortal glory.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea is a television writer and producer in New York City. Currently, she shares her home with several hundred books, three cats, and a large box of wine.

An Inflexible Truth

Christopher East | 8450 words

As the commuter jet descended toward the ruins of Las Vegas, Roland Zhang craned his neck at the window, watching the skeleton towers grow nearer. Billowing clouds of dust clogged the air, and wind-blown dunes partially buried the filthy, abandoned buildings. He'd viewed footage from the far corners of the Earth, every remote hellhole imaginable, but this was the first time he'd ever seen the real deal in person. He tugged at his collar, sweating in spite of the air conditioning.

“Your first citywreck?”

Roland oriented on the voice: a fifty-something woman in the seat facing him, Hispanic, streaking black hair cropped short. She looked very much at home in her weathered filter gear, and the backpack strapped to the seat beside her had the look of heavy use. “I’m afraid so,” he allowed, mustering a smile. “I’ve heard stories.”

“You’ll do fine,” the woman said. “And you’re just in time. I hear this tour is packing it in soon. May be the last run.”

“Oh?” Roland said. Nervously he retrieved a cloth from his pocket and started polishing his glasses. “Why?”

“Feds are sending the RRC back in,” she said. “Guess they’re gonna squeeze a few more raw materials out of these old hulks.”

“Is that right?” Roland said. He wondered if she saw through his act. He knew the Resource Reclamation Corps was returning, even though everything he’d read suggested they’d mined Vegas for everything they could salvage already. They’d moved out two years ago, and the city had been declared a historic Limited Access Zone. “Waste of time, isn’t it?”

“My thoughts exactly. I mean, plenty of interesting old junk in this city. Heck, that’s why I’m here. But exploitable resources?” She quirked an eyebrow at him. “I’m sorry, old lady brain. You told me before. What’s your name again?”

“Roland,” he said, pushing his glasses back on.

“Mia Quintero,” the woman said, reaching over to shake his hand. Her palm was firm and leathery.

“You’ve done this tour before?”

“Yes,” Mia said, glancing toward the window as the wheels touched down with a screech. “I’m a historian.”

“You study citywrecks . . . professionally?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “Wreck-mining’s just a hobby. But I’m kind of passionate about it. I prefer coastal dives, but these desertification cases make for an interesting change of pace. This is my third Vegas run. If I’m lucky, I’ll find a few relics, or drives for the archives. What about you? You don’t *look* like an adventure tourist . . .?”

Roland was saved from answering by the tour leader, John Sparkman, who stood at the front of the cabin while the jet slowed to a stop. Sparkman was two hundred pounds of solid muscle; the cabin couldn’t accommodate his height, so his head was cocked at a comical angle, cording the tendons of his neck. “Okay, suit up! Full seals for now. The worst of the dust storm’s over, but it’s still a lungripper out there. Your escorts will perform a respirator check before we open the door.”

By the time the cabin door opened, Roland was suited up and ready. The stairs lowered, and with a burst of adrenaline he followed Sparkman, Mia, and the rest of the tour group out onto the scorching, windswept tarmac of McCarran International.

He felt it right away as he emerged from the privilege and comfort of the jet onto the tortured landscape of the desert: the folly of his decision to come to this godforsaken place. He was a desk jockey, a coddled northern media analyst, not a field-tested reporter or a combat veteran or even an adventure tourist. He belonged in civilization, not its recent aftermath.

Besides, if Troy Mackowiak couldn’t crack this story, what chance did *he* have?

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The trail that led him to Nevada had started five months earlier, in the downtown Buffalo offices of the Neutral News Institute. From the eighth-floor conference room windows, he watched bulldozers pushing massive piles of snow out onto frozen Lake Erie, while ominous clouds amassed in the distance, a winter blast streaking in from Canada. Another northeastern deep freeze had struck, earlier than usual, and the local government had mobilized its army of blizzard-battling city employees. The chill bit right through the window glass.

It was the morning of the Institute’s monthly staff meeting. As usual, he’d set up the teleconference in advance of everyone’s arrival, and was still waiting for the others when Troy Mackowiak arrived. Troy’s shaggy brown hair was a

windblown catastrophe, and his wrinkled, street-casual clothes clung to his wiry frame for dear life. He carried a steaming mug of Coffaux in one hand, a stack of file folders in the other, and a heavy-looking travel bag over his shoulder.

“Roland Zhang,” he said cheerfully. “Mr. Dependable, ready to roll fifteen minutes early. You know, someone told me this isn’t even technically your job.”

“It’s not.”

“What a guy. How’s it looking out there?”

“We’re going to get socked in again,” Roland said, checking the hot mug of tea in his hand to see if it had steeped enough. “Expecting another ten inches tonight.”

“Shit,” Troy said, unburdening himself at his usual seat by the door. “I’ve got a flight in three hours.”

“Airport’s still open,” Roland said. “You’ll probably beat the storm.”

Troy joined him by the window, downing a huge gulp of his steaming beverage. “This weather’s enough to make me miss Houston. And Houston is, well, it’s Houston.”

“Where you headed this time?”

“The Great Southwest,” he said, perverse grin lighting up.

Roland rounded on him. “For God’s sake, why?”

Uncharacteristically, Troy averted his eyes as he responded. “The story, of course. Always the story.”

“Where exactly? Not New Mexico again? You almost didn’t make it back from that one.”

“Listen,” Troy said, clearly to change the subject. “I’m glad you’re here, actually. You got any vacay coming up?”

“No, I burned all my PTO,” Roland said. “Why?”

Troy’s eyes darted toward the open door of the conference room. “I need someone sharp vetting my feeds for the next couple weeks. And as you know I’m a keen admirer of your eye.”

Roland hadn’t known, and warmed to the respect. Troy Mackowiak was an NNI legend: smart, tenacious, utterly fearless. Unlike some field reporters, he didn’t dismiss the analysts as cube-farm flunkies. He treated them as needed collaborators. “Sure,” he said. “I’ll tag your files, if I can . . .”

“Actually, I was hoping I could send them to you directly.”

Roland shook his head reflexively. “That’s against protocol, Troy. Besides, Susan has me swimming in feeds from the Mediterranean unrest. I may not be available.”

“Look, I know it sounds sketchy. I’d just rather keep this material off the books. They don’t need to see this upstairs yet. If at all.”

“What are you into, Troy?” Roland asked. This wasn’t the first time Troy had gotten cryptic about a story he was chasing, but normally he was grandstanding, going for laughs or building his persona. This felt different, like genuine dissembling. It went against the NNI tradition of transparency.

“Honestly, I don’t know yet,” Troy said. “Could be nothing. Look, I just need preliminary eyes-on from a pro, that’s all. I’ll encrypt it to your home system. You won’t need the full office toolset. Can I count on you?”

Roland couldn’t help but hesitate. NNI’s internal chain-of-custody policies were part of why he had landed here, a system of checks and balances against spin. But it was Troy, so he relented. “Fine, but yeah, keep it off the company servers. I’ll handle it on my own time.”

“You’re so lawful,” Troy said. Then his manner tensed as he glanced toward the hallway, where a group of well-dressed professionals had amassed in the common area. “Well, I’ll be damned. The new boss is in town.”

Roland spun to observe the arrivals, a war party of Institute bigwigs. They hovered around the newly appointed President, Kathryn Poole. The face of the NNI, she looked polished and perfectly coifed, as if ready for a press conference. “I thought she was still in Philly.”

“She never slows down, that one,” Troy said, pitching his voice lower as they neared the door. “Remember what I said, okay? Much appreciated.”

“You bet,” Roland said, pushing down a nervous flutter in his stomach.

An hour later, Troy Mackowiak raced out of the meeting to catch his plane, and nobody ever saw him again.

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Pushing into the ruins felt like a military deployment—not that Roland had ever been on one. Sparkman clearly had, and took point with a matte black assault rifle at the ready. His looming shape was easy to follow. Occasionally he spun around, belting in unselfconscious basso profundo through the speakers of his mask: safety reminders, local history, famous buildings. On the flight, Roland had found Sparkman’s bearing unpleasant and intimidating, but now he saw how it made him good at his job: he possessed an easy confidence that put everyone at ease, made them feel in good hands in a dangerous landscape.

Sparkman had two assistants. Patrolling the left flank was Rico Guardarrama,

a wiry, middle-aged veteran with an easy manner behind his chiseled, dusky features; he and Sparkman were clearly old squad mates. On the right was Devon Easley, Roland's escort. She was athletic and short, with smooth ebony skin and close-shaved hair. She possessed the same military bearing as the other escorts, but lacked the comfortable rapport. Rico wielded an assault rifle like his boss, but Devon only carried a compact machine pistol, which she left holstered. For some reason, this made her seem more formidable, not less.

"So, Roland," said the nearest fellow tourist. His name was Perry Hammond, a California marketing VP of something or other. Fiftyish, graying hair, but well preserved, with sun-baked skin. "What's your line?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your line," Perry said. His voice was muted through the filter mask. "Job. Thing you do for a living."

"Ah. I work for the NNI."

"The what?"

"NNI. The Neutral News Institute."

"Oh!" Perry said. "Got you. Doing?"

"I'm a media analyst."

"Got you."

"Sorry to eavesdrop, but what did you say?" This from Perry's wife Alix, a beautiful, athletic woman twenty years Perry's junior, with golden hair artfully arranged around her filter mask straps. She and Perry were Rico's responsibility. "Did you say the Neutral *Nudes* Institute? I'm like, 'there's an institute for that? Where do I sign up?'"

"Get your mind out of the gutter!" Perry laughed, holding his old-school camera like a trophy. It was a thirty-five-millimeter contraption with a telephoto lens, a retro affectation.

"What's your institute do?" Alix pressed.

"We're a news organization." Now he was really sweating, and it wasn't just the heat; he'd been hoping to keep to himself. He tugged at his collar, craving a breeze. "Information outside the mainstream," he soldiered on. "We, uh, analyze raw feeds, visuals and audio, citizen journalism . . . types of stuff. Data mining, Internet scans, you know, vetting it all for authenticity. So as to contrast it with mainstream media, and, you know, report. Purely objective reporting."

"Wow, you've got quite the vocabulary," Alix joked.

"Bless you, Roland," Mia said from up where she walked alongside Sparkman. "NNI is what the news was supposed to be, before it got bought."

“Liberal news,” Perry said. It might have been an epithet, but from him it sounded like online dictionary pronunciation.

“Oh, not technically,” Roland said. “We’re apolitical as a matter of policy. No ads or commercials, no sponsorships, everything citizen-funded. Our only agenda is to inform.”

Mia chuckled. “What Roland is politely not saying,” she said mischievously, “is that NNI reports the truth. And since liberals have the truth on their side, NNI is liberal news.”

“I’m a Republican,” Perry said easily.

“Oh,” Mia said. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I can tell,” Perry said. “But don’t sweat it. I’m on vacation.”

This brought a laugh from everyone.

“Well, that sounds cool,” Alix said, her tone suggesting she felt otherwise. “Not as fun as an institute full of nudes!”

“This is all *very* interesting,” Sparkman said. “But you might want to save some wind. We’ve got a hell of a hike to the first campsite.”

“Now, now, boss, these are paying customers,” Rico said. “Not recruits you can just order around.”

“I should have left you in the jungle,” Sparkman said, which made Rico cackle.

Roland was happy to change the subject. He didn’t want these people thinking too hard on why he was here.

They neared a stretch of the Vegas Strip where fancy, massive casinos and resort hotels of yesteryear lined the boulevard. Now they were empty husks, windows agape, glass shattered, drifts of sand layering every paved surface. Roland absorbed it all, trying to imagine what life had been like before the water had run out, waiting for some profound insight. This was first-hand, not a secondary feed. Surely after all these years, reviewing images from a safe, digital distance, he would get something out of seeing the harsh reality in person.

But for all the guns and filter-masks and brutal heat, he still sensed a protective layer between him and any real danger. This was a historic Limited Access Zone, after all, not a collapse-in-progress. It was a curiously . . . *cleansed* reality. Maybe he was kidding himself. Maybe he would find nothing here but more spin, and the crumbling relics of departed civilization.

Devon Easley dropped back to walk beside him. “I admire what you guys are doing,” she said. “You tell it straight.”

“Thanks,” Roland said. He wished he could see her face, or anyone’s, for that

matter. He was surrounded by people, something he wasn't used to, but they were also *masked* people, strangers he couldn't hope to read. He couldn't authenticate the contents of their minds, and right now that was as unnerving than any external threat, if not more so.

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They hiked north into the city, and it took hours, factoring in rest breaks and detours to explore nearby ruins. Roland did his best to muster an aura of curiosity, listening to Sparkman's informed banter as they negotiated the oddly sanitized debris of Caesar's Palace. But he felt like an awkward poser. He couldn't possibly keep up with the energy of Mia, who searched vigorously for overlooked scraps of recent human history, or the Hammonds, who ricocheted around taking tasteless selfies next to fallen monuments of the past.

At one point, while the others were off spelunking an old hotel, Roland parked in the shade of a building and peeled off his filter mask to cool his face. The air quality had improved.

Devon walked over. "Looks like I pulled the easy duty," she said, peeling off her own mask.

Roland glanced up from polishing his glasses, happy to see a face. Devon's was pleasant, high cheekbones and firm jaw. A tiny slash of a scar crossed both lips. "What do you mean?"

"You're clearly not in this for the exercise."

Roland felt his face grow hot. "Probably just a sign that I need some."

"I'm just saying, not something you usually do."

"No."

"The Hammonds do," Devon said. "Not this particular tour, but different ones. I know the type. They get off on this."

"Uh, how so?"

"Well, they feel superior by virtue of circumstance," Devon said. "*Their* city didn't collapse, after all. Plus they can afford to come out here and pay for some first-hand schadenfreude. Makes them feel good about themselves."

So far Roland didn't think very highly of the Hammonds, but this struck him as harsh judgment on such short exposure. "What about Mia?"

"Oh, she's just a geek for the relics." Devon shrugged. "What about you? This work-related?"

"Not really," Roland said, mopping sweat from his forehead with a

handkerchief. “I mean, in a way, yes. I spend a lot of time looking at video of this kind of place. Thought it was time to see for myself. Get a different perspective.”

Devon ran a finger along her brow. “Got you. Hope it’s not too disappointing.”
“Why would it be?”

“The reality is pretty boring,” Devon said. “This used to be a more dangerous detail. Armed squatters, for instance. Refugees, outlaws. We even took fire a few times. But these last few runs? I feel a little silly arming up. Place is turning into a museum.”

“I guess that’s good for Mia.”

“Don’t get me wrong, we’ve still got dogs and scorpions to worry about, and we’ll stumble across the odd corpse. And of course the weather can still kill you: heat exhaustion, sun stroke, dehydration. Sparkman’ll play that up for the adventurers over there, make sure they think they’re getting their money’s worth. But it’s not like it was a few years back, when the feds were still cleaning it out.” Devon smiled. “Sorry if these are spoilers. You don’t seem like an adrenaline junkie.”

Roland tried to read her expression. People didn’t open up to him often; he was, as Troy had once put it, off-puttingly introverted. Was this why he distrusted her friendliness toward him, or was it something more specific in *her* manner? Maybe she was onto him, trying to draw him out. Maybe he wasn’t fooling anybody. “No daredevil here,” he said. “Actually, it’s, uh, reassuring to hear you think it’s safe.”

“Just don’t tell the guys I said anything,” Devon said. “Sparkman lives for jeopardy, even if he has to imagine it.”

“Masks on!” Sparkman called from across the street, voice booming through the speaker. “Time to move out! We’re pushing farther away from the airport this time so our repeat customer here can see some new turf. So buckle down those boots!”

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Shortly after nightfall, they reached the campsite, a small patch of unpaved ground in the shadow of a towering, derelict resort. The escorts had used this site before, but not for a while, according to Sparkman. The fire pit was full of sand, and the gunmetal supply cache stowed here was so buried that Devon had to excavate it. Rico built a cooking fire while the rest unburdened themselves, picking out plots of land to colonize.

The Hammonds had schlepped their own deluxe domtent, but the others inflated tour-provided ones from the cache: small, solo units that were little more than glorified sleeping bags, designed to keep the dust out. Desert chill descended quickly in the sun's absence, and soon they'd clustered around the fire to eat Rico's skewers and relax after the day's exertions. Sparkman took first watch, propping himself atop a nearby terrace wall where he could oversee the group and watch for dog packs.

"Amazing," Alix said, tipping back a silver flask of something alcoholic. She was using her husband as a backstop, staring skyward. "I don't think I've ever seen this many stars."

"No light pollution out here," Mia said.

"It's a far cry from Santa Barbara. Right, hon?"

Perry grunted, distracted by his eyeset, which illuminated the upper half of his face with flashing visuals.

"Heh." Alix handed the flask to Roland. "Even out here, can't pry his eyes off the screens."

Roland sniffed the booze, winced at the odor. "What's this?"

"Twelve-year-old Scotch, baby!"

"How are *all Scotches* twelve years old?" Rico asked, inspiring a laugh.

"Seriously? All of them!"

"It *is*," Alix protested.

"Uh, no thank you," Roland said. "I don't drink much."

"I'll take some," Rico said. He took a slug, closed his eyes, and exhaled. "Ho! Good stuff. Devon?"

"I got the middle watch," Devon said, turning over a spit. "You'll want me good and sober for that."

"Easy on that stuff!" Sparkman called from his elevated vantage. "You'll dry up and blow away on me. How's everyone doing? Seeing what you came to see?"

"Hell yeah, Mr. Sparkman!" Alix called.

"*Sergeant* Sparkman," Sparkman said. "Sorry we cut through the Strip so fast. You can blame Mia for that one!"

"We can always hit the casinos again on the way back," Mia said. "It's just that they're so picked over. Thanks for letting us go off the beaten path."

"It's all off the beaten path to us!" Alix said.

"Check this out, hon," Perry said, handing her the eyeset.

"You're not getting a *signal*?"

"No, it's that program I downloaded before we left."

“Oh, that,” Alix said, dismissively. “No thanks. I’m too in the moment.”

“Here, Roland, give it a go.”

Roland took the eyeset and fit it over his glasses. It was like flicking down a shade, a reality-warping filter of vivid computer graphics transforming the landscape around him. The simulation altered his immediate surroundings so that they looked exactly as they had back in the old days. The dead hulk of a hotel behind them was lit up like a Christmas tree, its windows now gleaming and intact. The streets were clear and clean, cars racing along them. Bright streetlights, flashing neon billboards, and three-dimensional hologram ads lit up the night, while pedestrians strode along nearby sidewalks. As impressive as it was, Roland felt an instinctive Uncanny Valley repulsion. He pulled the eyeset off and handed it back. The grungy reality of post-collapse Vegas returned. “Pretty cool.”

“Hard to imagine how it used to be, looking at it now, huh?” Perry said, putting his toy back on.

“You kidding?” Rico said. “Even now, this place has a better school system than Long Beach.”

The others laughed as the conversation continued, but Roland leaned back, feeling weariness in his limbs and a pleasant weight in his belly. He peered up at the stars, resisting exhaustion.

High above, something faint drifted across the sky.

For a moment he thought he’d hallucinated it, but then he spied it again, further along the same trajectory: a hovering glimmer like heat haze, slowly moving. Whatever it was, his eyes couldn’t track it. He couldn’t tell its size, what it was made out of, how far away it was. When it vanished moments later, he questioned whether anything had even been there.

“Did you see that?” Devon asked.

Roland glanced at her. “That . . . shimmer? What was it?”

Devon shook her head. “Not sure,” she said hesitantly.

Did she have a theory she wasn’t sharing? Roland couldn’t tell.

They fell silent, but after a moment, it came to him. That was a cloaked drone, he thought. Suddenly it seemed obvious. He’d analyzed so much eye-in-the-sky footage that his brain naturally reverse-engineered the blurry motion. Someone was watching them from above.

This revelation alleviated his doubt. Maybe something *was* going on out here. Troy had been onto something after all.

And Roland had put himself right in the middle of it.

Sleeping on the ground didn't suit him, but he did manage to drift off, huddled in the warmth of his mini-tent. Bizarre dreams woke him, their details vanishing from memory moments after opening his eyes, replaced by the crackle of the fire and the eerie silence of the dead city. One vision did remain: huge, robotic machines pushing towering mounds of lake effect snow into downtown Las Vegas, a dream-logic transposition of place, perhaps his brain subconsciously trying to solve both cities' problems.

As he woke from the dream, the knowledge of where he was reasserted itself: Las Vegas, March, morning, the overnight chill lingering, the smell of wood smoke still potent in his nostrils. But also, an incongruity: the sounds of heavy machinery in the distance, as if the snow-moving automatons of his dreamscape had materialized in the real world.

He unzipped the flap and peered out. Alix and Perry could be heard moving about within their tent, but the immediate area was quiet and empty. He found his glasses and fumbled them up his nose. About twenty yards away, Sparkman spoke fervently into a satellite phone, while Mia eavesdropped. Farther away, Rico jogged toward the camp as if returning from patrol.

Devon came around from behind his tent and crouched beside him. "Good, you're up."

"What's that noise?"

"Sparkman's trying to find out," Devon said. "Nobody's supposed to be in this sector."

Alix and Perry emerged from their tent just as Sparkman, Mia, and Rico all returned. The group convened around the smoldering embers of the campfire. "I called the office," Sparkman said. "They think it's the RRC."

"They *think*?" Devon asked.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Sparkman said. "Someone's going to call me back."

"I thought this place was still an LAZ until the end of the month," Roland said.

"It is, legally," Sparkman said. "They know we're still running tours. Granted, we haven't been in this particular patch of the city for a while, but still."

"What does this mean?" Alix asked. "Do we need to go back?"

Sparkman ran a hand over thick stubble. "No. Fuck them. We have every right to be here."

"RRC runs with a military escort, though," Rico said. "What if we run into them?"

“Sling your rifle,” Sparkman said. “Last thing we need is some green recruit panicking and throwing shots at us.”

“I don’t know,” Perry said. “Sounds kind of dangerous.”

“Maybe we should keep this as a base camp,” Rico said. “In case the office needs to tell ’em where we are.”

“Good idea,” Sparkman said. “We can spike our excursions out from here. Sorry, Mia, I know you’d prefer we run a circuit.”

“I understand,” Mia said. “Probably safer this way.”

Soon thereafter it was business as usual. They ate breakfast and planned the day’s hike. More than once, though, Roland peered skyward in search of ghostly aircraft, or half-heard the sounds of engines in the distance. For such an empty place, it was starting to feel awfully busy.

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That afternoon they split off to explore the citywreck in smaller groups. Once Mia and the Hammonds had departed, Roland set off in a third direction with Devon.

This was his chance. Without others driving the decisions, he could set a course for the coordinates Troy had emailed him—an email that had turned up in his spam filter two weeks after he vanished from the face of the Earth. It was a terrifying prospect, but he had come this far. He triggered the map program in his glasses to lead the way. It wasn’t real-time positioning, but the software was robust enough that he could follow the maps old-school. He figured it was about forty-five minutes’ hike to the northeast.

A cloud front rolled in from the west, obscuring the sun and making the walk more pleasant. Occasionally Roland made a show of pausing to feign interest in some rubble, or poke his nose into a hollowed-out storefront; in one of them, he even dug around long enough to inspect abandoned items, including a discarded laptop from which he liberated the hard drive.

“Picking up a new hobby, are you?” Devon asked.

“Wreck-diving?” Roland asked, securing the drive in a pocket as they resumed their hike. “Not really. I just thought I’d grab this for Mia . . .” He chuckled. “To be honest, I have no idea what I’m doing here.” Not *entirely* a lie.

“Not much of a field man for the NNI, then.”

“Somebody has to put their boots on their ground,” Roland said. “But I’ve never been that guy. My job is just making sure what gets to people’s screens

hasn't been doctored. And, you know, edit it into something that tells the story."

"So you *do* spin things." Devon flashed her teeth, revealing an incisor gap Roland hadn't noticed before.

"What? No."

"You said tell a story. You telling me that's not spin?"

"Well, you got to give the data *shape*," Roland said. He took a breath; he felt like he was sputtering opinions. "The Institute really *is* neutral. We make sure the full visual context is available. We make sure the language isn't loaded. But that doesn't mean the information doesn't have to be coherent."

"Relax, Roland. I'm just messing with you."

"Oh," Roland said. "Sorry, this stuff is important to me."

"Clearly!" Devon laughed. "I respect that. I worked Homeland Security in Florida during the evacs. What I saw in Miami, you wouldn't believe this shit. Then I get back to Pittsburgh and the news is either playing the fear card—immigrant invasion!—or they're glossing it over, making it all PG-13 to sell shampoo." She sighed. "When NNI came along, it was like, finally I can see what the fuck is happening."

Roland kept one eye on the route software to make sure they were on track. "Before she retired," he said, "the Institute's founder always used to say there's one true reality, an inflexible truth. And everything went to hell when people learned how to condition each other into developing their own realities."

Devon laughed. "When did that start? The Bible?"

"Uh, she meant, in the context of media . . ."

"I hear you," Devon said. "Like Perry with his glasses. Walking through one reality, seeing another."

"Yes, exactly. A psychological version of that . . . like a virus or something, that keeps you from seeing outside your comfortable contexts . . ."

"What's gotten into you?" Devon said. "Entering a marathon?"

Roland realized how fast he was walking, bee-lining toward the coordinates. Emboldened by the conversation, perhaps, he'd stepped up the pace. A head-on collision with the truth, he thought, feeling silly. "Sorry. Guess I'm distracted."

Devon chuckled. "You aren't much of a liar."

"What do you mean?"

"You keep checking that map on your prescription specs. Like I'm not going to notice. Are we on a scavenger hunt?"

Roland's stride faltered, and he glanced at Devon. She still had a relaxed expression on her face, her voice a tone of friendly ribbing. But her eyes were

penetrating. If she really was former Homeland Security, he was probably kidding himself that he could pitch a story past her. “It’s . . . well, it may be better for you, if you don’t know.”

“That doesn’t sound very NNI to me. How about a little of that ‘inflexible truth?’”

Roland exhaled a half-laugh. “Walked into that one.”

“So?”

Roland stopped, looked Devon in the eye, and took the plunge. “Hell. I’m in over my head, here.”

Devon’s smile faded. “Is that right?”

“Quite possibly.”

Devon looked around. “Over here,” she said, striding toward a shaded spot in the lee of an old car dealership.

“Where we going?”

“If you got me sneaking up on something,” she said, “you better get me in the fucking loop.”

••••

Calm overcast soon turned to early darkness, and the air grew cloudy with the stirred grit of a dust storm. They donned goggles and filter masks. “Better to cover up anyway,” Devon said as they strapped on their gear.

“Why?”

“Facial recognition.”

“You think we’re being watched?” Roland asked, his mind recalling the low-flying drone, hovering over the camp.

Devon shrugged. “Standard security precaution.”

They resumed the hike. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know,” Devon said. “But now you got me curious.”

She sold the line, but Roland was uncertain. Did she have a hidden agenda he couldn’t detect? He’d told her everything, risked everything on a hunch, and she hadn’t flinched. She’d just listened, nodded, and asked clarifying questions, and when his explanation was complete, she told him to lead the way. He was so grateful not to be thwarted that he’d gone along with it. He needed to *know*—what Troy had found, why he’d disappeared, and why he’d sent the cryptic email.

It was only later, after they dropped into silence to finish the hike, that he mused about her motives. She’d seen the drone, too. Why hadn’t she mentioned

it? She had manipulated him into telling her everything without giving up any data in return.

The air thickened with each gust of wind. Roland cursed it for obscuring his view, even as he thanked it for covering their approach. As they trekked the last few hundred yards, edging close to low buildings that lined the boulevard, he thought he heard machinery again. He remembered the sounds earlier, and Sparkman's sat-phone call, and wondered if the tour's office man had been right that the RRC was back. Troy's email had given him nothing but coordinates.

Suddenly Devon grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him through the open doorway of a burned-out convenience store. When Roland looked up from the cover of the building interior, heart hammering, he saw a truck emerge from the dust and darkness to rumble up the road. A rig, carrying a heavy load of large, cylindrical metal tubing. Ductwork? Industrial cabling? Moving slowly in poor visibility, the truck rolled past to vanish again into the drifting fog of dust.

Moments later they were moving again, this time with Devon leading. They huddled low against a high, concrete fence, an unforgiving architecture that Roland had seen cordoning residential zones from the city's major thoroughfares.

Roland squinted to focus, wishing he could lift his goggles long enough to push his glasses up his sweat-slickened nose.

Floodlights ignited ahead.

High, penetrating beams that cut through the thick air, they were suspended from cranes, and Roland was relieved to see that they weren't trained his way. They pointed down, illuminating a construction site. There was the truck they'd seen, along with other heavy vehicles: a trencher, a backhoe, larger machines Roland couldn't identify. Industrious workers in envirosuits surrounded the machines.

Something was being *built* out here.

"What the fu—?" Devon asked, and then slumped sideways against the wall. She slid down it, collapsing.

"Devon?" Roland asked, darting over to her. Her body had gone limp, and she was clearly unconscious.

Too late he sensed a presence behind him. He spun around, just in time to glimpse a fully envirosuited figure aiming a sinister-looking pistol at him. He felt a sharp impact on his chest, and everything went dark.

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He woke to a pins-and-needles sensation in his wrists and hands, which were clipped behind him to a cool, metallic chair. His shoulders and lower back weren't much better off, stiff and bent out of position, and a spot on his left temple was sore and swollen. The drug was wearing off, but he still felt groggy.

He opened his eyes and panicked when he couldn't see. But his next intake of breath calmed him. A hood obscured his vision; he could smell and taste its synthetic cloth.

That left hearing as his lone sense, but the only sound was the white-noise drone of an HVAC system. "Devon?" he called, to test his voice. Normal volume, but the tone was off, muffled by the fabric of the hood.

"He's up," a nearby male voice said in surprise.

"Shhh," said another, indistinct voice, possibly female.

The male voice had been generic, a relaxed baritone that sounded vaguely familiar. "Who's there?" Roland asked, hoping to inspire a response, but the man didn't take the bait.

A door opened and shut with a loud clack. Then, silence.

Roland cursed himself under his breath. Every sign had pointed to this being a dangerous, foolhardy escapade, but he'd ignored every warning. What had possessed him? His faith in the mission of the Institute? Some misguided admiration for Troy? Right now, no reason seemed rational. And yet, somewhere in the back of his mind, he couldn't shake the feeling that it had been important for him to take this risk, even if no outcome could justify the trouble he'd gotten himself into. He needed to *see*.

Minutes passed. He waited, flexing his hands to get some circulation going. Someone was in the room, he thought; he sensed a breathing presence nearby. The room was *cold*. Other discomforts had distracted him from noticing.

The door finally opened again. "Uncuff him!" a stern, female voice said. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Sorry." The man again, his utterance followed by footsteps. The tight, plastic zipcuffs were undone, and Roland's arms snapped forward, wound muscles unkinking.

"The hood, too."

The shroud was removed. Finally he could see, but he didn't have his glasses. Faint LED light fixtures overhead illuminated what appeared to be a small office; a quick look around revealed standard cubicle workstations. Squinting, Roland tried to identify the three people in the room, but his myopic eyes weren't up to the task. Based on the voice, he guessed the woman in the middle was in charge;

her blurry, dark blue skirt-suit contrasted with the muted surroundings. She was flanked by the man and woman Roland presumed were his captors.

“Out,” the woman ordered. “Get going.”

The guards made for the door. Roland watched them retreat. Something about the body language, coupled with the voice . . .

Alix and Perry Hammond? The ditzy adventure tourists? Without his glasses, he couldn't confirm the hunch, but . . .

The woman strode over, dragging a chair. She sat down across from him.

“Give me your hand, Roland.”

Roland extended his hand, and found his glasses pressed into it. He slid them up his nose.

Kathryn Poole sat across from him.

The President of the Neutral News Institute sat primly, as polished and professional as ever. Roland waited for shock, but all he felt was baffled numbness. “You . . .”

“We were hoping you wouldn't come.”

Roland shook his head. “What's going on here? Who's we?”

“Listen very carefully,” Poole said. “It's unfortunate you made it this far. But now that you're here, for the good of the Institute, we need you to answer a question. It's very, very important that you're honest with me, understand?”

Roland felt sick to his stomach. He touched his temple, which was bleeding. He must have hit his head when he fell.

“Who knows you're here?” Poole asked. “And why?”

The question was stated with the calm, charismatic tone of Poole's public persona. But to Roland, the questions had the edge of threat. “What if I don't answer?”

“Oh, you'll answer,” Poole said, leaning back. Again, that smooth, effortless voice, blunting the menacing content. “You're no hardcase, Roland. You're an analyst. One of our best, I hear. Honest, objective, insane work ethic. You're a natural fit for NNI. Always have been.”

“How do you know all this? We've never even met.”

“We just need to know who you've told about this trip.”

“Nobody asks that kind of question unless they're trying to . . . contain something.”

“You're not wrong. It's still in your best interest to answer.”

“Or what? You'll kill me?”

Poole shook her head. “I can see I'm not getting through to you,” she said,

pulling a smartphone out of her suitcoat pocket. She typed a short text message, hid the phone away, and stood up, smoothing her skirt as the door opened.

A moment later, Troy Mackowiak entered. “Well, hell,” he said, stepping into the room with a sheepish look on his face.

Roland had seen double takes in his life, but he’d never *felt* one of his own; his head shook like an earthquake. “Troy?”

As Poole departed, Troy crossed over to take her chair. He extended a folded white handkerchief to Roland. “Roland Zhang. My man. I am so sorry. You’re bleeding, buddy.”

Roland accepted the cloth and pressed it to his temple. He had so many questions, but paralysis of choice tied his tongue.

“First I want to say, I came out here just as blind as you did,” Troy said. “More prepared, but just as blind.”

“I thought you came out here to crack a story.”

“I found one.”

“And?”

“Turns out I didn’t want to crack it.”

Roland waited, glaring.

Troy held up apologetic hands. “Right. Not long ago I was sitting in your chair. Facing down Kathryn, looking for the truth. And she gave it to me.”

“And?”

“What if I told you the NNI isn’t entirely neutral?”

Roland blinked. “Meaning . . .?”

“Meaning, without help our operation is unsustainable.” Troy took a deep breath. “We can’t go toe-to-toe with the corporates, not even with the donations we get. The playing board is just too tilted. NNI was going to die. Something needed to be done.”

“And what was that something?”

“We took on some investors.”

Roland bristled. “Investors. You mean corporate money.”

“It’s not like that,” Troy said quickly. “These aren’t your usual interests. These are . . . outsiders.”

“Outsiders.”

“They’re people who believe in NNI’s mission,” Troy said. “And who also happen to oppose the status quo. Which, as I think you know, is *also* unsustainable. Disastrously so.”

“What status quo? Just tell me fucking straight.”

Troy rolled his eyes, then stood up to pace as he spoke. “Come on, Roland. Predatory capitalism. Systemic inequality, debt profiteering. Bureaucratic obstructionism. Everything that’s wrong with the Western world, everything that grinds the gears to a halt. There are people who want to fight that. They’re helping us. These are the good guys.”

“And they’re, what, buying us?” Roland asked. He felt a confused mixture of anger and relief swimming around in him. Maybe his life *wasn't* in danger. But something else entirely different and just as disconcerting was happening here. “What’s in it for them?”

“NNI has credibility,” Troy said. “It’s one of the few organizations in the country that still *does*, to the wider world. It can be an instrument of change.”

We’re selling out, Roland thought. But who to, exactly? Well-meaning philanthropists? Foreign governments looking to subvert the chronic corruption of the US? Whoever they were, Roland couldn’t see these mysterious interests as anything more than twirling moustaches, the other side of a vicious coin. “What are they building out here?”

“It’s a data center,” Troy said. “To make our cash flow look legitimate. Ramp up our resources and . . . change the narrative.”

“The narrative?” Roland said. “That’s not what we do!”

“Roland, my man, you can’t change the world with the truth any more,” Troy said, sounding a little sad as he said it. “The truth doesn’t matter when you’re up against faith and gut instinct, apathy and self interest. You need to *act*. And the side of truth needs an instrument, not a bunch of powerless thought leaders filling up Facebook with pithy quotes!” Troy sat back down and leaned forward. “Listen to me. I joined NNI when it was nothing, for the exact reasons you did. I passed up a much more lucrative paycheck. I thought what we were doing mattered.”

“It does matter,” Roland said, and realized he was sweating through his shirt again. His heart was racing.

“To us, sure. In an abstract, altruistic way. But it doesn’t effect change. And without change, there’s no fucking future.”

Roland closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to calm his heartbeat. There was a rationale to Troy’s rant, but even by considering it, Roland felt the integrity at his core eroding. This was stooping to evil’s level, escalating a twisted, civil cold war. It got him thinking in terms of *sides*, and the truth shouldn’t have *sides*, the truth should just *be*.

“I know you’re with us on this,” Troy said. “Your brain, if not your heart. You’re smart enough to see it. I know it’s ugly, but somebody needs to get ugly

about this before it's too late. If it isn't already."

"It's not right."

"We need to *try*, Roland. You could be a part of it."

Roland's head was still spinning, but he tried to piece it together. "Is that why you sent me the email? To recruit me?"

"The email was a mistake," Troy said. "The email was a failsafe, my stupid heroic effort to pass the torch if I died uncovering an evil conspiracy. It went out before I could stop it. I convinced Poole you wouldn't be a problem. You're a quiet, internal guy, after all. I figured you weren't likely to raise a stink. But if you did follow me out here? Well, then, maybe you *are* one of us. Maybe you do have it in you."

"And you could also grill me to find out if I told anyone else about you," Roland said, thinking of Devon, who must be locked in another room somewhere, being interrogated.

"That too, sorry to say. Like I said, we're going to have to get ugly if we're going to accomplish anything."

Roland shook his head. "You really think you can keep this secret out here?"

"We have help in high places."

"The government?"

"Higher." Troy's eyes drifted ceiling-ward.

Roland thought of the surveillance drone. Piloted by whom? Agents of the intelligence community, or the military, working against their own government? Roland realized he wouldn't be surprised: so many calamities they had warned about had fallen on deaf ears, in recent decades.

"So, Roland," Troy said pointedly. "Did you tell anybody?"

Roland nodded. "The woman with me, Devon Easley. She's the only one."

"How well do you know her?"

"I just met her. She's with the tour. Is she hurt?"

"She's fine."

"Let me talk to her."

"I'm afraid we can't allow that."

Troy's buddy act, his posturing, it all seemed a cheap façade, and the man Roland had respected all these years no longer existed. But it wasn't just disgust souring his stomach. It was fear. How ugly would they get? If they saw his trepidation would they do something to silence him, in order to keep their operation a secret?

"Roland. You okay?"

“I’m thinking.”

“We want to trust you, man. I told them, you’re one of the good ones. You’re not going to blow the whistle. Are you?”

It tore at his heart to admit it, but he knew he had to play along somehow. He wasn’t strong enough to suffer for his ideals. Not many were, these days. “I won’t,” Roland said. “But I won’t work for you either. I just want to forget this all happened.”

“Are you sure?” Troy said. “You could do a lot of good for us from Buffalo.”

“That’s not what I’m about. That’s not me.”

“Well, then, who are you?”

Roland opened his mouth to answer, but no words came.

••••

They moved him, blindfolded and bound, through cool, silent corridors. He smelled oil, and sweat, and electricity. Even blind, he sensed a malice to the place, a discipline and a commitment just from the noises he heard and the way he was treated. This wasn’t the NNI’s team spirit and pure vision, it was something scarier and more intense, unlike anything he’d ever felt. Even if there *were* black data servers being installed here, they weren’t just for leveraging the NNI to its new clandestine mission. They were part of something bigger—and suddenly it came to him. This wasn’t a cold war. This was a revolution, a *coup*. The idea confused and excited and terrified him, because if it was true, God knew who was spearheading it, who was financing it, or what it would do to the world.

Finally the march ended, and someone fitted a filter mask over his mouth and nose; based on the familiar fit, it was his own. They marched him through some sort of airlock, then out into the briskly whipping winds of the desert. A few more steps and he was in the back of some sort of panel transport, free to remove the veil over his eyes.

Jumpseats lined the walls of the vehicle, and when he pulled off his hood, he saw Devon Easley seated across the aisle. She looked shaken, but fine. She grimaced when she saw the shiner over his eye. “They work you over?”

“No,” Roland said as the transport rolled out, moving slowly in the poor visibility. “Hit my head when I fell.”

“You all right?”

“Fine.” Roland saw the exhaustion in Devon’s eyes. “How about you? Did they interrogate you?”

“No,” Devon said. “Just penned me up and told me to keep my mouth shut, or else.” She looked genuinely upset.

“They threatened you?”

“Close enough,” Devon said. “But they’re letting us go. Whoever they are, I’m not going to fuck with them.”

Roland studied her expression, and realized now that he’d been falling for her. That’s why he’d told her everything. But now he didn’t trust her, any more than he trusted Kathryn Poole or Troy Mackowiak. If they were letting her go, she was probably working for them. She’d probably been keeping tabs on him all along, to see what he would do.

“You okay?”

Roland rubbed his eyes. “I shouldn’t have come.”

They lapsed into silence as the transport bumped along. Finally, twenty-five minutes later, the transport jerked to a halt. “Masks on!” the driver called back.

They suited up.

“I’m going to pop the hatch,” the driver continued. “Head straight out the doors, due west for two clicks. That’ll put you at your campsite. Ready?”

Devon called an affirmative, and the doors opened.

They dropped to the street. The dust storm still raged; it was like wandering into the smoky aftermath of an explosion. The transport rolled away, leaving them in the pitch black of the night, walking blindly in the direction they’d been pointed. Devon locked her arm through Roland’s. “Stay close,” she said. “Hate to lose someone on my last tour.”

She was still selling it, Roland thought, uncertain. Half of him wanted to cling to her, while the other planned to tear loose and run for his life.

They strode against the wind, and he kept his eyes wide for signs of familiar territory, a campfire, a tent, something to guide them in. But after a few minutes, doubt set in. Were they even pointed in the right direction? He’d had no bearings at the construction site, no idea which direction they’d been traveling. Maybe they’d been ditched in the middle of nowhere, sent to wander off to their deaths. Maybe a sniper rifle was trained on them both, two quick bullets to erase the problem. If Poole and Troy were serious about the war they were joining, letting Roland and Devon walk away didn’t fit with their strategy. They would have to be more ruthless than that to win.

“You think they put us in the right place?” Devon asked. “They wiped all my software.”

“Me too,” Roland said, and suddenly he was trusting her again. “I don’t know,

Devon.”

“What do we do?”

Roland grasped her arm tighter. He wished he had an answer. “Keep going,” he said, and took another blind step.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher East is a writer, editor, reviewer, and avid consumer of science fiction, fantasy, and spy fiction. His stories have been published in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Cosmos*, *Interzone*, *Talebones*, *The Third Alternative*, and a number of other speculative fiction publications. He's attended the Clarion and Taos Toolbox writing workshops, and served for several years as the fiction editor for the futurism, science, and technology blog *Futurismic*. He blogs extensively about writing, fiction, film, television, music, comics, and more at www.christopher-east.com. Currently he lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works for an occupational and environmental health and safety consultancy.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

Swing Time

Carrie Vaughn | 6110 words

He emerged suddenly from behind a potted shrub. Taking Madeline's hand, he shouldered her bewildered former partner out of the way and turned her toward the hall where couples gathered for the next figure.

"Ned, fancy meeting you here." Madeline deftly shifted so that her voluminous skirts were not trod upon.

"Fancy? You're pleased to see me then?" he said, smiling his insufferably ironic smile.

"Amused is more accurate. You always amuse me."

"How long has it been? Two, three hundred years? That volta in Florence, wasn't it?"

"Si, signor. But only two weeks subjective."

"Ah yes." He leaned close, to converse without being overheard. "I've been meaning to ask you: Have you noticed anything strange on your last few expeditions?"

"Strange?"

"Any doorways you expected to be there not opening. Anyone following you and the like?"

"Just you, Ned."

He chuckled flatly.

The orchestra's strings played the opening strains of a Mozart piece. She curtseyed—low enough to allure, but not so low as to unnecessarily expose décolletage. Give a hint, not the secret. Lower the gaze for a demure moment only. Smile, tempt. Ned bowed, a gesture as practiced as hers. Clothed in white silk stockings and velvet breeches, one leg straightened as the other leg stepped back. He made a precise turn of his hand and never broke eye contact.

They raised their arms—their hands never quite touched—and began to dance. Elegant steps made graceful turns, a leisurely pace allowed her to study him. He wore dark green velvet trimmed with white and gold, sea spray of lace at the cuffs and collar. He wore a young man's short wig powdered to perfection.

"I know why you're here," he said, when they stepped close enough for conversation. "You're after Lady Petulant's diamond brooch."

"That would be telling."

"I'll bet you I take it first."

“I’ll make that bet.”

“And whoever wins—”

Opening her fan with a jerk of her wrist, she looked over her shoulder. “Gets the diamond brooch.”

The figure of the dance wheeled her away and gave her to another partner, an old man whose wig was slipping over one ear. She curtsied, kept one eye on Lady Petulant, holding court over a tray of bonbons and a rat-like lap dog, and the other on Ned.

With a few measures of dancing, a charge of power crept into Madeline’s bones, enough energy to take her anywhere: London 1590. New York 1950. There was power in dancing.

The song drew to a close. Madeline begged off the next, fanning herself and complaining of the heat. Drifting off in a rustle of satin, she moved to the empty chair near Lady Petulant.

“Is this seat taken?”

“Not at all,” the lady said. The diamond, large as a walnut, glittered against the peach-colored satin of her bodice.

“Lovely evening, isn’t it?”

“Quite.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Madeline engaged in harmless conversation, insinuating herself into Lady Petulant’s good graces. The lady was a widow, rich but no longer young. White powder caked the wrinkles of her face. Her fortune was entailed, bestowed upon her heirs and not a second husband, so no suitors paid her court. She was starved for attention.

So when Madeline stopped to chat with her, she was cheerful. When Ned appeared and gave greeting, she was ecstatic.

“I do believe I’ve found the ideal treat for your little dear,” he said, kneeling before her and offering a bite-sized pastry to the dog.

“Why, how thoughtful! Isn’t he a thoughtful gentleman, Frufru darling? Say thank you.” She lifted the creature’s paw and shook it at Ned. “You are too kind!”

Madeline glared at Ned, who winked back.

A servant passed with a silver tray of sweets. When he bowed to offer her one, she took the whole tray. “Marzipan, Lady Petulant?” she said, presenting the tray.

“No thank you, dear. Sticks to my teeth dreadfully.”

“Sherry, Lady Petulant?” Ned put forward a crystal glass which he’d got from God knew where.

“Thank you, that would be lovely.” Lady Petulant took the glass and sipped.

“I’m very sorry, Miss Madeline, but I don’t seem to have an extra glass to offer you.”

“That’s quite all right, sir. I’ve always found sherry to be rather too sweet. Unpalatable, really.”

“Is that so?”

“Hm.” She fanned.

And so it went, until the orchestra roused them with another chord. Lady Petulant gestured a gloved hand toward the open floor.

“You young people should dance. You make such a fine couple.”

“Pardon me?” Ned said.

Madeline fanned faster. “I couldn’t, really.”

“Nonsense. You two obviously know each other quite well. It would please me to watch you dance.”

Madeline’s gaze met Ned’s. She stared in silence, her wit failing her. She didn’t need another dance this evening, and she most certainly did not want to dance with him again.

Giving a little smile that supplanted the stricken look in his eyes, he stood and offered his hand. “I’m game. My lady?”

He’d thought of a plan, obviously. And if he drew her away from Lady Petulant—she would not give up that ground.

The tray of marzipan sat at the very edge of the table between their chairs. As she prepared to stand, she lifted her hand from the arm of her chair, gave her fan a downward flick—and the tray flipped. Miniature daisies and roses shaped in marzipan flew around them. Madeline shrieked, Lady Petulant gasped, the dog barked. Ned took a step back.

A ruckus of servants descended on them. As Madeline turned to avoid them, the dog jumped from Lady Petulant’s lap—for a brief moment, its neck seemed to grow to a foot long—and bit Madeline’s wrist. A spot of red welled through her white glove.

“Ow!” This shriek was genuine.

“Frufruf!” Lady Petulant collected the creature and hugged it to her breast. “How very naughty of you, Frufruf darling. My dear, are you all right?”

She rubbed her wrist. The blood stain didn’t grow any larger. It was just a scratch. It didn’t even hurt. “I’m—I—” Then again, if she played this right . . .

“I—oh my, I do believe I feel faint.” She put her hand to her neck and willed her face to blush. “Oh!”

She fell on Lady Petulant. With any luck, she crushed Frufruf beneath her

petticoats. Servants convulsed in a single panicked unit, onlookers gasped, even Ned was there, murmuring and patting her cheek with a cool hand.

Lady Petulant wailed that the poor girl was about to die on top of her. Pressed up against the good lady, Madeline took the opportunity to reach for the brooch. She could slip it off and no one would notice—

The brooch was already gone.

She did not have to feign a stunned limpness when a pair of gallant gentlemen lifted her and carried her to a chaise near a window. Ned was nowhere to be seen. Vials of smelling salts were thrust at her, lavender water sprinkled at her.

Someone was wrapping her wrist—still gloved—in a bandage, and someone who looked like a doctor—good God, was the man wielding a razor?—approached.

She shoved away her devoted caretakers and tore off the bandage. “Please, give me air! I’ve recovered my senses. No, really, I have. If-you-please, sir!”

As if nothing had happened, she stood, straightened her bodice over her corset, smoothed her skirts, and opened her fan with a snap.

“I thank you for your attention, but I am quite recovered. Goodbye.”

She marched off in search of Ned.

He was waiting for her toward the back of the hall, a fox’s sly grin on his face. Before she came too close, he turned his cupped hand, showing her a walnut-sized diamond that flashed against the green velvet of his coat.

Turning, he stepped sideways behind the same potted fern where he had ambushed her.

He disappeared utterly.

“Damn him!” Her skirts rustled when she stamped her foot.

Ignoring concerned onlookers and Lady Petulant’s cries after her welfare, she cut across the hall to the glass doors opening to the courtyard behind the hall, and across the courtyard to a hideously baroque statue of Cupid trailing roses off its limbs. She stopped and took a breath, trying to regain her composure. No good brooding now. It was over and done. There would be other times and places to get back at him. Stepping through required calm.

A handful of doorways collected here in this hidden corner of the garden. One led to an alley in Prague 1600; tilting her head one way, she could just make out a dirty cobbled street and the bricks of a Renaissance façade. Another led to a space under a pier in Key West 1931. Yet another led home.

She danced for this moment; this moment existed because she danced.

Behind the statue, Madeline turned her head, narrowed her eyes a certain practiced way, and the world shifted. Just a bit. She put out her hand to touch the

crack that formed a line in the air. Confirming its existence, she stepped sideways and through the doorway, back to her room.

Her room: Sealed in the back of a warehouse, it had no windows or doors. In it, she stored the plunder taken from a thousand years of history—what plunder she could carry, at least: Austrian crystal, Chinese porcelain, Aztec gold, and a walk-in closet filled with costumes spanning millennia.

She dropped her fan, pulled the pins out of her wig, unfastened her dress and unhooked her corset. Now that she could breathe, she paced and fumed at Ned properly.

She really ought to go someplace with a beach next time. Hawaii 1980, perhaps. Definitely someplace without corsets. Someplace like—

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The band played Glenn Miller from a gymnasium stage with a USO banner draped overhead. There must have been a couple hundred G.I.s drinking punch, crowding along the walls, or dancing with a couple hundred local girls wearing bright dresses and big grins. Madeline only had to wait a moment before a G.I. in dress greens swept her up and spun her into the mob.

Of all periods of history, of all forms of dance, this was her favorite. Such exuberance, such abandon in a generation that saw the world change before its eyes. No ultra-precise curtseys and bows here.

Her soldier lifted her, she kicked her feet to the air and he brought her down, swung her to one side, to the other, and set her on the floor at last to Lindy hop and catch her breath. Her red skirt caught around her knees, and sweat matted her hair to her forehead.

Her partner was a good-looking kid, probably nineteen or twenty, clean-faced and bright-eyed. Stuck in time, stuck with his fate—a ditch in France, most likely. Like a lamb to slaughter. It was like dancing a minuet in Paris in 1789, staring at a young nobleman's neck and thinking, you poor chump.

She could try to warn him, but it wouldn't change anything.

The kid swung her out, released her and she spun. The world went by in a haze and miraculously she didn't collide with anyone.

When a hand grabbed hers, she stopped and found herself pulled into an embrace. Arm in arm, body to body, with Ned. Wearing green again. Arrogant as ever, he'd put captain bars on his uniform. He held her close, his hand pressed against the small of her back, and two-stepped her in place, hemmed in by the

crowd. She couldn't break away.

"Dance with me, honey. I ship out tomorrow and may be dead next week."

"Not likely, Ned. Are you following me?"

"Now how would I manage that? I don't even know when you live. So, what are you here for, the war bonds cash box?"

"Maybe I just like the music."

As they fell into a rhythm, she relaxed in his grip. A dance was a dance after all, and if nothing else he was a good dancer.

"I didn't thank you for helping me with Lady Petulant. Great distraction. We should be a team. We both have to dance to do what we do—it's a perfect match."

"I work alone."

"You might think about it."

"No. I tried working with someone once. His catalyst for stepping through was fighting. He liked to loot battlefields. All our times dancing ended in brawls."

"What happened to him?"

"Somme 1916. He stayed a bit too long at that one."

"Ah. I met a woman once whose catalyst was biting the heads off rats."

"You're joking! How on Earth did she figure that out?"

"One shudders to think."

The song ended, a slow one began, and a hundred couples locked together.

"So, how did you find me?" she asked.

"I know where you like to go."

She frowned and looked aside, across his shoulder to a young couple clinging desperately to one another as they swayed in place.

"Tell me Ned, what were you before you learned to step through? Were you always a thief?"

"Yes. A highwayman and a rogue from the start. You?"

"I was a good girl."

"So what changed?"

"The cops can't catch me when I step through."

"That doesn't answer my question. If you were a good girl, why do you use stepping through to rob widows, and not to do good? Don't tell me you've never tried changing anything. Find a door to the Ford Theater and take John Wilkes Booth's gun."

"It never works. You know that."

"But history doesn't notice when an old woman's diamond disappears. So—what do you use the money you steal for? Do you give it to the war effort? The

Red Cross? The Catholic Church? Do you have a poor family stashed away somewhere that you play fairy godmother to?"

She tried to pull away, but the beat of the music and the steps of the dance carried her on.

The song changed to something relentless and manic. She tried to break out of his grasp, to spin and hop like everyone else was doing, but he tightened his grip and kept her cheek to cheek.

"You don't do any of those things," she said.

"How do you know?"

He was right, of course. She only had his word for it when he said he was a rogue.

"What are you trying to say?"

He brought his lips close to her ear and purred. "You were never a good girl, Madeline."

She slapped him, a nice crack across the cheek. He seemed genuinely stunned—he stopped cold in the middle of the dance and touched his face. A few bystanders laughed. Madeline turned, shoving her way off the dance floor, dodging feet and elbows.

She went all the way to the front doors before looking back. Ned wasn't following her. She couldn't see him at all, through the mob.

In the women's room she found her doorway to Madrid 1880 where she'd stashed a gown and danced flamenco, then to a taverna in Havana 1902, and from there to her room. He wouldn't possibly be able to follow that path.

• • • •

Unbelievable, how out of a few thousand years of history available to them and countless millions of locations around the world, they kept running into each other.

Ned wore black. He had to, really, because they were at the dawn of the age of the tuxedo, and all the men wore black suits: black pressed trousers, jackets with tails, waistcoats, white cravats. Madeline rather liked the trend, because the women, in a hundred shades of rippling silk and shining jewels, glittered against the monotone backdrop.

Gowns here didn't require the elaborate architecture they had during the previous three centuries. She wore a corset, but her skirt was not so wide as to prevent walking through doorways. The fabric, pleated and gathered in back,

draped around her in slimming lines. She glided, tall and elegant as like a Greek statue.

He hadn't seen her yet. For once, she had the advantage. She watched behind the shelter of a neoclassical pillar. He moved like he'd been born to this dance. Perhaps he had. Every step made with confidence, he and his partner might have been the same unit as they turned, stepped, turned, not looking where they were going yet never missing a step. It always amazed her, how a hundred couples could circle a crowded ballroom like this and never collide.

He was smiling, his gaze locked on his partner's the whole time. For a moment, Madeline wished she were dancing with him. Passing time had cooled her temper.

She'd already got what she came for, a few bits of original Tiffany jewelry. After a dance or two, she could open a door and leave. In a room this large, she could dance a turn and Ned would never have to know she'd been here.

But she waited until his steps brought him close to her. She moved into view, caught his gaze and smiled. He stumbled on the parquet.

He managed to recover without falling and without losing too much of his natural grace. "Madeline! I didn't see you."

"I know."

He abandoned his partner—turned his back on her and went straight to Madeline. The woman glared after him with a mortally offended expression that Ned didn't seem to notice.

"Been a while, eh?"

"Only a month, subjective."

"So—what brings you here?"

"That's my secret. I've learned my lesson about telling you anything. You?"

He looked around, surveying the ballroom, the orchestra on the stage, the swirl of couples dancing a pattern like an eddy in a stream. Each couple was independent, but all of them together moved as one entity, as if choreographed.

"Strauss," he said at last. "Will you dance with me, Miss Madeline?"

He offered his hand, and she placed hers in it. They joined the pattern.

"Have you forgiven me for that comment from last time?"

"No," Madeline said with a smile. "I'm waiting for the chance to return the favor."

Step two three turn two three—

"Do you believe in fate?" Ned said.

"Fate? I suppose I have to, considering some of the things I've seen. Why do

you ask?”

“It’s a wonderful thing, really. You see, we never should have met. I should have died before you were born—or vice versa, since I still don’t know when you’re from. But here we are.”

“That’s fate? I thought you were following me.”

“Ah yes.”

Madeline tilted her head back. Crystal chandeliers sparkled overhead, turning, turning. Ned didn’t take his eyes off her.

“Have you thought of why I might follow you?” he said.

“To reap the benefits of my hard work. I do the research and case the site, and you arrive to take the prize. It’s all very neat and I’d like you to stop.”

“I can’t do that, Madeline.”

“Why not? Isn’t there enough history for you to find your own hunting grounds without taking mine?”

“Because that isn’t the reason I’m following you. At least not anymore.” He paused. He wasn’t smiling, he wasn’t joking. “I think I’m in love with you.”

Her feet kept doing what they were supposed to do. The music kept them moving, which was good, because her mind froze. “No,” she murmured.

“Will you give me a chance? A chance to show you?”

It was a trick. A new way to make a fool of her, and it was cruel. But she had never seen him so serious. His brow took on furrows.

She stopped dancing, and he had to stop with her, but he wouldn’t let go. There, stalled in the middle of the ballroom floor, the dance turned to chaos around them.

“No. I can’t love you back, Ned. We’re too much alike.”

For a long moment, a gentle strain of music, he studied her. His expression turned drawn and sad.

“Be careful, Madeline. Watch your back.” He kissed her hand, a gentle press of lips against her curled fingers, then let it go and walked off the dance floor, shouldering around couples as they passed.

He left her alone, lost, in the middle of the floor. She touched her hand where he had kissed it.

“Ned!” she called, the sound barely audible over the orchestra. “Ned!”

He didn’t turn around.

The song ended.

She left the floor, hitched up her skirt and ran everywhere, looking behind every door and every potted fern. But he was gone.

If Ned followed her, it stood to reason others could as well.

Her room had been trashed. The mirror over the vanity was shattered, chairs smashed, a dresser toppled. Powdered cosmetics dusted the wreckage. The wardrobe was thrown open, gowns and fabric torn and strewn like streamers over the furniture.

She didn't have windows or doors precisely to keep this sort of thing from happening. There was only one way into the room—through a sideways door, and only if one knew just the right way to look through it. So how—

Someone grabbed her in a bear hug. Another figure appeared from behind her and pointed a bizarre vice-grip and hairbrush-looking tool at her in the unmistakable stance of holding a weapon. A third moved into view.

She squirmed in the grasp of the first, but he was at least a foot taller than she and he quickly worked to secure bindings around her arms and hands that left her immobile. All wore black militaristic suits, with goggles and metallic breathing masks hiding their features.

The third spoke, a male voice echoing mechanically through the mask. “Under Temporal Transit Authority Code forty-four A dash nine, I hereby take you into custody and charge you—”

“The what?” Madeline said with a gasp. Her captor wrenched her shoulders back. Any struggle she made now was merely out of principle. “Temporal Transit Authority? I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“You’ve never stepped through to the twenty-second century, then.”

“No.” Traveling to one’s own future was tough—there was no record to study, no way to know what to expect. She’d had enough trouble with her past, she never expected the future to come back to haunt her.

“I hereby take you into custody and charge you with unregulated transportation along the recognized timeline, grand theft along the recognized timeline, historic fraud—”

“You can’t be serious—”

He held up a device, something like an electric razor with a glowing wand at one end and flashing lights at the other. He pressed a button and drew a line in the air. The line glowed, hanging in midair. He pressed another button, the line widened into a plane, a doorway through which a dim scene showed: pale tiled walls and steel tables.

He opened a door, he stepped through, and all he needed to do was push a

button.

In that stunned moment, the two flunkies picked her up and carried her through.

They entered a hospital room and unloaded her onto a gurney. More figures appeared, doctors hiding behind medical scrubs, cloth masks, and clinical gazes. With practiced ease they strapped her face-down, wrists and legs bound with padded restraints. When she tried to struggle, a half-dozen hands pressed her into the thin mattress. Her ice-blue skirt was hitched up around her knees, wrinkling horribly.

“Don’t I get a lawyer? A phone call? Something?” She didn’t even know where or when she was. Who would she call?

A doctor spoke to the thug in charge. “Her catalyst?”

“Dancing.”

“I know just the thing. Nurse, prep a local anesthetic.”

Madeline tensed against her bindings. “What are you doing? What are you doing to me?”

“Don’t worry, we can reverse the procedure. If you’re found innocent at the trial.”

She lost track of how many people were in the room. A couple of the thugs, a couple of people in white who must have been nurses or orderlies. A couple who looked like doctors. Someone unbuttoned her shoes. Her silk stockings ripped.

Needle-pricks stabbed each foot, then pins of sleep traveled up her legs. She screamed. It was the only thing she could do. A hand pushed her face into the mattress. Her legs went numb up to her knees. She managed to turn her face, and through the awkward, foreshortened perspective she saw them make incisions above her heels, reach a thin scalpel into the wounds, and cut the Achilles’ tendons. There was no pain, but she felt the tissues snap inside her calves.

She screamed until her lungs hurt, until she passed out.

••••

She awoke in a whitewashed cell, lying on a cot that was the room’s only furnishing. There was a door without a handle. She was no longer tied up, but both her ankles were neatly bandaged, and she couldn’t move her legs.

Gingerly sitting up, she unfastened the bodice of her gown, then released the first few hooks of her corset. She took a deep breath, arching her back. Her ribs and breasts were bruised from sleeping in the thing. Not to mention the

manhandling she'd received.

She didn't want to think about her legs.

Curling up on her side, she hugged her knees and cried.

She fell asleep, arms curled around her head. The light, a pale fluorescent filtering through a ceiling tile, stayed on. Her growling stomach told her that time passed. Once, the door opened and an orderly brought in a tray of food, leaving it on the floor by the bed. She didn't eat. Another time, a female orderly brought in a contraption, a toilet seat and bedpan on wheels, and offered to help her use it. She screamed, batted and clawed at the woman until she left.

She pulled apart her elegant, piled coif—tangled now—and threw hairpins across the room.

When the door opened again, she had a few pins left to hurl at whomever entered. But it wasn't an orderly, a doctor, or a thug.

It was Ned, still in his tails and cravat.

He closed the door to the thinnest crack and waited a moment, listening. Madeline clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out to him.

Apparently satisfied, Ned came to the bed, knelt on the floor, and gathered her in an embrace.

"You look dreadful," he said gently, holding her tightly.

She sobbed on his shoulder. "They cut my tendons, Ned. They cut my legs."

"They're bastards, Madeline," he muttered, between meaningless noises of comfort.

Clutching the fabric of his jacket, she pushed him away suddenly. "Did they get you too? What did they do to you?" She looked him over, touched his face—nothing seemed wrong. "How did you get here?"

He gave her a lopsided smile. "I used to be one of the bastards."

She edged away, pushing herself as far to the wall as she could. Ned, with his uncanny ability to follow her where and whenever she went. He didn't move, didn't try to stop her or grapple with her. She half expected him to.

"Used to be," she said. "Not still?"

"No. It began as a research project, to study what people like me—like us—can do, and what that meant about the nature of space and time. But there were other interests at work. They developed artificial methods of finding doorways and stepping through. They don't need us anymore and hate competition. The Temporal Transit Authority was set up to establish a monopoly over the whole business."

"And you—just left? Or did you lead them to me?"

“Please, Madeline. I’m searching for a bit of redemption here. I followed you. I couldn’t stop following you. I knew they were looking for you. I found your place right after they did. I wish—I should have told you. Warned you a little better than I did.”

“Why didn’t you?” she said, her voice thin and desperate.

“I didn’t think you’d believe me. You’ve never trusted me. I’m sorry.”

No, she thought, remembering that last waltz, the music and his sad face and the way he disappeared. *I’m sorry*.

“You were following me all along. We didn’t meet by chance.”

“Oh no. It was chance. Fate. I didn’t know about you, wasn’t looking for you. But when I met you, I knew the Authority would find you sooner or later. I didn’t want them to find you.”

“But they did.”

“Once again, I apologize for that. Now, we’re getting out of here.”

He started to pick her up, moving one arm to her legs and the other to her shoulders. She leaned away, pressing herself against the wall in an effort to put more distance between them.

“Please trust me,” he said.

Why should she believe anything he said? She didn’t know anything about him. Except that he was a marvelous dancer. And she needed to dance.

She put her arms around his neck and let him lift her.

“Come on, then.” He picked her up, cradling her in his arms. She clung to him. “Get the door, would you?”

She pulled the door open. He looked out. The corridor was empty. Softly, he made his way down the hall.

Then Ned froze. Voices echoed ahead of them, moving closer. Without a word, he turned and walked the other direction. If he had been able to run, he would have rounded the next corner before the owners of the voices saw him. But he held her, and he couldn’t do more than walk carefully.

Footsteps sounded behind him. She looked over his shoulder and saw a doctor flanked by a couple of orderlies enter the corridor.

“Hey! Stop there!” The doctor pointed and started running.

“All these bloody doors lock on the outside,” Ned muttered. “Here, open that one.”

She stared. The door had no handle, no visible hinges or latches. Ned hissed a breath of frustration and bumped a red light panel on the wall with his elbow. The door popped in with a little gasp of hydraulics.

He pushed through into what turned out to be a supply closet, about ten foot square, filled with shelves and boxes, and barely enough room to turn around. He set her on the floor and began pushing plastic tubs at the door. He soon had enough of a blockade to stop their pursuers from shoving through right away. He kept piling, though, while the people outside pounded on the door and shouted.

Madeline cowered on the floor, her legs stuck out awkwardly. “You can’t dance for both of us, and I’m too big for you to carry me through.”

“Yes.”

“You shouldn’t have come. Now you’re caught too.”

“But I’m with you,” he said, turning to her with the brightest, most sincere smile she had ever seen. “It makes all the difference.” He went back to throwing boxes on the stack.

She caught her breath and wondered what she’d have to do to see that smile again.

“Help me stand.” She hooked her fingers on a shelving post as far above her as she could reach and pulled. Grunting, she shifted her weight to try and get her feet under her.

“Madeline, good god, what are you doing?”

“Standing. Help me.”

He went to her and pulled her arm over his shoulders, reaching his own arm around her waist. Slowly, he raised her. She straightened her legs, and her feet stayed where she put them.

There. She was standing. She clenched her jaw. Her calves were exploding with pain.

“Do you think there’s a door in here?” she said, her voice tight.

“There’re doors everywhere. But you can’t—”

“We have to.”

“But—”

“I can. Help me.”

He sighed, adjusting his grip so he supported her more firmly. “Right. What should we dance?”

She took a breath, cleared her mind so she could think of a song. She couldn’t even tap her toe to keep a beat. She began humming. The song sounded out of tune and hopeless in her ears.

“Ravel. ‘Pavane for a Dead Princess,’” Ned said. “Come on, dear, you’re not done yet. One and two and—”

She held her breath and moved her right leg. It did move, the foot dragging,

and she leaned heavily on Ned because she didn't dare put any weight on it. Then the left foot. She whimpered a little. Ned was right behind her, stepping with her.

The pavane had the simplest steps she could think of. At its most basic, it was little more than walking very slowly—perfect for a crippled dancer. It was also one of the most graceful, stately, elegant dances ever invented. Not this time. She couldn't trust her legs. She dragged them forward and hoped they went where they needed to be. Ned wasn't so much dancing with her as lurching, ensuring she stayed upright.

There was a kind of power, even in this: bodies moving in desperation.

She tried to keep humming, but her voice jerked, pain-filled, at every step. They hummed together, his voice steadying her as his body did.

Then came a turn. She attempted it—a dance was a dance, after all. Put the left foot a little to the side, step out—

Her leg collapsed. She cried out, cutting the sound off mid-breath. Ned caught her around the waist and leaned her against the shelving. This gave her something to sit on, a little support.

Without missing a beat, he took her hand and stepped a half-circle around her. He held her hand lightly, elevated somewhat, and tucked his other hand behind his back. Perfect form.

“This just doesn't feel right if I'm not wearing a ruff,” he said, donning a pompous, aristocratic accent.

Hiccupping around stifled tears, she giggled. “But I like being able to see your neck. It's a handsome neck.”

“Right, onto the age of disco then.”

The banging on the door was loud, insistent, like they'd started using a battering ram, and provided something of a beat. The barricade began to tumble.

“And so we finish.” He bowed deeply.

She started to dip into a curtsy—just the tiniest of curtsies—but Ned caught her and lifted her.

“I think we're ready.”

She narrowed her eyes and looked a little bit sideways.

Space and time made patterns, the architecture of the universe, and the lines crossed everywhere, cutting through the very air. Sometimes, someone had a talent that let them see the lines and use them.

“There,” Ned said. “That one. A couple of disheveled Edwardians won't look so out of place there. Do you see it?”

“Yes,” she said, relieved. A glowing line cut before them, and if they stepped a

little bit sideways—

She put out her hand and opened the door so they could step through together.

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Lady Petulant's diamond paid for reconstructive surgery at the best unregistered clinic in Tokyo 2028. Madeline walked out the door and into the alley, where Ned was waiting for her. Laughing, she jumped at him and swung him around in a couple of steps of a haphazard polka.

"Glad to see you're feeling better," he said. And there was that smile again.

"Polycarbon filament tissue replacement. I have the strongest tendons in the world now."

They walked out to the street—searching the crowd of pedestrians, always looking over their shoulders.

"Where would you like to go?" he said.

"I don't know. It's not so easy to pick, now that we're fugitives. Those guys could be anywhere."

"But we have lots of places to hide. We just have to keep moving."

They walked for a time along a chaotic street, nothing like a ballroom, the noises nothing like music. The Transit Authority people knew they had to dance; if they were really going to hide, it would be in places like this, where dancing was next to impossible.

But they couldn't do that, could they?

Finally, Ned said, "We could go watch Rome burn. And fiddle."

"Hm. I'd like to find a door to the Glen Island Casino. 1939."

"Glenn Miller played there, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"We could find one, I think."

"If we have to keep moving anyway, we'll hit on it eventually."

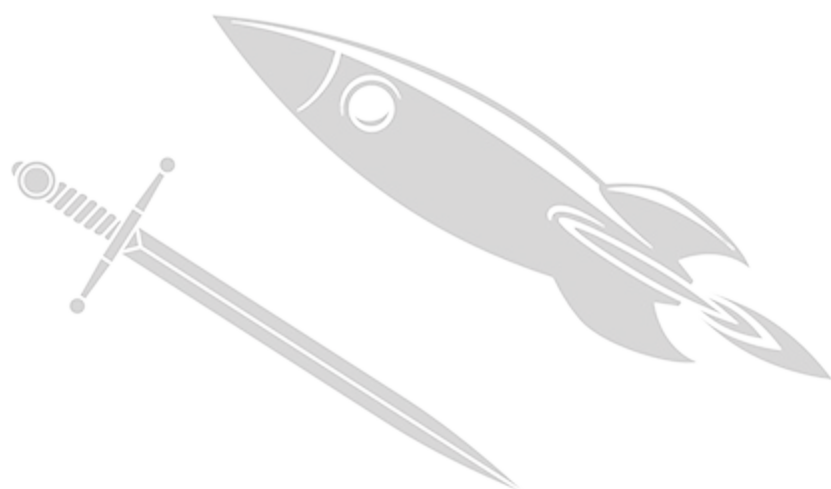
He took her hand, pulled her close and pressed his other hand against the small of her back. Ignoring the tuneless crowd, he danced with her.

"Lead on, my dear."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Vaughn is the bestselling author of the Kitty Norville series, about a werewolf who hosts a talk radio advice show. Her newest novel is a planetary adventure, *Martians Abroad*. *Bannerless*, a post-apocalyptic murder mystery, will be released by John Joseph Adams Books in July 2017. Her short fiction has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, from *Lightspeed* to *Tor.com* and George R.R. Martin's *Wild Cards* series. She lives in Colorado with a fluffy attack dog. Learn more at carrievaughn.com.

FANTASY



East of Eden and Just a Bit South

Ken Scholes | 4040 words

I was in line at the supermarket, fixing to buy me some beer, when I decided to tell my story. I'd just seen the headlines on the papers saying JFK had been successfully cloned by alien tax professionals and Elvis was living his life as a woman named Loretta Stills in New Jersey. Way I figure, a bit more truth can't hurt:

My name is Cain. The Good Book is flat-out wrong about me.

Most folks ask two questions about me. They want to know why I killed my brother. They think it was about sacrificing unto the Lord and such. My brother, Abel, with sheep; me with vegetables. Fact is, the Lord Almighty His Own Self is a meat *and* greens man. I should know. I had supper with him often.

No, that is not how it happened at all. And furthermore, I did not kill my brother. Not exactly anyways.

And the second question: Where did I find my wife?

Now I'm gonna tell you.

It started with supper, of course.

Ma and Pa were bitching about the good old days when the Lord banged on the trailer door. Yes, we lived in a trailer. Matter of fact, before the Big Flood, we *all* lived in trailers. The whole world was a bit like some parts of Mississippi.

"What's for supper?" the Lord His Own Self asked and then sneezed mightily.

"Meat," said Abel.

"Greens," said I.

"Beer," said Pa.

"Not you again," said Ma. She didn't care much for the Lord in those days on account of her menstruation and childbearing.

Me and Abel set to gathering up and putting the cats out what with the Lord being allergic and all. Yes, the Lord God is allergic to cats. Possums, kangaroos, and armadillos, too, if you must know.

Pa handed the Lord a beer. He cracked it and sucked down some suds. He sighed contentedly.

"Sure is hot," he said.

"Yep." Pa gave Ma a hard look and she set another place at the table. We all sat down. The Lord sneezed again.

We ate quiet, me and Abel, listening to the grown-ups talk. I was sixteen or so

then; my baby brother was fourteen, I think, though we never put much truck in age back then.

The Lord helped himself to more meat and greens and smacked his lips. Ma glared. Pa just sat looking sorry. Then, the Lord spoke.

“You two need to get busy.” He put down his fork for a moment to look at Ma and Pa.

“We’re plenty busy *now*,” Pa said. “What with that damn snake and you evicting us.”

“That’s not the kind of busy I mean. Babies. That’s what I mean.”

Ma looked perturbed. Pa looked hopeful. The Lord continued. “This whole world’s waiting on you two. Room for a whole lot of trailers, way I see it.”

Ma mumbled something, her face a bit pink.

“Now, I know,” the Lord said in His Most Understanding Voice, “That this is not a simple task. But I reckon a few more ought to do it.”

Ma had enough. “A few more?” Her voice rose the same way it did when Pa went past his nightly six pack. “A few *more*? I think not.”

The Lord got real quiet and just watched.

“It mightn’t be so terrible bad,” Pa said. “We’d have more help around here.”

She shook her head. “I think not.”

Me and Abel, we saw the storm brewing. I could see in his eyes that he was thinking the same thing: Time to go outside and throw rocks at shit.

“But,” Pa said and then everything else got lost as Ma banged her glass on the table, spilling Yoo-hoo every place. Yes, we had Yoo-hoo back in those days.

“I,” she said in her most serious voice, “Think not.”

“But what about your boys?” The Lord pointed to us each. “Fine, strong boys. Almost men. They’re gonna need wives soon so as they can do their part.”

Ma’s voice became very cultured all of a sudden. “So you are suggesting that I have more babies so my boys can marry up with their sisters?”

The Lord shrugged. “Ain’t no law against it. Yet.”

My stomach hurt from this. Abel looked like he was going to throw up all that good meat and greens right there in the Presence of the Lord Most High. Part of me wanted to run away. Another part was curious.

But the decision was made for us. “Why don’t you two boys go throw rocks at shit or something,” Pa said. So we hightailed it out of there.

Abel looked squeamishly at me while we threw rocks. “You reckon he really means it? That bit about sisters and babies?”

“I reckon he does,” I said, lobbing a rock at a beer can on the fence post. I

knocked it down with ease.

“Gross.” Abel set the can back up.

“Yep.”

He hucked his rock, missing by a long shot. “That dog won’t hunt,” he said. “That dog won’t hunt for a damn sight.”

So we decided to take matters into our own hands.

••••

Boys is curious. They were then, they are now. I can’t count how many times we asked about stuff. All the way back, I remember pointing to my belly button and then pointing to where Pa’s should’ve been. Sometimes, if he’d past his nightly six pack, he’d talk about how it used to be.

One night when we were very young, he even talked about how he met Mama. “I just went to sleep,” he’d say. “Woke up and I was married.” Then he’d lean in, looking around to make sure Ma wasn’t near. “Stay awake, boys. Stay awake.”

Of course, he had a big scar when he woke up, too, but he didn’t know exactly why, on account of him being asleep when it happened.

Me and Abel, we started to thinking about this. Seemed a nap and a scar weren’t near so bad as copulating with our yet-to-be-born sisters.

But we didn’t know where to start. We *did* have some idea as to who we could ask. But that was tricky.

In the end, near as we could figure, all we needed was a goat’s head, a fat dead rat, and a six pack.

We headed west and just a bit north. Most of you all know that the Lord put an angel and a big fiery sword in the way of the Garden. What you most likely didn’t know was that the angel’s name was Bubba and he was bad-ass.

He was also dumb as wood.

He was stretched out napping in the sun when we got to him.

“Hey fellas,” he said with a yawn. It was a powerful hot day.

“Hey Bubba,” we both said. Then we offered him the six pack. He grinned.

Then we commenced to kicking that goat’s head around while Bubba drank beer.

Every so often, Abel would kick the head up and over Bubba and it would land in the Garden.

Bubba’d go fetch it for us.

After a while, though, Bubba got tired of chasing the goat’s head. Finally, he

waved to us. "Get it your own damn self. Just mind the sword."

So we did. We made a great show of looking about for the head, all the while watching Bubba, who settled back down to snoring.

Now that fiery sword was big and noisy. It whistled and whizzed about but mostly stayed more to the middle of the Garden. We knew what we wanted wouldn't be there.

We spent all morning turning over rocks and talking to every snake we found. Mostly, they just hissed at us.

Then, just as we were like to give up, we found a big one. It was all orange and yellow and pink and blue and it had little stubs where it used to have feet. It lay under a big rock . . . one that took both of us to roll.

"Hiss," the snake said in a bored voice.

"Howdy," Abel said.

"Hello," I said.

"Hiss." It moved away, looking unhappy with us disturbing its rock and its rest.

"We came to talk to you." Abel had a way with words, so I let him do the talking.

"Snakes don't talk," it said.

"You just did."

I'd never seen a snake shrug before, but this one did. "Hiss."

"We need your help," Abel said. "The Lord God His Own Self wants us to mate with our sisters and fill the world with single wide trailers."

"Doesn't sound like my problem. Besides, I like trailers. They're nice for sleeping under."

"We don't mind that bit. It's the sister bit," I said.

"We need girls," Abel said. "Ones we ain't related to."

"I don't make girls. I just get them to eat stuff." The snake slithered towards another rock. "You boys mind that sword, you hear?"

Here is where Abel pulled out the fat dead rat. He plopped it down in front of the snake. "We'll make them our own-selves. We just need you to tell us how."

The snake sniffed at the rat. "I might could help you out." It looked at us, its beady little eyes twitching. "You might could help me out some, too."

"We gave you a rat," Abel said.

"I'm a vegetarian."

"What's that?"

"Greens."

I beamed. I grew the greens on our farm.

“Then what do you want?” Abel looked perplexed.

The snake waved its stubs around. “I miss my legs.”

“We don’t make legs.” But just as Abel said it, I had me an idea.

“So if we make you some legs, you’ll tell us how to make us some girls?”

I didn’t know snakes could smile; this one grinned and extended one of its stubs. “Shake on it?”

• • • •

So the snake told us what we needed to know. While it told us, I looked around for sticks that were just the right thickness while Abel pulled string from the hem of his cut-offs. In no time, we knew all about how the Good Lord made Pa out of mud and Ma out of a rib and the snake was tottering about excitedly on little wooden stilts we’d tied to its stubs. All in all, it was quite a satisfactory bargain on both sides.

“So we just need some mud?” I asked.

“Or ribs?” Abel asked.

“Not exactly,” the snake said. “See that sword yonder?”

We both nodded.

“There’s some trees there. One with red fruit and one with orange fruit.”

We both nodded again. Bits of this sounded a little familiar. One of the stories Pa told on two six pack nights.

“Mind you don’t touch the red, boys,” the snake said as it practiced high jumping its former rock. “The Lord His Own Self gets rightly pissed about that one and I don’t want to lose my legs again.”

• • • •

In the end, it just came down to who ran the fastest and who threw rocks the best.

Me, I’m slow as hell. But I’m a crack shot with a rock.

We lay in the bushes outside the clearing and watched the sword flash by like a gigantic hummingbird set on fire. The snake had told us what to do with the oranges. It hadn’t told us how to get them. But again, Abel was mighty smart.

“You knock ’em down,” he said. “I’ll just run out and grab us some.”

So I did, and he did. That boy sure could run. Whack. An orange fell. Whizz.

The boy flew. Buzz. The sword spun and saw no one there at all.

I guess Bubba wasn't the only one dumb as wood.

Abel made the run three times and after that he was tired out but we had us five oranges on account of my excellent aim. I didn't think nothing of it when he tore one in half and handed it to me. I just sucked the juice out of it and he did the same. Looking back, that was a mistake of sorts, but it saved our asses.

We figured we needed at least two more, so I took aim at a branch and let loose with a rock after the sword passed. Whack. The oranges fell. Whizz. The boy flew. Oops.

Children, and you grown ups, too, listen up: When someone says to you that you oughta tie your shoelaces in the off chance that you might trip over them, remember this bit.

Abel did *not* tie his shoelaces. No one had told him to before—wearing shoes was a bit new to us, growing up in a trailer and all. We actually didn't know what those strings were for.

Abel bent over the oranges, grabbed them up, and then went ass over teakettle as he tripped. He sat up with an *oh shit* look on his face just as the sword lopped off his head.

His head rolled to the side and he blinked at me.

There wasn't much blood, but his clothes had caught fire. I sat stunned for a second until he said something.

"Ma's gonna be pissed," his head said.

I didn't know swords could look confused; this one did. Of course, only being four of us in the entire world, it hadn't lopped anyone's head off before. But I'm sure it figured that this was not how it ought to go.

I figured the same but then remembered the orange we shared. At least now we knew it really *was* the Tree of Life.

"Way I see it," Abel said (knowing I couldn't rightly talk without giving myself away), "We need a diversion."

I nodded to his head to show I understood. With that, his body lurched up and took off running through the trees. Even dismembered, that boy could run.

The sword gave chase and after they'd gone, I went out, scooped up the two oranges, grabbed another three just in case, and picked up my brother's head.

"Better get going," he said. "I'm pretty sure I can't outrun that sword."

"I grabbed a few extra oranges," I said. "Maybe I can make you another body."

"First things first. We still need girlfriends."

••••

And so we escaped the Garden of Eden. The snake watched us zip past Bubba's sleeping form and waved its little stick leg at us.

"Way to go, boys," it said.

I waved because Abel could not and I did not stop running until we reached the river. There, I propped my brother's head up against a log and commenced to dig in the mud.

I decided to make Abel's girl first, since he'd been cut up. I didn't know how exactly she should look, so I kinda thought about Ma and all her curves. And I wasn't sure how the Lord God His Own Self had come up with hair so I just took some grass and shoved it into the right places. All the while, Abel gave me pointers.

After a bit, I tore some oranges and squeezed the juice all over the mud girl. The snake had thought this would do the trick, even though the Lord had just breathed on his creations to bring them to life.

It did not work at all.

About this time, I was feeling a might angry and sad all at once. I think Abel must've been feeling the same way, because he started to cry.

"You're going to be in *so* much trouble," he said between sniffs.

"Me?" I asked. "What about you?"

"Ma will say you're the oldest and should've known better. Besides, I ain't got no body. That's punishment enough."

I thought about this. "Can't do chores with no body."

He brightened up somewhat at this. "I hadn't thought about that."

"Besides," I said, "If we get this to work, I done *told* you I'd make you another body."

Funny we was talking about bodies, because at that moment, a loud sucking noise made us look over yonder. There, dragging itself through the mud and marsh grass, was Abel's body. Or what was left of it.

Now it was more like half of a torso and an arm. The rest had been cut clean away.

An idea struck me. My brother wasn't the only one with brains. "Hey," I said. "Maybe we *do* need a rib after all."

••••

Suffice it to say that the rib did not work by a long shot. It was a disappointing setback given just how long it takes to cut out a rib with a pocketknife. And I broke the pocketknife all to shit, too.

So we just sat there, me and Abel's head, and stewed.

"We need us some help," I said to my brother.

"We had us some help," he said back. "It did not work."

I looked at his head, then at his cut up torso and at the bloody rib poking out of the mud girl. "No," I said. "It did not."

"Pa is going to kill us."

"Naw. He can't on account of the oranges."

We were quiet again. An old crow settled down and commenced to peck at my brother's eyes. I swatted it away.

"We need help," I said again.

"Maybe the Lord God His Own Self will help us," Abel said. And just as he said it, a big bug flew right up his nose and he sneezed mightily.

That gave me another bright idea.

In the end, near as we could figure, all we needed was a dead possum, Pa's razor, and one of Ma's old sheets.

I propped Abel's head up in the fork of a tree so as not to alarm our folks and headed back East of Eden and just a bit south.

"Don't be gone long," he said, looking out for other crows.

I found the dead possum right away. It was half squashed in the middle of the trail. For those of you who study such things, possums have been getting squashed in the middle of thoroughfares since the very beginning. I do not know why, but I am glad, because it saved my ass . . . sorta.

I helped myself to one of Ma's sheets, hanging on the line, and wrapped the possum up in it. I did not need to hide it though, or hide that I was covered in my brother's blood, because she and Pa were otherwise engaged when I snuck into the trailer. They had taken the Lord at his word it seemed and were making all kinds of hooting and hollering noises when I passed by their bedroom.

My stomach turned as I thought about the sisters to come.

I took pa's razor and ran back to the river just in time to scare off another bird.

First, I hid my brother's torso under a pile of brush. Then, I shaved that damn possum bald and tossed it into the river. It floated a bit and then sank.

I put all that possum hair into my ball cap, set it aside, and commenced to digging in the mud some more. This time I built me a mud man (without his head of course.) Abel gave me some pointers, having felt his former body was

deficient in some areas below the belt.

“This works,” I told Abel, “And we can share the girl.”

He would have shrugged but could not. “I reckon we done shared everything else. And it’s better than a sister.”

So, I put his head in the mud and covered over the two mud bodies with Ma’s sheet. Then I stood back and admired my handiwork.

“Now I’m going to fetch the Lord.”

Abel grinned up at me. “You sure are smart, Cain.”

“Thank you.” I grinned back. Then I went to see Bubba.

“Bubba,” I said. “I need to call upon the Lord.”

Bubba looked abashed. “He was just here and he was pissed.”

Bubba then told me the tale. Seems someone had hit him on the head, stolen some fruit, tied legs onto the serpent, and left a goat’s head calling card. He told the Lord it was most likely Beelzebub helping his boss out and winked at me as he said it. Somehow Bubba had hid those beer cans. Maybe, I thought, he wasn’t quite dumb as wood after all.

“Well,” I said, “I still need to see him.”

“He’s looking over the tree. I’ll send him by.”

So I thanked Bubba and went back to the river.

The Lord God His Own Self strolled by a bit later.

“Hey boys, you seen a big demon ’round here goes by the name of Beelzebub?”

“No,” we both said.

“We ain’t seen nothing,” Abel said.

The Lord scratched his head. “What in tarnation are you two doing?”

“We’re playing Genesis,” I said.

“I’m Pa,” Abel said and rolled his eyes towards the mud girl. “That’s Ma there.”

“And I’m playing you,” I said, trying to look all humble.

The Lord looked rightly pleased.

“Maybe you could help us out,” I said.

Now he looked even more pleased. More tickled than a girl on prom night.

“Way I figure it,” I said, “This game is a way for us to tell our story to the generations to come after. We want to be historically accurate and shit.”

The Lord nodded. “I like this.”

I pointed to the mud girl. “Is this how you did the hair?”

The Lord came over, stooped down and looked real close at the mud girl’s

hair. This was my cue. I up-ended my ball-cap onto the Lord's Own Head and all that possum fur and dander cascaded down.

For a moment, the Lord looked quite surprised. Then he sneezed mightily three times and ropy wads of snot shot onto Abel and the mud girl.

That mud girl started coughing and sputtering and the Lord His Own Self whipped back the sheet. Sure enough, it was a *real* girl, though her hair never was quite right on account of the grass I used. Sadly, Abel was still just a head. The body was just mud. I reckon him already being technically alive messed up our plan somewhat.

The Lord, he chuckled. "You boys done good."

That, of course, was a relative statement given my brother's predicament.

The girl sat up looking truly bewildered. She was the prettiest thing I ever seen and I named her Jenny right on the spot.

We all sat there a bit and just looked at each other.

"Ma's still gonna be pissed," Abel finally said.

The Lord looked at the brush where Abel's hand poked out. "I reckon she is," he said.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"Way I see it," the Lord said, "There's this place called Nod out yonder. Room for a bunch of trailers there."

"What about Ma and Pa?" I asked.

The Lord looked very thoughtful. "You just hightail it and leave that to me. I'll think of something to tell them." And he did. Though it was not historically accurate.

So Jenny and me and Abel thanked the Lord kindly and I scooped up my brother's head. Then we left.

I started this out talking about two questions, but there is a third that has made me famous. Am I my brother's keeper? I reckon I am, because of his peculiar condition.

Me and Jenny and Abel, we had ourselves a long life on account of them oranges and shit. We experienced a lot of fine adventures, what with the Big Flood and the Ten Plagues and that one time when God's Own Son Himself hung out with us in the Orient for a spell. But those are all other stories.

Jenny is saying it's time for supper. Sometimes I miss supper with Ma and Pa and the Lord. At least there are still trailers.

"What are we having?" I ask her before I wrap this up.

"Meat," she says.

“And greens,” my brother says.

“I’ll grab us some beer,” I say.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Scholes is the critically acclaimed author of four novels and over forty short stories. His series, *The Psalms of Isaak*, is being published both at home and abroad to award nominations and rave reviews. *Publishers Weekly* hails the series as a “towering storytelling tour de force.” Ken’s eclectic background includes time spent as a label gun repairman, a sailor who never sailed, a soldier who commanded a desk, a preacher (he got better), a nonprofit executive, a musician and a government procurement analyst. He has a degree in History from Western Washington University and is a winner of the ALA’s RUSA Reading List award for best fantasy novel, France’s Prix Imaginales for best foreign novel and the Writers of the Future contest. Ken is a native of the Pacific Northwest and makes his home in Saint Helens, Oregon. You can learn more about Ken by visiting kenscholes.com.

The Shining Hills

Susan Palwick | 3860 words

“Are you all right?”

The voice, sharp and worried, shot out of the pocket of shadow to her left. Startled, she turned and found herself blinking at a cop, one of the ones who patrolled the park on foot. In the last light of dusk, she could just make out his half-frown, his badge, the hand resting on a nightstick. He reminded her of her father.

She shivered and pulled her sweatshirt more tightly around her. She should have brought warmer clothing, but she wasn't going to be here long. “I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?” Her father would have said she was being rude, and foolish beside: You didn't talk back to cops, especially in foreign countries. She didn't care. Cops were cops.

“It's getting dark. Where are you going?”

None of your fucking business. Even she knew better than to say that. Anyway, couldn't he figure it out? She didn't answer, just gestured with her chin. When she glanced at the top of Arthur's Seat now, she couldn't make out the glowing lights she'd seen before. She wondered if the cop would have been able to see them. Only the Chosen saw them, supposedly. That was why the rest of the world thought they were crazy.

She hoped she hadn't missed her chance.

When you see them, don't look away. Follow them. If they vanish, they may be gone forever. There's no way to know if you'll get another chance. That's what everybody said. There were Chosen who were still here, stunned and yearning. Some of them killed themselves, and she didn't want to do that, but she wasn't sure what she'd do instead, since she'd come all the way here.

“Ach,” the cop said, softly, and shook his head. “That's no place to be going, not at nightfall. You don't know what's up there.”

Neither do you, she thought. And I know there were lights up there. Maybe they'd just been blocked by other people. Maybe they'd come back. She started walking again, but he hurried next to her. “Wait, please. Please, wait. I'm still here. I'm talking to you. What's your name?”

The lights hadn't come back; she couldn't even see the top of the Seat now, in the growing darkness. She could only see a few other people, far ahead of her. She wondered why the cop wasn't going after them. Frustrated, angry at herself

for letting him distract her—although she supposed he'd just have followed her anyway, had she ignored his first greeting—she turned. “Niff.”

“Niff?” She caught a flash of white teeth in the dusk, a smile. “That short for something?”

“Jennifer.” Why was she even answering? But maybe he'd go away more quickly if she did.

“Niff. That's a good one. I've never heard that.”

“Thanks,” she said, throat tightening. She'd hated her name and all its standard nicknames as long as she could remember. Her brother Toby had hit on Niff, the one surprise hiding in those syllables, and it had stuck. Toby had always understood her, but he was gone now. War. IED. Not enough left to send home, not even his dog tags.

She turned back toward Arthur's Seat. Had she seen a brief blaze of light? She peered into the dimness, unsure, but started walking anyway, really more of a trot. The cop stayed next to her, an unwelcome growth.

“I'm Seamus. I prefer not to be called Shame.” She didn't answer. He thought he was clever; he wasn't. She sped up. So did he. “Niff, what do you think you're going to find up there?”

He was faster than she was; he stood in front of her now, and she blinked, unsure how he'd gotten there. He could have been one of the fey himself. “Go pester somebody else,” she told him.

“Not right now. Right now I'm pestering you.”

“If I scream and say you were harassing me, what do you think would happen?”

His face in the fading light was grave. “If you scream, another cop will come. They know me. They're my friends.” She shook her head and tried to go around him, but he blocked her. “Niff, listen to me. Just listen. I don't know if there's a faerie court on top of Arthur's Seat or not. I do know that people you don't want to meet have been going up there to waylay folks heading to the top to see faeries. Some of them shine lights to fool people. Robbery's the best you can expect.”

“Nothing to rob.” She'd spent all her money getting here. “The lights are real.”

“Some of them are real. Others aren't. None of them, real or not, mean you any good.”

She noted that he hadn't told her she was stupid to believe in them. He was pretending to keep an open mind, trying to win her trust. Again she tried to move around him; again he swung easily into her path. He made no move to touch her, just made it clear that they could do this dance for a long time. “Robbery's the

best, I said. There are other things they can take, will take. You know about the bodies up there: everyone knows. Some say they're folks the fair folk rejected, say if they want you, they'll pull you into their world and you'll be safe and will never have to worry about rape or murder again, although don't ask me how anyone knows faeries don't have their own version of rape, or that they aren't just throwing people into stew pots."

She rolled her eyes. "They're *vegetarians*."

"And you know this how? The people who vanish don't come back: Everyone knows that, too."

At least he wasn't trying to convince her they didn't exist, not that anybody could. Everyone knew people had vanished. Everyone had seen the lights, or knew someone who had seen lights, heard music, glimpsed gauzy forms with wings, flickering, here and then gone. Some said they weren't faeries but angels or demons or aliens. It didn't matter. Wherever people vanished to, they were somewhere else.

She thought the summoners were faeries, because she'd dreamed music, celtic-y, with harps and pipes. She didn't really know they were vegetarians; she just thought so. Nuts, flower salad. Berries. But she shouldn't have said anything. Dumb. Don't engage with assholes. "I'd like to go up there, please. I've done nothing wrong. You can't arrest me."

"Oh, Niff." He sounded very tired. "I'm not going to arrest you. When's the last time you had something to eat?"

Arthur's Seat wasn't very high, not really, but the path seemed longer now than it had before the sun set. She craned her head; she couldn't see the lights anymore, but if she started up, maybe they'd come back. "I'm nineteen. I'm legal. You can't stop me."

"In three hours, the moon will be up," said Seamus the cop. "Full moon: You know that. That's why you came tonight, right?" She wondered how many other cops were in the park, trying to stop people heading up to Arthur's Seat on the night of the full moon. "You'll be able to see better then, if you still want to go. Let me buy you a burger, talk a bit. You still want to go up there afterwards, you're right. I can't stop you."

••••

He took her to the Holyrood, one of the pubs closest to the Park. He hadn't expected her to say yes, and wondered why she had, but he was glad of it. Simple

hunger, he supposed. She was American, that was clear enough, on a gap year before college maybe: She'd be at school at this time of year, if she were studying. But then, plenty of college kids had run away to the Shining Hills too.

This time of year: late November, when it got dark before 4:00. Perfect for mysterious lights; bad for young women—or men, for that matter—wandering around the Park. In summer, especially Festival, when it stayed light until ten and the city swelled to three times its normal size, Niff would have been much less easy to spot.

But kids had regularly washed up in Edinburgh even before the mysterious lights started. He'd been working Holyrood Park a long time, and he knew them from a mile away, just as the pimps and predators did: the lost ones, the runaways, headed up for a look-see. They gave off a sour smell that had less to do with food and hygiene—both usually in short supply—than with grief, desperation, despair. Some were on drugs, but not all; Niff wasn't, not that he could tell, and over the years he'd gotten good at telling.

The Holyrood was warm, crowded, renowned for its burgers. He wondered if Niff would order beer—he wouldn't have stopped her—but she didn't, asked for tea instead. “You really a pimp?” she asked, eyes narrowed, sitting across from him at the table. “Pimp dressed as a cop?”

“No, Niff. I'm really a cop.” He was off-duty now and shouldn't have been in uniform, but he wasn't going to tell her that, and she hadn't asked about his lack of a partner. If she did, he'd tell her the radio on his shoulder kept him in touch with a partner, which indeed it did, when he was on duty. He walked the paths and trails and his partner drove the car around the Park down below. Sometimes Seamus patrolled down there too. If he heard a scream, he could make it to the top in ten minutes.

Niff eyed him. She wore a nondescript faded sweatshirt and fingerless gloves, none of it warm enough for Edinburgh in November, although they'd had no snow yet. Well, sure she'd packed light. Planned to go somewhere warmer.

He wondered briefly why there were never stories about ice fairies—or maybe there were, that kid's ballet—before Niff said, “You have a police budget to buy people burgers?”

He smiled. It was a smart question. “No. It's my own money. I won't say no to your repaying me, if you have any of your own.” She looked away, and he said, “That's all right. I didn't think so.” If she'd had money of her own she wouldn't have been hungry, wouldn't have agreed to come with him in the first place.

“So you're a cop who works with pimps?” Her eyes were still narrowed.

“Being so careful not to touch me, taking me somewhere public. Trying to get me to trust you?”

He regarded her. Smart. “Has that happened to you?”

“No.”

“Good. Because you’re right: If that’s what I were up to, I’d probably be going about it the same way. But I’m not. I’m worried about you—or anybody—hiking up to the Seat this time of day, that’s all.”

“You take them all out for burgers? What’s your story?”

“Trade,” he told her. “Your story for mine. But yours first, because I’m buying the burgers.”

• • • •

She told him. She didn’t know why; she hadn’t told anybody else except people online, the ones who gathered in the chat rooms to talk about the Shining Hills. The lights appeared in high places every six to eight months, but only in one place at a time, always somewhere with hills. Rome. Seattle. San Francisco. Edinburgh. They shone intermittently for a few weeks, and then they vanished, and some percentage of those who’d made the pilgrimage to see them vanished too: the Lucky, the people in the chat rooms said, and of course other people thought they were unlucky, doomed or damned. No one knew. All anyone knew was that wherever they were now, alive or dead, it wasn’t here, and that was enough for Niff and the others like her.

She had never fit in, never felt like she belonged to her family—mother dead of cancer five years ago, father distant ever since—never really felt like she belonged to the Earth. She’d always had strange feelings: heard snatches of song, flashes of odd color, been bored and baffled by the things other people found ordinary—football, baby showers, prom corsages—and smitten by the things no one else understood: the slant of moonlight through a window, the angle of a skyscraper rising into a flawlessly blue sky.

“None of that means you’re a faerie,” Seamus said. “You could just be an artist, Niff. Why not stay here and find out?”

She shook her head. If she did that, she might miss her chance. And there was nothing to stay here for, nothing, because Toby was dead. Toby was the only person here she’d ever really loved, the only person who’d understood her and never made fun of her, and he was gone, blown to bits.

Seamus was quiet when she told him this, quiet and attentive. He knew how to

listen; she'd give him that. He didn't lecture like her father, like most of the other adults she knew. And, unlike her father—of whom he'd initially reminded her—he didn't seem lost. He wasn't bossing people around to give himself a job to do. He seemed rooted, at home.

“I'm sorry your brother died, Niff.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you think this is what he'd want, though? Do you think he'd want you to be gone, too, because he is?”

She shook her head. “You don't get it. I'm not *killing* myself. I'm just going somewhere else.”

“You don't know. You don't know what will happen, even if you give the fakers up there a miss and get to whatever's real about it, if anything is.”

That was true. She took the last bite of her burger, chewed and swallowed it. “Toby would understand.”

Seamus gave her a level look, infinitely sad. “The dead always understand, don't they? Anything we want to do, they'll always approve.”

“No. My mother wouldn't. She only cared about herself even before she got sick. But Toby would.” She pushed back her empty plate and said, “Thank you for the hamburger. I have to go now.”

“Ah,” he said, and put out a hand. “Not yet. Not quite yet. We've still time before moonrise, and it's a trade, remember? You have to hear my story, too.”

“You think I'm stupid,” Niff said. “Or silly.” She could hear the anger in her own voice, but it wasn't really directed at Seamus, this stranger: It was what she wanted to say to her father, to the endless therapists and counselors, to the other people her age who were too busy with school or hooking up or getting drunk to care about faerie. “You think I'm trying to avoid the real world.”

“All worlds are real,” Seamus said, and she looked at him, startled, feeling herself give a grudging nod of admiration. Not many people knew that.

“Yeah. They are. So why not go to that one?”

“Because it isn't yours, that's all. Look: You've heard about geographical cures, right? People taking vacations to get away from whatever's bothering them, but they can't.”

“They bring it with them.”

“They bring it with them. Suicide rates are higher in holiday towns, Niff, did you know that? Because unhappy people go to places where people go to be happy, because the places are supposed to make them happy, but it doesn't work. And when you're unhappy in a place like that, it's doubly terrible. There's

nowhere else to go and no one to talk to. And that's true even when you're surrounded by other people. Look, if running off to bleeding faerieland would fix everything, I'd go myself. I'm not telling you to stay here because I want you to suffer, because I'm trying to keep you from something better. I'm not anti-pleasure. You can have all the drugs and sex you want, as far as I'm concerned. But I don't think faerieland's any better. I don't see how it can be. If they don't just eat you or put you in a zoo, it has to be the biggest jolt of loneliness and culture shock there is. And yeah, there would be other people there, presumably, a little expat community maybe. Why do that when you can find a community here?"

"You believe in it," Niff said, feeling her eyebrows rise. He wasn't faking, and he wasn't talking down to her.

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

He turned away from her. In the dim light of the pub, she saw him swallow. "Because my daughter walked up a hill like that one five years ago and never came back down."

"No body?"

"No. No body."

She looked at her watch. Ninety minutes to moonrise. "All right. So tell me the story."

• • • •

Audrey was fifteen when she walked up her hill. Hers was the Sparrow Hills in Moscow. She'd been there on a school trip—a music camp; she was a violinist—and the lights had come, and she'd followed them, although none of her classmates had. They'd all been warned by their teacher, but Audrey had crept out of the youth hostel in the middle of the night with her best friend Selena, who didn't see the lights but was curious, and wanted to keep an eye on Audrey.

Selena came back alone. She'd gotten almost all the way to the top with Audrey, she said, and then she tripped on a stone and fell, and when she got up again, Audrey was no longer there, and the air had an odd tingling sensation, the way it does right before lightning strikes, but Selena couldn't see anything except other people climbing the hill, passing her. She called for Audrey, and got no answer. She heard frantic cries, screams and shouts, ahead of her. Afraid to climb any higher, she turned back.

She killed herself six months later, hung herself in her parents' attic.

"I didn't blame her," Seamus said quietly. "No one blamed her," and Niff didn't know if he meant that he didn't blame her for losing Audrey or didn't blame her for killing herself. Maybe it was both. Maybe he couldn't tell them apart. "I can't listen to violin music anymore. None of it: not fiddle, not chamber music, not 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.' Anything on that instrument makes me too sad."

"What about your wife? Can she listen to violins?"

"I don't know. We split up after Audrey disappeared. That happens a lot, when bad things happen to children. Illness. Accident."

Faerie. "My mother's dead," Niff said. "So's my brother. My family's already split up. I doubt my father will even notice if I vanish."

Seamus' eyes narrowed. "I'm betting he will. If you're doing this to make him sit up and take notice, it's an awfully big gamble. And if you're right, you'll never know if it paid off."

Niff shrugged. "Maybe that would matter to me if I cared if he noticed." She pushed her plate back. "I'm going now. It's almost moonrise."

"All right."

"Are you coming with me?"

He looked startled. "Do you want me to?"

"You can if you want to, but you're not talking me out of it."

"All right," he said. His stomach twisted. He was afraid of the climb, but she wanted company; she was, after all, just a little girl. And if any human evil was up there, he could maybe do something about it.

So he paid, and they left, and went out into the cool darkness, moon just rising, and began climbing the paths to the Seat. He used the torch on his belt to light the way until the moon came up more fully; then he switched it off. They didn't need it anymore.

As they went, others joined them, quiet bodies in the dark, climbing. No one spoke. A glow brighter than moonlight lit the path now. Seamus stopped twenty feet from it, and watched others walk in, two, four, six of them. A woman cried out behind him: "Johnny, no! Stay with me! Stay!" Seamus half-turned, and in the light of the glow saw a woman holding a man her age, husband or brother or friend, saw him wrench away from her and race past Seamus and Niff. The woman keened, and Seamus remembered the screams Selena had heard. He watched Johnny approach the glow, a dark silhouette against it, and then vanish. Gone. Gone, like Audrey, like all the others.

Behind him, the woman was on the ground, sobbing. Someone helped her up and started walking her back down the hill.

Shaking, Seamus turned toward the light again, thinking that Niff would be gone, that she'd have vanished when he took his eyes off her. But she was still there, and for a dizzy moment he allowed himself to believe that she'd stay, that he'd saved her.

"Don't blame yourself, Seamus." She was watching him with something like pity. She reached out and almost touched his arm, but didn't. He knew her words for a great kindness. He couldn't answer. "Be happy for us. Think of us dancing." And then she moved forward until she too was gone, and he was left to remember those last words, how they had sounded clear and bright over the music. Pipes and flutes, not fiddle.

Seamus heard it too, the music. He'd always heard it: in dreams, in alley echoes, in the gurgle of water in the drain when he washed the dishes after his lonely dinners. He'd heard it his whole life. He'd never spoken of it to anyone, and Audrey had never told him she heard it too. He doubted anything would be different if she had.

He stood in the glow, leaning against its pull. He knew that if he walked into the dazzling brightness, he might wind up where his daughter was, might see her again, would anyway have solved some mystery.

Or died, or been eaten or dissolved. Better the devil you know.

The summons grew stronger the longer he stood there, with people streaming around him as if he were a tree, with the burger and beer cold and heavy in his stomach. He heard the faint, sweet music, smelled the flowers of that other land. He waited until the pull became nearly unbearable. Someday, maybe he wouldn't resist it.

Others had stopped. He knew some of them were predators, still and cautious now maybe because they'd seen his uniform. He couldn't arrest them if they weren't doing anything, couldn't tell them from heartsick friends and family.

He hoped Audrey was dancing somewhere, had reached the portal rather than falling to scum, human or otherwise.

Farewell, farewell.

The light blurred from tears; the music continued, endlessly enticing. How many of the others standing here heard it? "Sod off," Seamus said aloud, speaking to the glow and the lilting melody. He raised his voice, seeking a defiance he didn't feel. "I live here, don't I?" Then he turned away, back to the city and the dark, and began to descend the hill.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Palwick is the author of four novels from Tor Books and a story collection from Tachyon Publications. Her short fiction has appeared in a variety of SF/F magazines and anthologies, including several Year's Best volumes. She has won a Crawford Award and an MLA Alex Award and been shortlisted for the Mythopoeic and World Fantasy Awards. Currently an Associate Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno, she has spent twenty years teaching writing and literature and ten years providing spiritual care as a volunteer in a local emergency room. This experience both informed "Remote Presence" and inspired her upcoming career change; in Fall 2017, Susan will begin full-time studies in the MSW program at UNR, with the goal of becoming a medical social worker. She and her husband live with their three cats in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

A Citizen In Childhood's Country

Seanan McGuire | 2710 words

It was always a relief on the ward when midnight came, bringing the late-night caretakers in their faded scrubs and sensible shoes, carrying their little trays of sweet oblivion from bed to bed and room to room. They passed among the patients like the Sandman himself, leaving even the most devoted screamers sleeping peacefully. The silence wouldn't last, but oh, it was sweet for a little while. The more damaged patients—the ones who'd been waiting years for sanity to make a house call, the ones who'd outlasted dozens of caretakers and might well outlast a dozen more—had had plenty of time to develop a tolerance for even the most potent sedatives. The worst could take doses that would knock an elephant out and be right back to screaming down the walls an hour later.

Even an hour of quiet was better than nothing at all. Ms. Creelman watched the caretakers moving through with their trays and their serious expressions, allowing herself to relax for the first time since the beginning of her shift. The hospital administration warned her when she applied for the position, but they hadn't been able to truly capture the scope of the situation. "The residents are frequently agitated at night"—that was what they said to her before she signed her contract, before she signed a year of her life away. Agitated.

They didn't say anything about the screaming.

"Twelve o'clock and all's well, hey, Ms. Creelman?" asked Mike, stopping next to the nursing station. He was pulling a safety-yellow janitor's bucket behind him, and the soap scum that frothed around its edges was faintly tinged with red. He followed the direction of her glance, and shrugged. "Little incident on the ward. One of the patients tried to tunnel out of his room to get away from the monsters he said were coming out of the walls."

"Has he received medical care?" Ms. Creelman found it difficult to look away from the bloody soap bubbles as they popped, one by one.

"He's with Brian."

Ms. Creelman looked up, sharply. "Brian?"

"He was available," said Mike, and shrugged. "Besides, he gives good bedside, right?"

"I suppose," said Ms. Creelman, not entirely mollified. She knew that her dislike was ill-founded; Brian was one of the night nurses. He was dependable, and seemed to get along well with most of the patients, even if he took their

delusions a little too seriously. That was the part that disturbed her. In a place like this—which would have been called an asylum in any early age, and was now called a “private hospital,” as if that changed its purpose—taking madness seriously was a calling, but taking delusions seriously . . . that was dangerous.

“Don’t worry, Ms. C,” said Mike, resuming his walk down the hall. “It’s twelve o’clock, and all’s well.”

“All’s well,” she mumbled, and wondered why she didn’t believe herself.

• • • •

In the fuss of midnight—the silent progression of sweet chemical dreams, the shrieks of residents not yet sedated, and the howls of Damon Hickman as Brian waited for the painkillers to kick in—no one really noticed when one of the quieter, less troublesome girls on the ward palmed her pills, slipping them into the pocket formed by the corner of her pillowcase as soon as the caretakers turned away. When they looked back she was already relaxing, lashes fluttering against her cheeks in a skilled parody of sleep. The door clicked shut. Her eyes sprang open. So little time; so very little time was left. The next room-check and round of medication would come in six hours.

One way or another, she was planning to be gone when it arrived. One way or another, she’d been here longer than she should have been, and she was long past the point where waiting was enough.

Stripping the bed only took a few minutes. Bundling the sheets in her lap, she sat down on the bare mattress and turned her face toward the room’s small, steel-barred window. Humming a sea shanty under her breath, she began calmly, systematically ripping the first sheet into strips. So little time; so very little time.

Not long now.

• • • •

“Where are you going, Brian?”

Ms. Creelman’s voice was practically at his shoulder. Brian flinched before he could forbid himself to do so, taking a quick stumble-step to the side as he moved away from the sound of his superior. “Nowhere,” he said, turning to face her.

She arched an eyebrow. “Nowhere,” she repeated.

“The supply cabinet,” he hastily corrected. Holding up the first aid kit he’d been carrying, he said, “I need to put this away before one of our patients gets out

and gets hurt.”

“Ah.” She looked at him thoughtfully. “Do you enjoy working here, Brian?”

“Ma’am?”

“At the hospital, I mean, not just on this ward. Is this something you would choose to pursue as a career?” Her tone was neutral, but her eyes were cold.

She knows, he thought, before shoving the idea away as firmly as he could. If she knew, he’d already be gone. He’d been careful, so careful, in covering his tracks, and he’d had help—some of the best help in the world. They looked after their own. That was why he was in the asylum. No matter what, they looked after their own. “I find it very refreshing, ma’am. The patients can be a handful, but their way of looking at the world is almost fascinating, if you can just make yourself relax.”

Her gaze grew, if anything, even colder. “And are you relaxed, Brian?”

“Not right now, ma’am,” he said, and swallowed. The image of the patient in room nineteen—little Jane Doe, whose dental records matched nothing in the country, whose chart indicated that she hovered at the cusp of sixteen years of age, who’d been in the same white room with the same white walls for four long years—rose behind his eyes.

So little time.

Ms. Creelman studied him a moment longer before nodding to herself and turning away. “Good. A little caution is advisable in your position.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, as he watched her walk away. A little caution was advisable, yes, but he wasn’t planning to retain his position for much longer. There was, after all, so little time.

• • • •

The case file for patient 347, “Jane Doe,” is sketchy at best; odd, given that she was institutionalized for slightly over four years. She was found on the street, underfed, wearing what the admitting officers described as “nothing but rags,” wandering in what seemed to be a fugue state. Her left wrist was broken, and she did not resist when she was collected, bundled into the back of a social services van, and eventually—after several way-stations and group homes—deposited in a private institution. Her admittance fees and upkeep were paid anonymously, something which had happened before, with other lost children found under similar circumstances. They all seemed to stay for roughly the same amount of time. Then, on or around what was likely to be their sixteenth birthdays, they

snapped out of their private madness and rejoined the world. It was strange, but so many things are strange, and at least the children like Jane were quiet.

Tractable. Easily forgotten.

So little time left.

••••

The moon outside the window watched Jane—that wasn't her name, that wasn't her name at all; Jane had been years and years before her, and Jane had chosen this, while she'd fallen into it, getting lost, getting *found*—as she finished ripping her sheets to shreds and began braiding them with tight, careful motions of her hands. She tied good knots, did Jane-who-wasn't-Jane. She'd practiced them on hammocks and on sea-slippery anchor ropes, on dried sinew and snares. Her makeshift rope would hold, regardless of which of the two possible uses she chose to put it to. Time was short—so little time left—and her rope would be used, one way or the other, before the sun came up.

Midnight marked the beginning of the last day of her fifteenth year, and she knew what tomorrow would mean. Tomorrow meant telling them her name; tomorrow meant telling them where she was from; tomorrow meant being found forever, not just for a little while. Tomorrow meant that time was up.

Maybe that was good enough for Jane, but she wasn't Jane. She'd never asked to be Jane. Tomorrow would happen, one way or the other . . . but however it happened, it would happen without her.

Still humming, Jane-who-wasn't-Jane continued to braid her sheets into her escape, and watched the moon, and waited.

••••

In the inquest that followed the disappearance of patient 347, it was discovered that one of the employees of the institute—a Brian Patterson, late of Roseburg, Oregon—had previously been a resident at a similar institute, and with a similar background. He, too, had been found seemingly abandoned; he, too, had been a prisoner in an elaborately detailed fantasy world for years before coming to his senses and telling his caretakers who he was. How, exactly, he'd been able to conceal his past from the hiring manager is still under discussion. It matters very little now. Brian Patterson has not been seen since the night of Jane Doe's disappearance.

The order of events, as we have been able to reconstruct it, appears to be thus: At midnight, when the nightly medications were dispensed, Jane did not take her pills. Whether this was due to collusion with Patterson or simply an act of childish rebellion is unknown. At approximately half-past twelve, Brian was seen by the ward supervisor, Ms. Creelman, supposedly in the act of returning medical supplies to their proper location. According to her report, he seemed perfectly normal at that time.

At one-thirty-four, precisely, six signal flares were set off in the woods behind the hospital. One of those flares set fire to the surrounding underbrush, necessitating that the fire department be called. The hospital was far enough from the blaze to be deemed safe, and was not evacuated, although the sirens woke many of the patients. The chaos was not resolved until well past six o'clock that morning. By that time, it was too late for anything to be done. The night had been too short; there was, in the end, too little time.

• • • •

The flares burst like blazing roses against the midnight sky, briefly blotting out the stars. Jane-who-wasn't-Jane regarded them with interest, head canted very slightly to one side. The glittering petals fanned into individual points of tumbling light, cascading down, down, down and out of sight. She resumed her braiding. Lights against the sky were all well and good, but she'd seen stranger on the nights when she was fool enough to take her pills, and time was so short now, so very short.

Shouting in the hall outside her room; shouting, followed by the sound of running feet, and the shrieking blare of sirens. She hunched her shoulders and kept working, fasting now, aware that she was racing more than morning.

So intent was she on her work, and so loud were the sounds outside, that she didn't hear the key turn in the lock; didn't hear the door ease gently open behind her, or hear it eased just as gently closed again. Then, the question, from what should have been an empty room:

“What's your name?”

She whipped around like a frightened cat, lips drawing back from her teeth in a grimace that was closer than a snarl as her fingers clamped down on the half-completed rope. Brian glanced from it to her, pained sympathy in his eyes.

“Mine's Brian,” he said. “They called me Bandy, because my knees bent in, and I always walked like I'd just gotten off a bicycle.” The first flickers of hopeful

astonishment began sliding into her face. He forced himself to ignore them—he didn't want to frighten her, and the ones who got as far as making ropes were always so easy to scare. "I didn't fall. My brother did, and I went after him. I spent so much time looking, and I got so scared, that I couldn't get happy. I got caught instead."

"Did he?"

Her voice was tiny and rusty from disuse. Brian felt his shoulders relax. "I don't know. I haven't seen him. I think he must have stayed lost, or he'd have found a way to contact me by now."

"Good." She looked down at the braided sheets in her hands, and said, voice still very tiny, "I'm Candle. Tonight. Still. Tomorrow . . ."

"Do you want to go home, Candle?"

The look she gave him was full of startled hope, and fearful longing. "Can I?"

"Tonight," he said. "Come with me."

He offered her his hand. After a long silence, she reached out, and—never letting go of the rope—she took it.

• • • •

Brian and Candle walked into the woods behind the hospital, her hand still clutching his, the knotted sheets gathering dead leaves and debris as it dragged along the ground. The fire blazed to the west of them, blanketing the sky in smoke. In all the chaos, it was easy for one nurse and one small girl in a grubby cotton nightgown to slip away. Their absence wouldn't be noticed for hours, by which time both of them would be long, long gone.

"I'm sorry I left it so late," said Brian, once they were past the first edge of the trees. "I kept hoping . . ."

"Is he coming?"

Brian closed his eyes, continuing to walk forward. Her fingers in his felt very small. "Not until I leave."

"Does he know?"

"Yes."

She didn't ask him how. There were ways and ways, and some of them couldn't be used until you'd been found for good. Better not to know. Better just to go. Better just to shut out the sound of shouting, the sirens in the distance, and to listen instead to the steady pounding of her heart, like a drum caught and captive in her chest. "So he'll come."

“Yes.”

They walked on in silence for a bit before she said, “I caught my hair on fire once. That’s why my name’s Candle.” Whatever it was before that didn’t matter, because it was still the last day of her fifteenth year, and she was still in childhood’s country; her citizenship had not yet been revoked.

“Good reason,” Brian agreed.

They walked further. “What’s your brother’s name?”

“Sander.”

“I’ll tell him. I’ll tell him you did this.” She turned her face toward him, a pale moon in the darkness, while smoke blotted out the real moon up above, blotted out the stars, blotted out everything but the night, this last night, before her time ran out like his had done. “I’ll tell them all.”

“Thank you,” he said gravely, and let go of her hand. “Go a little further on. You’ll know the way.”

“I know,” she said, and smiled suddenly, dropping her carefully knotted rope before she turned and ran into the woods. For just a moment, through the trees ahead, he saw a glimmering light, like a child’s nightlight—or a candle—being held behind a screen. Then he picked up the discarded rope and turned away, and began the long walk through the woods to where he’d stowed the car he’d be using to drive out of this life and into the next, into a fresh identity composed by another of the Found, into a fresh asylum where their sources indicated the potential for another of the Lost.

In the woods behind him, he heard the sound of silver bells, the sound of childish laughter, and the sound—intangible, implausible, and real as any wish made on a midnight star—of a citizen of childhood’s country having her passport renewed; the sound of a little girl who’d come so close to being Found forever getting Lost, and going home.

Brian smiled, hugging Candle’s rope against his chest, and walked on.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seanan McGuire was born and raised in Northern California, resulting in a love of rattlesnakes and an absolute terror of weather. She shares a crumbling old farmhouse with a

variety of cats, far too many books, and enough horror movies to be considered a problem. Seanan publishes about three books a year, and is widely rumored not to actually sleep. When bored, Seanan tends to wander into swamps and cornfields, which has not yet managed to get her killed (although not for lack of trying). She also writes as Mira Grant, filling the role of her own evil twin, and tends to talk about horrible diseases at the dinner table.

Ink

Bruce McAllister | 4270 words

The American boy, whose name was David, had always collected things. Coins, minerals, seashells, insects, and even house-brand bars of soap from hotels in his family's travels. His collections helped him know who he was when so much of life did not; and the things he collected did not make him bleed, when so much of the world—the sharp, angular things of it—did. When you bought an old coin in a store, the coin didn't bruise your skin or scratch your fingers. You just needed to make sure you didn't bump against the display cases. When you picked up a *gastropod* or *pelecypod* on the mud of a bay, it didn't hurt you. You just needed to make sure you avoided tripping on a piece of cement from an old dock. You took them home, these things you collected, because they were safe, and put them in neatly organized boxes or jars or trays or books and, when you wanted to, took a deep breath and looked at them in safety. If you did this, your dreams of blood—of bleeding wherever you walked—stopped for a few nights, and were instead about bruises, just that, not skin that leaked out what kept you alive.

The disease was called “severe hemophilia A.” Neither of his parents had it, so it was, the doctors said, a “spontaneous mutation,” common enough, and one that the treatments of recombinant FVIII—paid for by the Navy everywhere his family went—would help, but only if he didn't miss them.

• • • •

When his family moved—because of his father's military assignments—to a new city every two or three years, they had to find a new doctor for his treatments, sometimes nearby, sometimes not. He also had to learn the new dangers—the new ways he might bleed both inside and out. But he also always found something new to collect or additions to what he already collected. It was a way to tie it all together—life and the world and himself. It was a story, and the story continued, which was important. Without it, who was he, and why was he in this world bleeding this way? Was he only a shadow, bled dry, or was he a boy whose skin glowed like the sun?

His father's new assignment was a smoggy port in Northern Italy. Just south of that port, his family would live in a fishing village with a little cove, a castle above it, and clean air and the very sun he wanted to be bright like. When he

learned that all of the boys his age in the village had a stamp collection, he began one, too. They were happy with theirs, and he would be happy with his. Sometimes the drives to the base at Livorno for his infusions—to keep him from bleeding so much—took him out of school in the village, where he was learning the language and Roman history and the pig production of Calabria and Tuscany. But he could work on his stamp collection in the car—in his stamp album, with its neat rows of slips.

Stamps were the safest of all collectible things, weren't they? You didn't have to put pins through them or struggle with drawers or wooden boxes. And having a stamp collection was important in this village. If he wanted friends, which he did—friends at the school where he would be for three years—he would have to fit in, wouldn't he? They were kind boys, he'd discovered, rarely asking about his bruises or the careful one-foot-after-another way he walked; and when they did ask, it was gently, not the way kids did back in the States.

Besides, it was a collection—and he knew how to collect things, didn't he?

Yes, you could *buy* new stamps at post offices and old stamps in philatelic stores and by mail. That was easy. But that wasn't how his friends had made their collections. Theirs had been started by their grandfathers in Liguria or Tuscany or Umbria, even their great-grandfathers, and continued by their fathers, and now by the boys themselves. His friends might purchase stamps to grow their collections, but the heart of those collections were *people*, people who gave you stamps whether they were relatives or friends or strangers. That kind of collection was the best, he knew.

The boy's family was soon living in a little stucco house the villagers called a villetta. He would walk carefully, looking for holes and rocks, on the dirt road that ambled from their villetta through shady olive groves, out into the sun, then down to the waterfront, to its colorful boats and crumbling castle, and the school building with its stern façades. None of the trees' branches hung low over the road from his house, so he was safe. No dogs were ever loose that might break the skin if they tried to bite him. He would pass a convent whose walls were covered with lichen and whose courtyard was almost as dark as night from the trees that had grown unpruned for an eternity there. He would also—right where the sunlight broke through—pass the massive wrought-iron gate of the Perotto family villa and the endless path that led from that gate up, like a rose-bush-decorated snake, to the front of the Villa Perotto, which no one in the village had ever been inside. It was rumored that witches—*streghe*—lived in little shacks in the olive groves all around, poisoning cats and talking to the green wall lizards,

and he had come to believe it himself. Even his friends believed in spells—ones that came from the shadows of the trees, the darkness of the convent, the sea in moonlight, and, in turn, in miracles that came from the *light*. Ones that came from the kindness of the people, their lack of cruelty, and what mattered most to them and always had: *family*. But the magic didn't touch him directly—he still bled every day and always would, world without end—and so he did not think much about it. Why should he? It was *their magic*, the village's, not his, wasn't it? He was an interloper and would be gone from its blue cove and green hills and people and sun soon enough. He would return to the shadows.

Besides, he had *real* things to do. He had, in fact, decided this morning to do it, and he did. He went ahead and stopped beside the black gate of the great villa, looked down to make sure there was nothing he might trip on—a step, a stone, a brick—and took a step toward it. He was an American, but people would have been kind to him even if he weren't. They were different here. Perhaps the people who lived in the villa wouldn't mind if he asked. He would be courteous, of course. There had to be envelopes, old ones—with old stamps on them—somewhere in the countless rooms of that villa, and maybe they would help him with his collection. Someone in this villa might even have a stamp collection himself and would understand why he, David, needed one, too—so that he might know who he was in this new place. Men who collected stamps had once been boys who'd collected them, known who they were by collecting them, and so . . .

• • • •

He put his hands cautiously on the iron design—a hawk or eagle with wings outspread—and checked for any metal that might tear his skin. Then he looked again up the path that led to the villa.

He rang the doorbell, which was black and smooth and as safe as a seashell worn by the waves and sand. He was nervous, but that, he told himself, was only because he wanted to ask his question correctly, in the right way, respectfully.

He could see an old woman in a simple black dress—the kind so many old women here wore—coming down the long path from the villa. It took her ages. She had a bad leg and wobbled a little, so the path was even longer for her. When she reached the gate, she did not open it, but asked him gently what he wanted.

“*Che vuoi, ragazzo?*”

“I am the American boy who attends the middle school in this village.” His family, he went on, lived down the road in the villetta La Lupetta, the little house

just below the Villa Lupo, which belonged to Doctor Lupo and his family. She nodded. Everyone knew the doctor, whose name meant “wolf.”

He collected *francobolli*, he said, and was sorry to bother her; but wondered whether the family had any old envelopes with stamps on them that they might be willing to give him for his collection, which (he explained) needed more brightly colored stamps. It was unreasonable that he should ask, he admitted—“*Mi dispiace, Egregia Signora*”—but he would appreciate her consideration of a boy’s request.

He had red hair, blue eyes, and freckles. His face was round like a moon. He had been teased for these things at his father’s other assignments—these and his bleeding and the fact that he didn’t like sports—but here he had not, and he didn’t know why. He knew he stood out and that the old woman probably knew, even without his saying it, who he was, and his family’s story.

The old woman looked at him oddly, as if she knew him, blinked and said very gently, “*Si, capisco, ragazzo mio*. Please wait a moment.”

My boy, she had said, and it wasn’t just an expression here, he remembered. You said it only to family and friends, people you knew and cared about.

He watched her ascend the path slowly back to the villa and, reaching the dark portico, disappear inside. He waited for what seemed like an hour. He felt bad that he was making her, with her bad leg, do all this walking. He shouldn’t have asked.

When she reappeared in the sunlight, she had something—no, many things—in her hand; and as she grew closer, he could see they were exactly what he had asked for: envelopes—and postcards, too. Postcards were even better because the postcard itself was often beautiful. As she handed them to him through the gate, she was smiling because he was smiling. His happiness for some reason made her happy.

It was then that he saw she had only one clear eye. One was brown, the other cloudy, as if blind.

“You may have these, *ragazzo mio*,” she said, again gently. “I wish you the very best of luck with your collection. Stamps are a wonderful thing. Boys should always collect them.” She paused, and a shadow passed over them both; or perhaps it was only the sadness in her voice as she said: “Many years ago the man of this villa collected *francobolli*, too, as did his son, but their collections are no longer here . . .”

“*Moltissime grazie, Signora.*”

“*Prego, ragazzo mio . . .*”

Her happiness at talking to him—that’s how it felt—seemed to win over the shadow, and her one good eye was dancing with light now.

He continued to thank her—he did not want to leave—and he wished he knew the language better than a year of tutoring and school allowed. She would not move either, he saw, unless he moved first. And so—though the step he took seemed to make her a little sad, and that was the last thing he wanted to do to her—he was the one to leave first, looking down again to make sure it was safe to walk, but also stopping and turning once to look back at her as she, too, turned and began to ascend the path again, her black dress like a shrinking shadow beyond the dark iron of the tall gate, the windows of the villa suddenly dark, too.

• • • •

In his bedroom, on his bed, after checking his body for bruises, and thinking of the old woman’s pale, bloodless eye, he didn’t remove the stamps from the envelopes and postcards. He would never remove them, he told himself. You just didn’t do that when the envelopes and cards were old. The stamps were from the Second World War. He could tell from the pictures on them. The handwriting was wonderful—the sevens with their crossed trunks, the ones that looked more like capital A’s without a bar, and the floweriness of the handwriting. He saw now that the postcards weren’t picture postcards at all, but simply letter-cards. He was disappointed, but not really. The ink was ink—but instead of being perfectly black it was a dark red, sometimes a brown that was almost black. Was this what people called “sepia”? Two of the envelopes—the smallest—had little cards in them, with exquisite, tiny writing, the cards bordered in black. He remembered from reading that stamps bordered with black meant death—that the person on the stamp had died. The black borders were like a little funeral for the person.

He tried to read the letters and cards, but gave up. The words were those of grown-ups writing to each other, not to a boy of twelve, and, even when he could read the words, they were hard to understand. It was enough to have the old war stamps—some with Victor Emanuel, the King, some with old airplanes or Roman busts, some with the man they called Mussolini. It was enough to smell their mustiness, something else that couldn’t hurt him, and know that they’d been written in another time. A time when the crippled men in the village had received their wounds in that war—bleeding more than he ever had—and become crippled. A time when the women who now wore black had lost their husbands to a bleeding that couldn’t be stopped, and started to wear their black dresses, like

the old woman from the villa. Like a funeral, that dress.

• • • •

Not long after he was given the envelopes and cards, the boy's father threw himself on his son, knocking him out of the way of an oncoming car near the doctors' office on the Navy base in Livorno. His father—a tall, gentle man, an officer—broke an ankle saving him, and the boy felt a strange mixture of gratitude and guilt. At least the broken ankle didn't bleed. At least it was just a bruise. "That is what fathers do for their sons," his father explained, his eyes as blue as the boy's and his skin just as pale.

• • • •

A week after that, the boy's bleeding stopped. It stopped suddenly, and it stopped completely. He didn't bruise anymore. His cuts bled only for a moment, the blood clotting as it was supposed to. He no longer needed the infusions, the doctor visits, the drives to and from them. He no longer had to walk carefully.

His Navy doctors in Livorno—and specialists from Genoa that they brought it in to try to understand it—could not explain it. There was, of course, no connection between the car episode and this, and no one even suggested it. Only the boy wondered, and then he stopped wondering.

Bloodwork over the next three months showed the impossible: The FVIII deficiency had disappeared. The clotting protein was now suddenly present.

The adults talked on and on about it, but what mattered to the boy—the only thing that could possibly matter, miracle that it was, and a miracle, he felt sure, that was somehow tied to the village and that old woman—was that he didn't have to be careful anymore, didn't have to check every minute of every day every inch of his skin for scratches, cuts, and bruises.

It took him months to learn how to walk differently, touch things differently, be *different* in the world, not afraid. Sometimes it was frustrating, how long it was taking, because it seemed silly—how breaking a painful "habit" could be so difficult. He also, he soon saw, had to give up a big piece of who he was—a boy who *bled*—and perhaps this made the breaking even more difficult. But by the end of summer the new feeling—that he was like other boys now—told him who he was. *A boy who didn't bleed.*

He continued adding to his stamp collection, yes, but it felt different. It was not

desperate. He didn't do it nervously, with a dread whose face was never quite clear. He collected stamps simply because the other boys did, because it was fun, and it was fun because the dread was fading, and with it, the shadows.

Over the years, he would start to bleed again, but stop within minutes. His doctors back in the States could not explain why—it made no sense because the deficiency was still gone—but when he did bleed, brief though it was, he would dream that night of something small and mysterious bleeding in the darkness forever, no one knowing it was there. Was it a heart, dead but alive somehow? Was it a tiny baby, dead at birth? Was it something else in his dream?

As the years passed, the episodes finally stopped. The dreams stopped, too. He was a man now and could forget how much blood there had once been in his world.

• • • •

When the boy was a man of forty-five, living in his own country—his own father long since retired from the military, and the bleeding of his youth a memory that sometimes felt like someone else's (though the day his father had saved him he would never forget)—he found himself teaching high school history. He loved history as much as he'd once loved stamps, and weren't they alike? Every stamp was history, and every country knew what it was by its stamps. He had been teaching history for years, had been married twice—the first time far too young—and now had three grown children whom he loved, but who had never been interested in stamps, or any collection, for that matter. It was a silly feeling, he knew—feeling a little sad about that—because he was no longer interested in his old collections either and hadn't been for years. People were what mattered. In fact, he often said that to his students, who weren't quite sure, he knew from their faces, why he was saying it.

On a spring day, cleaning one of the two attics of his house, he found in a large trunk the box with the old envelopes and cards. The box was black and sticky with something, and at first he didn't recognize them, those letters and cards, the stickiness so filled the box, leaking from its corner and flaps. Someone had—perhaps his parents, perhaps he himself—years ago taped the box up with masking tape, and that was the only thing that had kept it together as the cardboard grew soggy and tried to fall apart.

The sticky material, as he got it on his hands, felt more like honey than paint or an adhesive, but he couldn't, in the dim light of the attic, see well enough to

identify it.

He got rubber gloves from the kitchen, put the damp and crusty box on newspapers on the porch, and pulled out the envelopes and cards. The stickiness was a mystery, but he was more interested in what the box held. The last time he had touched them, he had been a child.

He wasn't sure, holding the letters—covered as they were by whatever the substance was—that he'd be able to read them. He got a wet sponge and tried to wipe them clean, but the water took the writing away as well. He stopped, sighed, started reading what was readable, and found that there was more than enough.

It was stunning.

It was history, immense history, that he held in his hand, sticky or not. He'd held it in his hands as a boy, but without knowing it.

The letters and cards were condolences—ones from senators, doctors, generals, archbishops, members of Mussolini's cabinet—to the family of the man who had died, and died violently, though not on the battlefield. Or a battlefield of another kind. An important man. A hero of the Great War, and now, in these letters, a man of position in another war: His Excellency the General Giuseppe Perotto, *Ministero dello Stato* and *Senatore del Regno*, and a member of il Duce's Ministry of War. A man important not just to a fishing village in Liguria, where he had been born, but to an entire country and its role in that war. "To the Family of General Giuseppe Perotto. We are aware of the painful travails you are enduring at this time of your incalculable loss. The crazed individual who has taken the General and Ugo from us. . ." "My dear Margherita—What a terrible surprise I received this morning by telegraph from the Ministry of War. I was, at that moment, overwhelmed with gratitude and yet a sense of terrible loss as well for those weeks my wife and I spent with you, the General, and Ugo in 1930 in Liguria, and can only pray . . ." "I send to you by words that must fail to capture the human heart my most profound condolences for the loss of the General and your son to the insanity of these times. His passing will be felt by all"

Why had the old woman in black given him such letters? Where had she found them when she returned to the villa? Why were they still there, ready to be given to a boy? Who was she, and was the "man of the villa" she had spoken of that day at the gate, when he was thirteen, the General? If so, what had happened to that man's collection?

He didn't know; but the letters remained, and they made his hands tremble, holding them. He needed to look something up, but what was that stickiness? It was, he found himself thinking—crazy as the idea was—as if the letters

themselves had somehow leaked the black-but-red stickiness into that box, all over the letters and cards. But that wasn't possible. He was tired—neither he nor his wife had slept well the night before—and finding the letters had put him in a dreamy place, imagining all sorts of things from the sheer emotion of it.

Tossing the vision aside, he went to his computer and did the quick research he wanted to do, a simple search, and stopping suddenly when he felt the blood drain from his face and hands and the air of his office turn cold.

General Giuseppe Perotto (the entry read) had been killed by a lone “anti-Fascist” revolutionary with his Carcano M91 rifle on August 3, 1943.

The assassin had been stalking the General's family that day in Rome, planning to kill them all; and when the first shot was fired, hitting the General in the chest, the General had thrown himself on his wife and son.

That had not been enough to save Ugo, the boy, or himself. The assassin was a marksman trained by the Army.

“Ugo Perotto was twelve—” the entry went on.

“—collected stamps, and suffered from hemophilia.”

• • • •

When he got up from his computer, he was shaking. He went back to the porch, to the box of letters, and brought them into the kitchen, to the counter there, where the light was brighter. Removing the rubber gloves at last, he touched the substance both where it was still sticky and where it was dry and crusty. He recognized it now. Without a doubt.

To make sure, he smelled his sticky fingers, caught the whiff of rust, and tasted it, too. Saltiness. Metal. After all, it was a sea inside us, wasn't it?—and full of iron.

Black and a near-black brown, but with red. It couldn't escape being red even when it was black. It was blood. Old blood.

The letters had bled for him so that he would not have to bleed. They had bled for him for thirty-five years, and he hadn't known it. He had put the letters away, as if they were not—*could not be*—important any longer to him, the bleeding gone at last. And yet they had been there in his life forever, the reason he was no longer cursed, the reason he'd been able to be a good husband and good father and lived a normal life.

The letters and the blood they bled for him, a boy the Perotto family hadn't even known, could not bring a father and son back to life, but they could keep

another boy alive even if it meant bleeding for him in the darkness of a box, one attic after another. For if they did that, an old woman in black could leave the shadow of a villa's portico, enter the sunlight, and begin walking and keep walking, thinking of the grandson she had loved and missed so very much, and might have again, if only for the briefest moment, in the moon-faced boy she was about to meet.

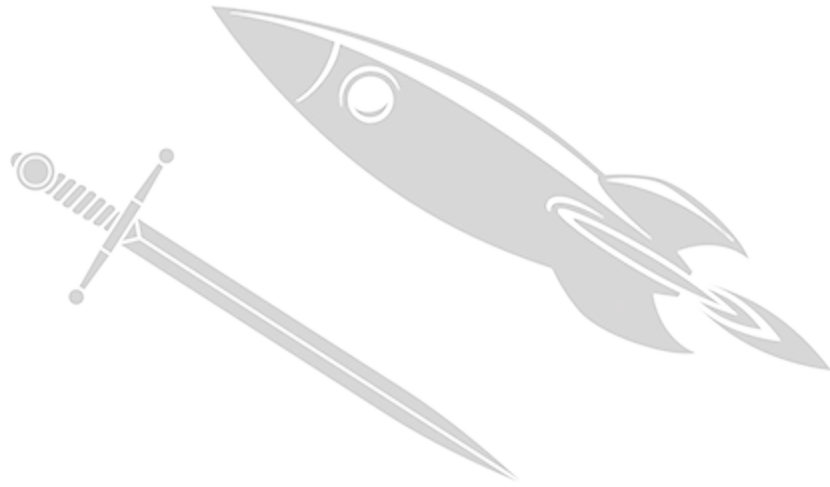
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce McAllister's short stories have appeared over the years in many of the SFF field's major magazines and in various "year's best" volumes, and have won or been short-listed for awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Shirley Jackson Award, the Nebula, the Hugo and others. He is the author of the novels *Dream Baby* and *The Village Sang to the Sea*, and the collection *The Girl Who Loved Animals*.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

NOVELLA



Steppin' Razor

Maurice Broaddus | 13720 words

“Some people have written the story of my life representing as truth what in fact derives from ignorance, error or envy; but they cannot shake the truth from its place, even if they attempt to make others believe it.”

—*My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*, Autobiography of H.M. Haile Selassie I

I. Crazy Baldheads

Desmond Coke no longer jumped at the thunder of artillery in the sky. They were the weapons of the age. Born in violence, Jamaica had been settled by bloodshed and held by cruelty. The great thrumming sound from the passing airships bristled the skin. Dry brown vines crunched under his weight as he leaned against the cotton tree's steel grey trunk with little concern of dirtying his suit. From his hillside vantage point, he watched the familiar panorama play out through mountaintop haze.

Ominous shadows, like a shoal of slow-moving whales, dove among the clouds. A flag emblazoned across each of their massive hulls, the crosses of three saints formed the Union Jack. Impassive and smug, the passing battalion represented little more than bloated saber-rattling in the name of the Albion Empire. Their standing mission to raze Accompong Town amounted to a bombing raid on the well-fortified city. A vain effort, as the town, and much of the island, was reinforced to withstand hurricane assault, much less the tepid shelling of airships.

Accompong Town launched artillery shells loaded with witchfire, petroleum refined to a gel which blazed with lava's white-hot fury when ignited. Neither side veered near enough to the other to do any real damage. The same dance repeated every few months as Albion warships violated Jamaican airspace on their way to other islands. Ostensibly securing their foothold in the American colony, any incursion was strictly for show. Albion had its hands full warring with the Five Civilized Nations of the northwest territories and the Tejas Free Republic of the southwest territories.

Waiting for the smoke to clear, Desmond pinched a pile of dried chiba leaves and rolled them into his spliff. Lighting his spliff and inhaling deeply, the smoke filled his lungs and came out in a ropery fog from his nostrils. The coarsely serrated alternate facing leaves of the chiba plants were to be admired in their own way. Versatile, it found its chief purpose through its intoxicating smoke.

The cotton tree scraped his back as he shifted. Maroons considered cotton trees sacred. They believed duppies danced among the branches of those rooted in graveyards, the spirits free to play and flit about at whim. Muddled superstitions to some, Desmond clung to the old ways when they served him. No one would search him out where Old Hinge, that particularly fearsome duddie, hung her skin on branches as a warning before making mischief.

The booms faded into a sputtering thunderstorm without rain. Distant rumbles no longer shook the ground and what passed for tranquility returned to the island. Desmond stabbed out his spliff against the tree and fixed a broken smile to his face, tucking the unsmoked portion into his pocket. Still in the rush of the heady smoke, his thoughts floated above reality, the world moving at a much slower pace as his languid steps took him back toward the Cobena Park estate. Crickets renewed their evening chirping. A damp heat clung to the air. Chickens dashed about, their fluttering wings objecting to his presence. A tinge of sorrow nagged him as he passed the wood shanties many of his brethren slept in when not in the fields. Young, listless, machete-wielding laborers who knew nothing of their heritage, up before sunrise; by moonrise still working. Even without the crack of the whip, without the smack of the cane, without a Massa to take away his pickney and sell them up the way. Unlike the Maroons, the rest of the Jamaican populace was made up of people who fled the Americas, the descendants of slaves. The Chinese. The Taino. Not to mention Albion's undesirables, her convicts, debtors, and dissidents. A proud tradition of exiles who settled the island but were not permitted to live in the Seven Cities of the Maroon.

His life wasn't his own.

Descended from the Ashanti people, the 16,000 Maroons formed the ruling class of Jamaica. The nation's immense wealth stemmed from its production of sugar cane and rum. And chiba, though no one discussed it in polite company. The Cobena Park estate was known chiefly for two crops: bananas and chiba. This allowed the family to own a number of indentured servants. Unlike in Albion or the Americas, Maroon servants were considered part of the family. That nuanced difference helped Jamaica's aristocracy lay their heads to pillow at night.

—What took you so long? August Cobena asked from behind a table in the

kitchen.

—I just now finished.

—Come, nuh. August raised both his arms and waited in the middle of the large drawing room. As Desmond neared him, he realized the man wore only his white silk jumpa and a pair of briefs, thankfully covered by the fall of the collarless shirt. August nodded toward the pile of kente cloth. Its silk and cotton material ran smoothly over his fingers, a dark green pattern accented by yellow and black threads. Desmond draped the interwoven cloth strips around August, thinking the man too old to be diapered like a child. He'd always considered August Cobena an avaricious man, whose tiny eyes gleamed from within his large face with a faraway gaze, as though staring through whoever he spoke to in order to fix them on his next goal. Black moles freckled his cheek, his smooth skin, dark like calf hide. His nose was too thin for his face and he never quite shut his mouth, leaving his fat tongue to loll on the cusp of his lips as if forgotten.

Desmond dutifully wrapped the fabric around him, leaving the man's right shoulder and arm exposed, then allowing the remaining cloth to trail along the ground. It was a sign of prosperity and August never allowed an opportunity to acknowledge the class differences between him and others to go unattended.

Gaslit fixtures adorned the walls. The extra heat produced was well worth the display of their wealth. Putting on a pair of slippers, August moved toward the bar and poured himself a finger of colorless rum from a crystal decanter. The first glass went down in a single gulp. As did the second. He lingered on the third.

—Are you ready? Ninky Cobena's voice had both a nasal quality and a sing-song measure to it. Too tall, too loud, and too young—she was nearly thirty years August's junior—her wide hips and high breasts cut a remarkable profile despite her wrappings. Her kente wrap was the inverse pattern to August's: a rich yellow, with green patterns woven against black threads. She, too, wore her cloth around her body styled as a toga, over an undercloth of white lace. The other main difference was a red Calico scarf wrapping her head like ivy around a statue, folded in half, tied and tucked. It accentuated her high cheekbones and full lips. Her every move was sure.

Desmond backed away from the man and took his place in the corner of the room. The fact that they spoke English was the only acknowledgement he was present. The Maroon spoke Asante-Twi when they were among their own and English when obroni were present. Patois was spoken only by the "common" people. Desmond sat between them, among them yet unseen at the same time. Such was the power of class and caste, an accident of shade. All the better

positioned to glean scraps of discarded conversation.

—No, I'm not ready. What's the point? This whole estate is cursed.

—August, don't be that way. The stack of bracelets on her right wrist dropped to the middle of her arm with each gesture.

—Our fortunes dwindle. Our family name is . . .

—Fine. It still carries much weight in the empire. The Colonel still needs us. Ninky adjusted the drape of his cloth. She snapped her fingers and held out her hand without meeting Desmond's gaze. He unfurled his pocket kerchief and handed it to her. She dabbed at some imagined spot on August's collar. Though young, she was wise as a serpent. The rest of the staff feared being in her presence, as she had a bit of the dragon about her; however, Desmond was the personal attaché for August and didn't fear her wrath. He'd dealt with worse in his own mother.

—You need to take better care of your charge.

—Yes, mum. Desmond pocketed his kerchief. She hated to be called mum, complaining it made her sound old. Desmond insisted that it was about issuing the proper respect. Her irritation was a quiet benefit.

—But for how long? August brushed her fussing hands away.

—Not all power is found in coffers, Ninky said, nonplussed. We have been invited to dine at the Colonel's table tonight for a reason.

—How can you be so calm?

—There's no point in treating it like a funeral dinner.

—It might as well be a last supper.

—Hush, my husband. Ninky fastened gold disks to her ears. She hooked her parasol to the crook of her arm. Desmond, hurry up and get dressed, man. You will attend us tonight.

—Yes, mum. Thank you, mum.

With one simple sentence, years of planning and waiting fell into place.

He would finally be close enough to kill the Colonel.

II. Slave Driver

Perched high up in the mountains, the St. Elizabeth parish in western Jamaica bordered the western parishes of St. James and Trelawny. Some stretches were a desperate collection of galvanized zinc-topped shacks dotting the hillside, working up the nerve to declare themselves a town. Desmond called this "the Jamaica within Jamaica," the areas which existed between the megapolises and the

stately king homes, far from the intrusive view of tourists. They still had a ways to go before they arrived at Accompong Town, named for one of the seven leaders who helped to liberate Jamaica from Albion.

The lush green of the hills was a sea of palmate plants. The sun hovered overhead. A smattering of rain burst from a seemingly cloudless sky, more of a sprinkling than a downpour, not even worth turning on the wiper blades. Desmond drove along the hard-packed dirt road—a one-way road with room enough for a single car—struck by how quiet the wealthy were when they had to be around each other. Stitched together by copper rivets, twin brass tubes outlined the body of the car. The vehicle wound along the tight roads, with Desmond availing himself liberally of the horn to alert oncoming vehicles or passers-by. Men walked along the roads armed with machetes, returning from their day's labor. Shirtless or with their shirt completely unbuttoned and untucked, they hard-eyed the conspicuous vehicle.

Desmond wound around another bend and slowed as several cars blocked the road.

—Is everything all right, Desmond? August's voice cracked with concern. If he had his way, he'd either never leave his compound or be whisked by private airship to wherever he needed to go. That way he'd never have to risk his safety by mingling with common folk, as if secretly fearing that poverty was contagious.

—Looks like a passa-passa. Nothing to worry about.

—As if they can't entertain indoors like decent folk. Ninky craned about, studying the burgeoning street party. Well, I suppose they can't. Still, they shouldn't block the road. It's a public nuisance. Go see about it, Desmond.

—Yes, mum.

The air smelled of fresh-baked bread, body odor, and chiba smoke. Music swelled from the stack of speakers pressed into the cleft of the hill. Aggressive, angry drumbeats accompanied by electronic squalls focused through an electro-transmitter, its driving rhythms pounded the air. A rotating cylinder gyrated up and down within a glass-fronted cabinet, the delicate machinery protected by a brass framed cabinet. A series of antennae lined the top of the device; electricity arced between them. The charges climbed the spires, inching along like a self-winding string. Men shouted into the amplifier, toasting without hope, screaming the soundtrack to their life.

Desmond approached a mud-coated box-shaped vehicle. Paint flecked from its copper enhanced casing like it was eager to be free of it. A group of men cloistered by shadows, ambled toward him. Their eyes darted back and forth,

calculating an internal gamble of how much money Desmond's charges represented. With the air of predators on the prowl, any last one of the gathered men would bash his brains in and leave him for dead, not bothering to drag his body out of the street. He adjusted the weight of his pistol. Ninky had insisted on him getting dressed, after all.

Another man pushed through the throng. His cream breeches dirty and loose, he was of the bush. Several welts marred his shirtless torso, probably from thumpings meant to correct too much spirit. His nest of dreadlocks tumbled from a multi-colored knit cap onto his broad shoulders, a sign of his covenant as an Israelite. He walked tall, meeting everyone's eyes, commanding respect like he had a gun in his pocket. Hands wizened and scarred, calluses ridged his fingers. He used a machete to split a coconut to drink from, then stabbed the blade into the earth beside him before sauntering over to Desmond.

—You fecka you! I should bust your jugular! The man cocked his pock-marked face, fixing a cataract-clouded eye on Desmond.

—Who do you think you're talking to, you mawga foot Rasta? Desmond demanded.

The pair squared off against one another, wary eyes refusing to break their gaze. After a few heartbeats they broke up into laughter.

—You rude youth. No manners at all.

—Long time, Country.

Desmond clasped hands with the Rastafarian. Country and the law had an understanding of sorts. He was a top ranker in the Presidential Posse gang. The Albion colony of America issued a warrant for his arrest for trafficking narcotics. The way he evaded dragnets, frustrated American intelligence, and returned to Jamaican soil made him a hero to the people. Former actor now puppet for Albion, Viceroy Ronald of the United States pressured the Colonel to sign an extradition order but was told "We're Jamaica. We handle our own." Despite the bounty on his head in America, Country was safe in Jamaica. Though his ties to the Obeahists made him an enemy of the Kabbalists and the Kabbalists didn't care about borders. Or legalities.

—Where you off to with those waitamigls?

—Dinner with the Colonel. I'm supposed to clear your passa-passa so we can head on.

—You sup with the devil. Country sucked his teeth in disdain. He would sell us to Babylon if he could.

—I know my duty. Now, I need to make this look good. Desmond did not

relish his role as attaché, a glorified servant. Whenever he dealt with any of his “of the field” brethren, he wondered how they viewed him. His heart was with them, but because he was “of the house,” a gulf separated them.

—Give me a nanny.

Desmond handed him a \$500 banknote, which pictured Grandy Nanny, the great freedom fighter.

—Nanny for Queen. Country held the note up to the firelight to make sure it wasn't a counterfeit bill.

—You think me a thief now?

—Trust no shadow after dark.

• • • •

The headlights, jutting cans more ostentatious than aerodynamic, slowly extinguished once the engine shut off. Desmond opened the door for the Cobenas. Ninky adjusted her wrap, then opened her parasol, a well-rehearsed gesture that gave time for August to come around and take her arm. When they were in place, she nodded at Desmond.

Desmond's lanky form bore the brown, single-breasted pinstripe suit with a scarecrow's bearing. Cut purposefully short, the jacket made his legs appear even longer. A pink shirt peeked from under the jacket, the corresponding pink stripes of the tie swirled against the alternating yellow stripes matching his pocket kerchief. The brown overlaid with yellow repeated on his two-toned wing-tipped shoes. Desmond donned a pair of sunglasses which hid a third of his face and placed an unlit pipe in his mouth. He twirled a tan-handled cane once, signaling they were ready to march, then strode ahead of the couple. Only the highest-ranking of the bourgeois dandied their servants for such an entrance.

Eschewing the gleaming metal structures of the Montego Bay and Kingston megapolises, immense white concrete buildings formed a court around Accompong Town's central palace complex, though functionally the entire town was an extension of the palace proper. The people scurried about in frenzied anticipation. Every January sixth—on the birthday of the rebel leader Cudjoe, brother to Nanny—the people came together for a festival in celebration of the peace treaty between Jamaica and Albion. A group of elders hunched over tables, slapping dominoes into place and making fun of each other's play. The women roasted a pig over an open fire. The ceremony required that they shred it, mix it with fresh rice—careful to add no salt to either—then go under the nearby cave to

throw the food. Only after their ancestors' duppies were fed could they cook for themselves. Like the rhythm of waves crashing against a slave ship, music built in intensity as people sang of rebellion and emancipation. Others danced, invoking the spirit of their ancestors.

Desmond never knew his own birthday nor even how many he should have celebrated.

Giant stone lions policed the entrance to the palace. The stationed guards mirrored those of Albion's Buckingham Palace, except for black uniforms with gold epaulettes in place of Albion's eye-bleeding red. Despite Jamaica's independence, much of it echoed Albion. Even its flag, modeled on the St. Andrew's Cross, was reminiscent of the Union Jack except in black, gold, and green. Apologists claimed the intent was to jab a stick in the eye of the great British Empire, but Desmond had little use for Albion's fripperies.

Two of the guards remained in position by either side of the main gate while a third approached them.

—Who you with? His gold cap tilted off to the side of his head as he scanned them.

—The Colonel.

—Who you represent?

—August Cobena of the Cobena Park estate.

Desmond didn't meet the man's hostility, which stopped just short of open aggression. The Maroon loved their jijifo, "evasive maneuvers" designed to wrong foot obroni. The more confused an outsider was, the more advantage the Maroon had. The guard relented without a smile.

—No harm. Just conversing. Make sure you not here on bad business. Your weapon will be checked and returned upon departure.

Desmond felt uneasy undressed. He'd heard reports that Kabbalists were on the island. Despite being in the Colonel's compound, he'd prefer to be able to address matters on his own if need be. But he wouldn't let that get in the way of his primary mission. He deposited his weapon into the waiting tray by his fingertips. They waited in the greeting hall of the palace, surrounded by the lacquered mahogany of curving banisters and the polished brass of the fixtures. Automata, constructed of porcelain with not even the slightest whir of machinery, took their coats.

At the blowing of an abeng, a retinue of a half dozen men paraded into the large hallway and lined up to face one another. Wearing tall, cream-colored Brodie helmets, long red jackets, and cream-colored pantaloons, they withdrew

the cutlasses which hung at their side and held them aloft to form an arch. A squat, mahogany-skinned man entered next. An Albion admiral's hat, too large for his head, canted at an odd angle, revealing closely cropped hair. A white silk coat hung from his shoulders in order to allow his dark blue jacket to be appreciated, with its long tails and gold tassels on the shoulders like an infantryman. A thick cravat bowed at his neck. His breeches and boots completed the quasi-military appearance.

Colonel Malcolm Juba. Malcolm the First.

Oversized, black-rimmed glasses masked a face ravaged by pox. A thin Van Dyke framed his mouth. Thick-necked, his gait had a bear-like quality to it. He often acted in a strange, wild manner, but by all accounts he was a brilliant chieftain. The way the Colonel adopted British culture as affectation disgusted Desmond. There were those in certain circles who considered his lack of ideological purity worrisome. "Elected" every five years, typically running unopposed, an osofu, thirty-two members appointed by him, assisted the Maroon leader. Despite being the highest-ranking members of the osofu, August and Ninky genuflected in his presence.

The Colonel stared through Desmond as if he wasn't in the room.

—August. Ninky. I'm so glad you could dine with us tonight. Used to being obeyed, Malcolm's voice had a thumbscrew timber, pressing down on all who heard him.

—We're honored, August said.

—Malcolm. Ninky's voice held a tone of total pleasure as she offered her hand. Thus they began their courtship of societal niceties.

—Please, come this way. Malcolm snapped his fingers.

Desmond had never met a pharaoh before, but imagined it being much like this. Malcolm projected the essence of power, creating an aura about him as if he were the incarnation of a god. The procession passed the royal altar. The façade took up nearly the entire wall. Brass heads honoring the past Colonels outlined the frame. Within the woodwork itself, several images formed scenes. Ninky's hard gaze stopped on it, studying its details.

—Do you know your history?

—Everything's always a test with you, Malcolm, Ninky said.

—This time the question is a testament to the intricacy of the artisans' work. His hand swept over a portrait of boats about to lay siege to the island.

—This was the forces of Albion in 1655, with their "Western Design," their offensive against the Spaniards who occupied Jamaica, two infant powers,

wrestling over a tiny island plaything. But, even then, Albion revealed its hubris, sending only thirty-eight ships carrying 8,000 men—poorly equipped and poorly organized—to oust Spain’s foothold. As if their mere appearance would carry the day. After all, who would dare oppose the will of the Queen?

The scene moved to that of people opening doors to pens and fleeing. Malcolm stepped with a deliberate ease, ensuring all attention was on him.

—The sad reality of their overconfidence was that it worked on the Spanish. But before they retreated, the Spanish freed their slaves in hopes they would harry the English until they could return to re-conquer Jamaica. However, both sides underestimated the Maroon. To them, we were savages, and it was their duty to tame us. That was what the Spanish named us, you know. “Cimarron” as in “wild.” Untamed. We kept that name to show what the untamed spirit could do.

—To the British, we were the Coromantee, after the slave forts on the Koramantine coast of Africa, Desmond said.

—Ashanti. Fanti. We were all the same shade of black to them. Your man knows his history, if not his place.

—My place?

Four of the Colonel attendants assumed attack postures. Nothing too overt. August and Ninky probably didn’t notice the spacing. They positioned themselves to neutralize Desmond with minimum fuss, but the cramped space worked to his advantage. He could think of eight ways to cripple them if they attacked. Nine if he wanted to damage the artwork. Desmond smirked, in spite of himself. The Colonel nodded ever so slightly and the men backed down, assuming closer ranks.

—We don’t attack obroni unless they move against us first. That is our way.

—Is that what I am now? Obroni?

—It’s all you ever were. You are a brown skin man. Malcolm’s voice held a sour note of disapproval. Maroons are black.

All eyes studied Desmond, awaiting his reaction. His instinct was to rush the Colonel. None of his attendants could reach him before he wrenched the man’s skull from his neck. However, not one of the Niyabingi had gained such access to the palace and he was obligated to learn as much as he could before completing his task.

Desmond swallowed hard before bowing. He stepped back, satisfying the Colonel.

—Come, now. August clapped his hands. The music, the art, it all is to celebrate our Independence Day.

—You're right, August. Come, we have much to discuss. And celebrate.

When they entered the dining room, Cuban mastiffs trotted up to greet the Colonel. Such dogs at one time had been trained for man-hunting, unleashed on runaway slaves. Too many Maroons kept them as ironic pets. Custodians of their culture, the Maroon clung to the old ways as much as possible. All of the furniture was either mahogany or rosewood. Black lacquer cabinets accented with gaudy brass studs held sets of porcelain dolls. An empty Victorian birdcage stood in the corner. The entire design reminded Desmond of a plantation great house.

The attendants seated them around a mahogany table in a spacious salon, then lined up in formation against the back wall. They stood at rigid attention without sound or movement while the guests ate. They permitted Desmond to sit at a table off to the side. His plate served after the Cobenas', he finished quickly and sipped his tea. It was the finest tea he ever tasted.

An attendant poured Malcolm a libation from an array of bottles. Closing his eyes, he uttered a prayer in Asante-Twi. Desmond presumed this was to further remind him of his place as obroni. The Maroon loved their ceremonies.

—It has been 199 years since the end of the Maroon Wars, when Jamaica claimed its rightful independence. Becoming a beacon of hope in the west for Africans, a safe haven for runaways. But despite being that golden city on a hill, Jamaica is not without her problems.

—Do you mean the incident in Trenchtown? August asked.

—That incident caused us to declare a state of emergency. We had schools and businesses shutdown while armed vigilantes roamed the streets. We arrested their “top ranker,” but we were forced to ally ourselves with ghetto strongmen to keep the peace.

—Such an action is not without precedent. We've always had community enforcers. Things have merely . . . evolved, Ninky said.

Desmond stifled the need to shift in his seat, instead choosing to sip his tea and betray no emotions. His father had been one of those gang leaders. Romanticized as the Robin Hood of Trenchtown, Desmond clung to no illusions: His father was a drug dealer and weapon trafficker. The infamous Nesta Coke, up to his elbows in blood in the Rastafarian's war with the Kabbalists. A man of the people, never leaving the streets he was born into, he had risen to such folkloric heights of popularity he'd been immortalized in song. The Colonel couldn't have him killed or disappeared. But rumor skittered about that Nesta's location had been leaked to the Kabbalists. In the middle of the night they broke in and whisked him back to the United States. His father was burned to death in a prison cell in the American

colony. That was how the Colonel managed his alliances.

—We have grown stagnant, said Malcolm. We have managed to avoid the culture of violence and absent fathers which so plague our brethren in Albion. They are a people broken by the sting of the plantation and the lash. But the poison that afflicts their souls seeps onto our soil, like a virus searching for a host. Still, we have our obayifo.

—Obeah? August asked.

The Rastafarian movement had grown to encompass all of the dissident wings. The Niyabingi fancied themselves as secret soldiers ready to put into action the will of the people. The Obeahists were more political, choosing more “practical” methods. Rumors abounded about the powers of obeah men and obeahmas. Some said they could separate their soul from their body. Could change a man’s heart. Could make harm befall an enemy.

—So you know of the old religion?

—I know that when the social order is maintained, no one turns to “The Science.” But when things deteriorate, become chaotic, people return to the old ways.

—You make our arguments for us.

—Arguments for what? August asked.

—We know of their plots. Most of them are little more than con men. But true practitioners of “The Science,” their power lies in their ability to poison. Wouldn’t you agree, Ninky?

—I wouldn’t know. Ninkey straightened and turned to him without a smile. I pay as much attention to them as I do tales of duppies.

—“Duppy dead out” in the age of reason, but not for those of The Science.

—Surely you’re being paranoid, August said.

—Perhaps. But you know the mark of a skilled politician? To make allies from enemies. Malcolm sipped from his drinking horn.

Desmond had heard the rhetoric before. No politician ever came out and admitted that many of the street-level gangsters worked at their behest, thus creating the very problems they could come in and solve. Profiting at both ends of the situation. It was quietly feared that the Colonel was in his heart a neocol, a tacit supporter of the movement to join the Albion empire, pining away for the rule of British law and order. Nostalgic for imperial glories, the Colonel reminded Desmond of a former slave who didn’t know what to do with his freedom, so desperate to retain his master’s “protection” and attention.

—But we are Jamaicans. We’re well off. We’re free, Ninky said.

—We have a poverty of values. We have a poverty of caring. We have a poverty of education. We have a poverty of responsibility. We have a poverty of time. We're not free until all of us are completely free. And Emperor Selassie shall point the way.

—Colonel, if I may, August said. I still don't see why we are here. And my apologies, but the ways of the Rastafari hold little interest to . . .

Malcolm raised his hand to cut off August. A young boy stood in the doorway. Not like other pickney, his skin was dark as midnight and his eyes the palest of green. His white collared shirt and black slacks had the appearance of a uniform. He moved with a quiet elegance. Malcolm studied their reactions to the boy.

—And who might this little one be? Ninky asked.

—Lij, Malcolm said.

—Lij? What an unusual name, August said.

—Names have power.

—You sound like a Kabbalist. Is he your nephew? A child of your staff?

—No. Lij is our guest of honor. Malcolm's voice grew throaty, with a hint of gloating

—I still don't see . . . August said.

—Talk and taste your tongue. You have a decision to make. We can end dinner here having enjoyed some pleasant conversation . . .

—Or . . . Ninky said in a wary, but curious tone.

—Or we can go deeper. We can show you things you may not be ready for, but which can take both you and our people to a whole new level.

—What is it? August asked, a foolish grin plastered on his face as the prospect intoxicated him.

—Anymore we cannot say. In fact, words cannot do justice to it. What we have to show you must be seen and experienced to be understood. But once you have seen them, your lives won't be the same. They may even be forfeit.

—Forfeit? Ninkey asked.

—That's the wager. Knowledge, power, and wealth could also be yours. The choice is yours.

• • • •

Desmond couldn't name what woke him. Despite the whir of the fans blades, the night was sticky with a cloying humidity punctuated by his own sweat. The buzz of mosquitoes irritated his ears. He rolled over in bed, unable to get

comfortable, as if an ill-placed spring poked him in the back. When he did drop into sleep amid his fitful tosses, he suffered nightmares, dreaming of fire.

The air had changed. The pressure in the room dropped, maybe from a door opening down the hall. The creak might have been old floorboard settling. However, August paid him to indulge his paranoia; heeding his uneasiness was a professional hazard. The palace prohibition disallowed him from walking about the grounds dressed, but there was undressed and there was undressed. Desmond grabbed his cane.

Wearing only his white undershirt and hastily donned breeches, Desmond crept along the hallway barefoot. The strange quiet of the house put him on edge. The entire guard had disappeared, as if he'd wandered into a deserted duplicate of the palace. It couldn't have been coincidence. It would explain why the Colonel had his own personal attendants on top of palace security. Anyone could be reached. Paranoia meant life.

At the end of the colonnaded balconies, the palace grounds led into shaded groves. Many considered it a modern marvel with its hanging gardens of genetically enhanced plants, species that existed nowhere else in the world. Put together with an artist's eye, the explosion of vibrant color was visible even from the byway. The gardens were world renown. Constructed in the 1860s, the cinchona plants were cultivated for their quinine, an antidote for malaria. This became a key export to Albion. Malcolm had hundreds of exotic palms from around the planet planted. Fan palms from Mauritius, hurricane palms from the Maldives, all against a landscape of red African tulips, lilac-colored hydrangeas, blue azaleas, and the like. An artificial stream coursed through the gardens to the melody of birds of paradise.

A shadow darted between the trees. If the figure were after the Colonel, he couldn't be allowed to succeed. Not when Desmond was so close to finding out all of the Colonel's secrets and the Rastafari so close to ending his threat once and for all. Desmond chased after him. The figure hoped to elude him among the trees, but Desmond had spent his share of time around the Corbena Park estate. The snapping of branches and the scurry of dead leaves gave away the would-be assassin's position. Eventually he realized it, too, and he whirled on Desmond in a sudden lunge. Dressed in all black, his goggles glowed a dull green. A series of canisters slung across his shoulder, like a shotgun ammo belt. The man had some acrobatic training. He danced about with incredible grace, a springiness to his steps as he rolled to his feet. Desmond leapt out of his way, dodging the first thrown punch.

Desmond tugged his cane, freeing the metal core from its sheath. He clutched the sword in one hand, but held the shaft of his scabbard with the other as if wielding two long sticks. He struck no vital areas as the dull thumps he landed battered the man's side.

Desmond parried the next blow using his scabbard and then ducked in what seemed to be a carefully choreographed dance. The assailant fought high, most of his attacks directed at Desmond's chest and head, with little power behind them. Crouched low, weight on his right knee, Desmond swung the sticks. The man raised his left leg, frozen like a resting crane, while fending off the blows. The two were fairly matched; neither man seemed to be able to press their advantage over the other. The clash of batons clattered in a flurry of wild swings.

His life was not his own. Desmond had been claimed and trained by the Niyabingi from the time of his father's death, another weapon in their war. Falling back on his training, Desmond spun in a clockwise kick that swept the man's legs. He allowed the momentum of his attack to carry him through; his cane and scabbard batted the man's arm and thigh. It was like hitting steel reinforced enough to hold off a dreadnought. Desmond dodged the wide arc of his assailant's next blows.

An abeng blew, alerting the guards. Ceramic automata whisked along the pathway. The man glanced around, then sprinted toward the outer wall, clearing it with short, agile leaps. On the other side laid a low drop-off into the thick of the grove. The assailant knew his exit strategy.

Desmond slid his cane back into its case. A glint of metal drew his eyes. A fallen canister slick with moisture. He daubed his fingers and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. Oil stained the grass.

—Well met, sir. Malcolm, escorted by his personal attendants, applauded as he approached.

—I suspect he was a Kabbalist agent. He had training, Desmond said.

—As have you.

—I am August Cobena's personal attaché. He wouldn't have hired me if I had not. The man also dropped this. Desmond opened the canister before Malcolm could protest. A gel of some sort. What is it?

—Don't. Malcolm warned and continued in a tone that didn't invite discussion. All will be explained. As we probably won't find slumber for the rest of the night, perhaps we should start our day a little earlier than we'd planned. Anything else you'd like to ask?

—No, suh. Desmond stopped just short of falling into patois, hoping for the

right measure of reserve and deference.

Malcolm's grin widened, a lolling crocodile smile.

III. Jah Live

The palace limousine—a brass engine the length of a train car whose pistons stammered and hissed as steam escaped—drove through the ruins of Nanny Town. The symmetry of the surrounding houses probably went unnoticed to the untrained eye, but Desmond knew their history. In shouting distance of one another, the houses formed a natural relay of communications should power, or technology, fail them. It was the way of Cudjoe, Nanny, Accompong, and the other military leaders who fought and expelled the Albion forces.

Nanny Town had been completely leveled during an Albion raid, but the Maroon left the ruins standing as a solemn reminder of their fate should they ever lower their guard. People said that the duppies of those who died in the battle still haunted it.

Though the vehicle hit every bump in the poorly kept roads, the jarring movement barely jostled Malcolm. He locked his regal stare on August as he addressed him. Ignoring Desmond.

—We're almost here. A leather strap draped like a gun belt over the shoulder of corded epaulettes on yet another blue uniform. Medals in the shape of baroque crosses adorned his chest, though what war service he'd actually seen was unclear. Gold braids wrapped at his cuffs and wound up to his elbow. A plumed hat nested between him and one of his attendants.

—Old Town? Flanked by Ninky and Desmond, August sat across from Malcolm. He tried to match the mood of the occasion; his full-length leopard print robe flowed to his ankles. He passed his gold staff from hand to hand, never quite getting the proper position for it, and appeared uncomfortable under his necklaces of beads.

—In the shadow of Cudjoe's tomb. Rather fitting don't you think?

—Malcolm, I don't wish to speak out of turn, but all are forbidden to be here. This area, it's . . . sacred.

—Another most fitting description, August. Come, you are among the first to see the wonders that await.

Desmond couldn't remember how long it had been since he ate. As attaché, he ate after his charges did, before them if they suspected an attempted poisoning. All told, it wasn't as bad as when he was a child and his belly grumbled worse

than a field hand without chiba. He exited the car first and stood at attention, allowing the length of his black jacket to fall to his knees. Charcoal-colored trousers, his light gray gloves matched his shoes and tie. An orange and yellow boutonniere was pinned to his lapel. For a moment, he closed his eyes against the heat, as if force of will alone would prevent his sweating. Malcolm nodded his approval before donning his hat.

Malcolm's attendants lined each side of the door to escort them. A gravel path veered from the road toward a stand of trees, one of which stood apart from the others. Ninky wandered toward them and stopped before the Kindah Tree. A sign at its base read "We are Family." She genuflected and knelt.

—You recognize this tree? Malcolm put a gloved hand on her shoulder.

—It's Cudjoe's tree. Ninky kept her eyes closed. Only the high ones are allowed to pilgrimage here once a year. But the sign . . . it's unmistakable.

—This is where Albion sued for peace, Malcolm told August, though he seemed just in need of an audience. Albion's Colonel Guthrie, as a sign of friendship, switched hats with Cudjoe. It's where we began the tradition of dubbing our rulers Colonel. Come, we have just a little further to go now.

This was the Jamaica Desmond knew. Not the megapolises, not the king's houses, not the tourist traps as people arrived to gawk at their culture like some sort of zoo exhibition. But this, the earth beneath his feet, the measured breeze. The memories of scooting up coconut trees and dropping fruit down to the waiting arms of his brothers. Sipping the barely sweet milk under the shade of banana leaves. Of swimming in underground caves where the town drew their water.

He was of the people left between the politicians and the wealthy and the Maroon. He hated that sewer trickled along the streets of his hometown, that so many of them had been crammed together and forgotten, treated like second-class citizens by their darker brethren. He was the hate that hate built, fired by neglect, and patient as the ocean.

They continued down a path which led from the secluded area deeper into the bush. Royal embroidery trimmed Ninky's bright red Raija Kaftan and matching headscarf. Embellished with small mirrors, a print of shadow people, each carrying their own burden, trailed up the Kaftan. August took Ninky's hand, steadying her as they walked. Their sandals weren't made for treks through the fields and their ankles often buckled over the unsteady terrain. But they uttered nary a wince as they walked, as if not wanting to give satisfaction to Malcolm, who made his way as sure-footed as a goat.

—You are about to enter Peace Cave, Malcolm said. From this location Cudjoe launched his attacks against Albion. Over the years, we have made . . . modifications to it.

The mouth of the cave was hidden from the casual observer. A cadre of soldiers patrolled a clearing. Recognizing Malcolm, they saluted. A lone guard escorted them into the cave mouth. He relieved Desmond of his cane and August of his staff. They wouldn't need such affectations, they were informed. Gaslit glass bowls burned to life at their entry, illuminating their path. The sounds of rushing water echoed from off in the darkness down an unlit side path as they made their way toward the rear of the cave. The path wound around crags of jutting stone until they reached an alcove. A hidden door slid out from the rock, closing them off. The pit of Desmond's stomach leapt as the room dropped.

—Colonel? August reached for a handhold along the wall.

—It is all right. We're simply plunging deeper into our story. It's still not too late to turn back.

—We've come too far for that now.

Ninky said nothing, but met Desmond's unerring gaze with her own steely one. Desmond turned away.

—We'd rather hoped you'd say that, August. We know you have long had an interest in our technology, Malcolm continued.

—I . . . yes.

—This is a place of questions. And wonders. Within these confines, our research follows two areas, the physical and the biological, yet manages to meet in the realm of the spiritual.

The platform stopped before a twin set of doors.

—I don't understand.

—The forces of "Babylon" array against us, he said.

—Now you sound like one of the Rastafari, August said.

—They are one of the many groups we are called to govern over. One of the many bedfellows we have had to build relationships with. So many disparate voices with no greater vision uniting them beyond our rule. We've held off Albion for centuries. We battle not against just Albion, but all of their principalities. Colonialism. Classism. Imperialism. Materialism. These are the things that threaten us. Things from which we need liberation.

—But these are . . . ideas.

—Ah . . . now you see the crux of the matter. How do you fight an idea? Malcolm donned white gloves. With a bigger idea. We need a return to old ways.

Simpler ways. We've lost our moral compass. Our task isn't to take on Babylon, but to free it. *Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.*

Desmond had seen this too often before: politicians using the religious beliefs of their people as propaganda to further their agenda. He bided his time. Dressed or not, he would find a way to solve the problem of the Colonel once and for all.

—Colonel, August said in a deliberate tone, as if not wanting to disturb an ill-balanced mind. Perhaps you'd better start from the beginning. Where does all of this come from?

—You weren't there on that day. April 21, 1966.

—When Haile Selassie visited Jamaica? Ninky asked. You were there?

—When he visited, when he first stepped from his airship, oh the joy, the love in the air. The first African head of state to visit our shores. The Roaring Lion. So quiet, but radiating such . . . power. Like a balm on the people, draining the poison from our souls and casting a vision for a new Jamaica.

Desmond perked to attention at the mention of the name and the blessed day. Grounation Day was the Rastafarian's second holiest day of the year. While they spoke, Desmond scanned the lab. A scalpel laid on a table's edge. He detested being undressed. It was an easy palm and Malcolm was more concerned with showing off his gadgets and tubes. A thought nagged him as he wondered why they would need scalpels down here.

—What is it they say? Malcolm glanced at Desmond and then back to his guests. "*The older the moon, the brighter it shines?*" We are an old, old moon. To see emperor Selassie, to realize he was divinely appointed and could deliver us from the ways of poverty and emptiness, it changed our life. We're here now. First, let us show you the next generation in our defense.

Malcolm barged through the doors. People in long white coats scurried about under an azure light. Coils of wire ran between wood planks and metal sheets. The thrum of dynamos filled two adjacent rooms. The energy crackled from one glass sphere to another. The hair along Desmond's exposed wrist and neck stood on end. The energy's intensity almost formed a wall for them to push through. Desmond couldn't begin to calculate the profligate sums spent building this complex or assembling the machinery inside.

—Here we use the forces of attraction and repulsion to create an electromagnetic cannon. With it, we can fire rockets with exploding ordinance or use the energy of lightning. Leave the steam to Albion.

—Such power. I can feel it along the skin. August's voice took on an

enraptured tone.

—That’s the thing about power: It is always felt. As we speak, our dynamos are under construction about the seven cities. In fact, by Albion’s next incursion over our airspace, we will see them greeted in a manner that will discourage further breaching of our shores.

—This is magnificent, Malcolm. Why keep it a secret? Ninky asked.

—Because our scientists are also experimenting with harnessing what they call ectoplasmic resonance. It’s a power source derived from the residual energy of spirits who have left us.

—Duppies?

—As we said, “duppies dead out” in the age of *true* science. It is only one piece in a greater puzzle.

—It’s . . . abhorrent, Desmond said. Duppies weren’t just the spirits of their ancestors. They were their cultural heritage. Stories passed down, parent to child, which connected them to their past. Malcolm was tampering with the fabric of his people and didn’t realize it. Or worse, didn’t care. My apologies, mum.

—We suspect you voice what your mistress thinks, so we forgive you the impertinence. Let me explain: Long have we been frustrated by the ways of Albion.

—As have we all, August said.

—Well, specifically, the moral decline rotting them from inside. They worship at the altar of science and enlightenment, the sun never sets on their empire, yet they don’t seem to progress as quickly as they ought. Here it is, 1988, and their world decays for lack of vision.

—What twisted game do you play at, Malcolm? Ninky asked.

Malcolm arched an eyebrow at her, irritated but in control.

—Come, see our second laboratory.

Another set of doors hummed open and closed as they entered the laboratory. Desmond checked his pocketwatch. The early hour of the day still had him unsettled and his belly reminded him of that fact. When he glanced up, he spied the boy from dinner approaching, wearing all white, with gold embroidery along the V of his chest and around a matching hat. Two guards escorted him. Eyes wide and alert, the boy took it all in without a trace of fear. He walked as though preoccupied with his own imagination, lost in young boy thoughts, but with eyes older than any man Desmond knew. It was all right there in those not-quite-right eyes of his. His stride was at ease and confident, each step his own regardless of how many guards surrounded him. The guards avoided his gaze, keeping a

careful distance from him.

The boy turned to Desmond and in that moment Desmond felt the physical thrust of his body failing him in inches. The taste in the back of his mouth stolen. The faint scent in the back of his nostrils swept away. A wave rippled through him like he was a dime novel whose pages were being rifled through. Scrambling and scribbling, desperate to find a corner of himself to call his own. Yet, for all the terror in that instant of unraveling, Desmond had the overwhelming sensation of being free. Loved. All of his secrets, all of his burdens, all of his plans and agendas, all of the lies he told himself to get out of bed and face the day—day after day after day after day—he no longer had to do it. All in a single gaze. A terrible, knowing, kind gaze.

Dismissing the guards with a gesture, Malcolm took the stairs leading to a dais.

—All living things are made up of discrete units called cells, Malcolm began. If a two-celled sea urchin is put into a beaker of seawater and shaken until the cells separated, each cell would grow separately and form a whole sea urchin. One identical to the other. However, creatures as simple as sea urchins pale in comparison to the inherent complexity of human beings. Look at us: glorious creatures created in the image of Jah. Maroon, Jamaican, African, Albion, we continue in form and function, diversity, robustness, and variety all from the mating of two sexes. Physiques, predilections, mayhaps even disposition such that echoes from generations past could emerge again as if plucked from time. Or the body's memory. To understand this is to know the mind that could create such intricacies, such elegance, such . . .

—Order, August said.

—Precisely.

—What do you propose? Ninky asked.

—Cutting out the middlemen. What if we could take inert cells, infuse them with life energy, and allow them to grow. Layer upon layer, knitted together in a chamber like a series of micro-machines in a glass womb.

—It sounds a lot like the Kabbalists and their tales of golems.

—The Kabbalists, like the Rastafarians, have their own interpretations of the Old Testament, seeing mystic portents in everything. Numbers. Letters. Names. But perhaps they aren't the only ones interested in working out the ways of the Tree of Life.

Ninky approached one of the glass bowls, the murky liquid obscuring all visibility. She touched it and immediately withdrew her hand. She turned from the glass bank and staggered back.

—This ectoplasmic energy, this energy of life . . . Malcolm, tell me about the boy.

—You always were the clever one, Ninky. He who controls the naming controls life. There is great power in names. Haile Selassie was born Tafari Makonnen, and became the King of Abyssinia.

—What have you done?

—He is a copy created in a laboratory after years of attempts. A number of failed . . . growths. But we dissected, studied, and learned from our mistakes.

—He's an abomination. His eyes . . . Ninky's voice trailed off.

—There was a defect in his eyes. Yet, the green hue adds to his unique status. Otherwise, he's just a boy. An extraordinary boy.

This changed everything. The Order of the Niyabingi existed to fight imperialism wherever they found it, even in their own mad despots. But long had they waited for the Great King from the East to deliver them. Desmond had prayed with holy impatience for that day to come. Some dark nights, he believed he waited in vain, but those were few and far between. Emperor Selassie was theirs. Unfiltered through other's experiences. No need for clergy or hymnals or translations or interpretations. And now, if everything the Colonel said was true, he was here. After a measure.

—All we needed was a sample from *HIM*. As befitting his destiny, his conception was on Grounation Day four years ago. Lij Tafari. *Lij* means "Child" but one day he will be *Ras*. *Ras* means "head," head of a way of life. The messiah who will lead the peoples of Africa and the African Diaspora to freedom. Such is the power of names.

—There is a greater power in the *namer*. Is that what this is truly about? Ninky asked.

—What we need is faith and pride. Our people have lost their way. Soon, they will find themselves on the same path as Albion: fat, lazy, sick on their own excesses. We need someone to lead us. Who better than The Messiah, descendent of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba?

—What you propose is madness. What about those who disagree with you? Ninky asked.

—Disagree. Agree. As those in Albion deal with Kabbalists, we have Obeahists. Even in my own cabinet. Not to mention the various factions collectively called Christians. The Maroon may dictate the caste, but we are still the minority.

—So you appeal to the Rastafari to help wrangle the voices?

—Appeal? No. Venerate their story? Yes. The greater the vision, the more people want to believe.

—The bigger the lie . . . Ninky sucked her teeth.

—So you say.

—Colonel, this is so . . . big, August said.

August was never a strong man. His mother was the source of their family's strength. She had the dragon about her, too. August enjoyed the entitlement of being a Cobena, but lacked the steel to wield the power that came with such a family. His face too soft, all jowls, he quaked as if he were ready to blubber.

—What would you have from us? Ninky's hard gaze was a mix of consternation and irritation.

—Ever pragmatic. We want your support and, as need be, your silence. Next November second we celebrate Emperor Selassie's coronation day. We will also be celebrating 200 years of independence. On that day, Lij will be presented to the world. Until then, we ask that you begin to take him in as his parents and raise him as your own.

—This is . . . a lot to absorb, August said.

—Oh, I don't expect your decision today. However, you shall remain my guests until you've made up your mind.

IV. Exodus

Desmond dreamt of fire and awoke to the darkness gripping his throat. Wiping his mouth of pooled saliva, he stank of his own sour sweat. In the distance the familiar booms echoed as Albion harried the other side of the island for a change.

Things had gone so wrong since Peace Cave. His Niyabingi cell leaders no longer trusted him, each communication tinged with suspicion. All he'd reported was dinner with Malcolm and vague hints about a possible lab he couldn't access. They suspected he knew more than he let on, especially with Malcolm's elite guard now stationed about Cobena Park. He was as trapped as the Cobenas, playing for time until he could figure out his next move.

His stomach rumbled. Desmond snuck toward the kitchen of the Cobenas' main house. Worldly problems always seemed less dire on a full belly. These days, even simple trips to the kitchen required dodging patrols and avoiding the rear door's sentry. But he knew the grounds better than any of the Colonel's men.

The kitchen smelled faintly of ginger and curry. Fruit flies buzzed around oranges on the counter. A pot of goat belly soup remained in the refrigerator, with

the yams a little hard, the way he preferred them. The family wouldn't miss a bowlful.

—You come nick me potatoes? Ninky asked in faux patois. She sat cross-legged on the corner stool, hidden by the deeper shadows of the kitchen. When she leaned forward, her hair, plaited in two at the side, fell past her nightdress' bosom. And she seemed much, much older. The few months since their visit to the cave had worn on her. As had the company of soldiers attached to their house to “ensure their safety.”

—Sorry fe mawga dog, mawga dog wi tun round bite you. Desmond exaggerated his accent and smiled. Reaching for the refrigerator handle, he waited for Ninky's nod before proceeding. May I ask a fool-fool question?

—You go on play the fool to catch wise, Ninky said. You don't deceive me. You see more, hear more, and know more than you let on.

—I'm like a fly on the wall. No one notice flies until they buzz around.

—And that's when they get swatted. What's your question?

—What do we do next?

—We?

—Let's say that I have . . . friends. I joined up with them because I had nowhere else to belong. I studied with them. I trained with them. Not everyone agrees with my friends, what they believe in, or how they go about doing things.

—They sound like dangerous friends to keep.

—And yet, a person like myself, with the kind of friends that I have, no matter how hard we might try to remain discreet, would not be allowed near certain factions without a benefactor. Perhaps an obeah man. Or obeah ma. Someone to provide an umbrella of protection, never anything overt, merely provide access.

—You dance around topics and never speak plain.

—You never know who may be listening. Desmond took out the scalpel he'd swiped from Peace Cave. It was tangible proof the experience had been real. Besides Lij. But the boy loomed too . . . large in his mind. He cleaned his nails with it. Nanny for Queen.

—Nanny for Queen. Do you mind if I smoke?

—No, mum.

Ninky withdrew a long spliff. She licked its side then lit it. The heady aroma of chiba filled the kitchen.

—In some circles, chiba is considered sacred. A rite. Would you like to share this?

—Yes, mum.

Desmond took the spliff but didn't take his eyes from Ninky. The cigar tasted of her. He sucked deep and held the smoke before returning it to her.

—Speak . . . as if you were among friends, Ninky said.

—The Colonel is a madman. A dangerous and powerful madman. He's creating a mythology for the people. Lij must be seen as coming from them. The Kabbalists are his primary obstacle.

—Feh. For all their talk of working out the Tree of Life and the mysteries of the Divine Throne, all they are amounts to Albion business interests who have formed a cabal. Mystical nonsense as cover to keep their numbers small and their manipulations of the market secret.

—Lij represents technology. Secret knowledge, true, but money to be made, moreso. In the mean time, you play the blessed parents of the Messiah.

—I don't play the virgin well, Ninky said.

Desmond choked on his smoke. He waved off another hit.

—The Messiah, *His Imperial Majesty*, grows up before the people, rallying and inspiring them. The Colonel offers to have Lij stay at the palace, heir apparent, all the while brainwashing him. Assuming he hasn't already done so.

—I don't think he has. Some part of him, whatever deep corner of him that remains unspoiled and decent, knew that for Lij to ring true, he had to be his own man at first. Desmond recalled the boy's gaze.

—It's a risky gambit.

—He's tightening his grip on power from all sides. Even if it fails and he doesn't win the heart of the people, his technology and military will garner him their loyalty.

—If you can't be loved, be feared. Lij represents a powerful symbol. In the right hands.

—Are we the right hands? Desmond asked.

—You are. But you can't remain here. He's too young and it's too dangerous here.

—So we run?

—I fear I am too much of a coward. Besides, they watch my every movement. However, Ninky stood up and walked toward the door, a fly who knows how to avoid being swatted, an old fly . . .

—Me old, but me nuh cold. Desmond smirked.

—Watch your step, my dear, and walk good.

The sun glowed red, the waking dawn over the rain-soaked land. The loamy smell of earth filled the groves of palms. The hills were colors caught on a painter's brush: lilac, grey, and blue-green. An abeng blew its mournful wail in the distance. During the Maroon Wars, it warned of a British marauding party. Now it signaled that the hunters drew near.

—I'm scared. For all of his aplomb and cool-headedness, Lij was still a boy. A boy woken in the still of the night to a hand over his mouth and a voice telling him to hush and trust.

—It's only a little bit further. Then we'll be safe, Desmond said.

—You promise?

—I'd like to. I probably should. But I can't. I can promise I'll be by your side as long as I'm able.

Desmond worried that he sounded more like a lawyer trying to hedge than a paternal figure. But he wanted to be as honest, as realistic, as possible. His heart wanted to tell of promises broken, of men he loved dying in flames. Those were the world's life lessons.

—Where are we going? Lij asked.

—To visit a friend. But we have to be careful. There are a lot of people, bad people, looking for us. But I know the Blue Mountains. Those soldiers will go round and round in circles, probably fall into the same pit traps that ambushed Albion Redcoats while we hide in back-o-water caves.

—Is he a good friend?

—We're close as batty and bench.

The boy stared with those pale green eyes, large as an owl's. Desmond didn't have much of a plan beyond sneaking past the guards and evading patrols long enough to get to Country. Lij took his hand. The boy still trembled.

Desmond spent his life looking in, watching others live their lives. To the Maroon, he was obroni, an outsider, as were all of the brown people. Desmond had no place among his own, as they considered him "a man of the house." He couldn't tell them what he'd sacrificed for them. In the Cobena house, though high-ranking, he was considered a servant. His family had Rastafari roots, but he had not joined, only been a sympathizer. And once the conservative Bobo Ashanti sect of the Rastafari assumed control, even non-member allies were considered outsiders. When Desmond examined his life with true eyes, he realized he was alone. He soldiered on anyway, knowing he'd find a place where he belonged and held that hope close.

—How about I tell you a Br'er 'Nansi story to pass the time? My mother used

to tell me Br'er 'Nansi stories all the time when I was your age. I hated them. Thought she was just a silly old woman. I didn't know the power of stories then. Now I miss them. Would that make you feel better?

Lij squeezed his hand.

—There was a mad witch who hated her name. Wherever she went, she never told anyone her true name. Names have power and she knew that her name was the source of her power. To say it would be her undoing.

—What was her name? Lij asked.

—If I tell you, you have to keep it to yourself. You promise?

—I promise. Lij smiled. It was the first time Desmond had seen the boy do so. In that moment, all Desmond knew was that he wanted to keep him safe forever.

—It was Five. The witch ruled the land. Everyone was scared of her power. She cursed fields and the gungoo pea roots would shrivel. She cursed the goats and their meat would rot on their bones. Everyone put up with her madness, giving her anything to keep her happy. Everyone except Br'er 'Nansi.

Desmond pulled Lij low when a car neared. Its headlights skimmed over them. The bush limbs above them looked like interlaced fingers. He waited a few seconds after they could no longer hear it before they continued.

—Br'er 'Nansi was the craftiest of the animals. And he was old. He knew the true names of all the old ones, from Br'er Turtle to Old Hinge. He couldn't let his brethren tremble at the thought of the witch.

—That doesn't sound like Br'er 'Nansi, Lij said. He's usually greedy. Selfish.

—Sometimes people change from one story to the next. Br'er 'Nansi went to the village of the witch, right up to her house, and banged on her door. When she opened the door, he stood there holding an armful of bananas and weeping.

—*Someone has stolen my bananas, Br'er 'Nansi cried out. I don't know how many the thief took.*

—*How many did you have?* the witch asked.

—*I was told six, but I don't know how to count. Can you please help me?*

—*There are one, two, three, four, and the one in your hand.*

—*I don't know any number called "the one in your hand," Br'er 'Nansi said. Does it come before nine? Wait, do you mean Five? Five! What a lovely number, an even better name. Everyone should know it. Everyone should shout it, drag it from the shadows into the light where it can be known and no longer feared.*

—The witch was angry. No one enjoyed having their secrets brought to light. She chased Br'er 'Nansi all through the hills, spitting her curses and threatening to kill him as soon as she found him. 'Nansi hid in a medicine bag around the neck

of an obeah woman bound on a ship heading for the New World. Even though it was against his will, he didn't mind.

—*My life is not my own, Br'er 'Nansi said. I will comfort my people wherever I find them.*

—His life was not his own, Lij repeated.

Desmond hated the death of innocence that came with understanding life.

• • • •

Bamboo poles lined the front of a ramshackle house. White, green, and red flags fluttered from each of the poles signifying that a “science man” occupied the house. Burglar bars girded every window. Corrugated metal formed the roof, its ridges trailing down to large buckets which collected rain run-off.

Country leaned his chair back against the wall, eyeing his dominoes with great suspicion. A tam covered his dreadlocks, which drew forward on his forehead every time he furrowed his brow. A lone lamp lit the porch. The other men huddled tight around the table studying his every movement. A smile crept across his face. He slapped a tile onto the table. Curse words spilled into the night. Country preened about in triumph, pausing when he glanced in Desmond's direction. They couldn't have been seen, Desmond knew this, but Country dismissed his guests. Once they had departed, he waved Desmond over.

—Come on out, you walk foot buckra. Country's languid drawl hid a welcoming smirk. Who's the pickney?

—That's . . . a long story. Colonel's people are looking for us.

—You'll be fine for now. Country studied Lij. Suddenly the man knelt, stopping short of genuflecting. *When God comes, the sun will come out.* Come on.

The first time Desmond met Country, he was in myal. A spirit possessed him and he climbed a coconut tree upside down. He looked like Br'er 'Nansi himself atop a mound of eggs, the way he hung from the tree. The final rite of becoming a Niyabingi was to receive the blessing of an obeah man. Country had hammered out an ancient staccato beat on goatskin during Desmond's ceremony. A Coromantee war dance rhythm, a prayer on a hand drum to bring destruction on their enemies.

Desmond ushered Lij inside, peeking out the door for unwanted eyes one last time before shutting it. The house was little more than planks of wood hammered into place. A lizard scurried along a brightly colored relief map of Africa. A five-

pointed Judaic-Rastafarian Star of David marked the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Next to the map were photographs of Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey, a so-called Negro agitator from America. A half dozen brooms sat bundled in the corner. Sometimes Country sold them, symbols of the need to sweep out the filth of Babylon, for extra money for chiba. Otherwise, he maintained his vow of poverty. The Bobo Ashanti sect lived sparse and uncompromising lives.

—You hungry? I'm fixing enough to make belly bust. Country fussed about in his kitchen, frying plaintains and boiling green bananas to accompany the tripe with garlic.

—Bananas? You know crop theft is punishable by flogging with a tamarind switch.

—Eat your jokes and starve, then. What's going on? Country poured condensed milk into his instant coffee and drank in huge gulps as Desmond relayed the Colonel's plan. He issued a sideways glance at the boy, unable to hide his fear and awe.

—You read me up? Desmond asked when he finished his tale.

—Do not let the science fool you. I am founded with Christ. Country rocked back in his chair while he thought. The boy himself doesn't matter. The idea of him does.

—So you believe the Colonel's story?

—That man is a ginnel. Utterly mendacious . . . a damn liard. Desperate to prove to himself that he was more than the little imp parading as a man trying to drive fear into people. Him is too hard aise, but . . .

—But what? Desmond asked.

—The boy is a steppin' razor. He too dangerous, like a walking blade.

—But he's my charge now. The gift of His Imperial Majesty was to allow me to recognize myself as a person. Like him, born, prepared, and guided for a purpose. This boy would be a pawn of Malcolm, used for his own ends until he was twisted into a "mawga dog." He deserves something better. A chance to be the man he was meant to be.

—Then free the boy, nuh? Don't let him be caught up in politricks.

—Can you get us to the coast? From there we can make our way to the United States. No one will think to look for us in the heart of the beast.

—I'll need gas money.

—Mawga foot Rasta.

Desmond pressed a few nanny notes into his palm. Country flattened them on his knee, then held them to his eyelids for a moment.

—Money is eyesight. Country winked then slipped the bills into his pocket. I'm feeling a mite bit murderous.

—Good. That may come in handy.

••••

Desmond found himself reaching for handholds that weren't there as Country's mechanical contraption careened along the curves of the road. The engine huffed, belching steam while cylinders clattered. A hot, oily smell came from the engine. Not built for creature comforts, the van was little more than a brass shell with a seat for Country. The rest was open space designed for hauling the equipment for his passa-passas. It shuddered as he tailgated the vehicle in front of them like a frothing bully, honking and jerking the wheel back and forth.

Their clothes folded in neat piles within their knapsacks, Desmond and Lij dressed no different than any other laborer. They looked like they were on their way to one of Country's street parties except that he still toted his cane rather than a machete. Taking a back trail, they drove toward the Kingston megapolis, bypassing the king's houses of its outer boundaries.

Their destination was the Port Royal citadel at the seaward end. It was largely a historical site with the remains of a burned down slave quarters largely preserved. Pirates like Captain Henry Morgan once hid there. Now, its port was a higgler's domain.

Desmond hated the voyeurs such tourist traps attracted, but the busyness of the port worked to their advantage. They'd be able to buy passage on a waiting freight and if you had enough nanny notes, you could insure no questions were asked. The amount of people milling about also decreased the likelihood of being noticed. Even if they were, the Colonel wouldn't chance so public an incident. He wouldn't want the reports of injured—or worse, killed—visitors to damage their tourist trade.

—Big you up nice. Make you ever ready for love. Street vendors cried out peddling “front-end lifters,” obeah “science” for the passing consumer. Their culture bought and sold as trinkets in the shadow of the old slave depot. With the instinct of a fox beset by hounds, Desmond had the unmistakable sensation of being watched. He scanned the crowd for any of the Colonel's guard or anyone who took an inordinate interest in them. He waved an all clear to Country.

Country led them down a forgotten pathway overgrown with brush, the remains of the steps little more than a scree of pebbles. He said he knew of a back

way into the port, bypassing the security checkpoints. Desmond steadied himself as best he could, using his cane to guide his slide, for he slid more than walked, especially in his Spat boots. He slung his jacket over his other arm, to relieve his heat and sweep away intruding branches. Sweat ringed his shirt's collar and drenched his armpits.

—You make my job all the more easy, wayward travelers.

—Who's there? Desmond asked. Country froze where he stood, scanning about for the source of the voice, but Lij inched to Desmond's side.

—One brief dance in the Colonel's garden and I'm so quickly forgotten? With a queer lilting resonance to his words, a man stepped out of the shadows. His severe, pinched face, under the high arch of his eyebrows, produced an unpleasant countenance. Desmond knew the gaunt figure had deceptive strength.

The man clutched a pistol. Energy crackled within a glass sphere where the cylinder should be. The technology was reminiscent of the Colonel's dynamos.

—I thought I'd bring a pistol to the knife fight this time.

—Who is this fool-fool raasclaat? Country demanded.

—I'm guessing a Kabbalist agent. He was after the Colonel's . . . method of production. We don't have anything you need here.

—I need young squire, Lij. We have big plans, the least of which being to depriving the Colonel of him. Our men watched the Colonel's palace and the Cobenas'. I've been trailing you ever since you absconded with the lad. Since you've already done half of my job, I'll just relieve you of him. Give me no trouble, you'll have my thanks and your lives.

—I am honor-bound to the lad. I shall not see him harmed.

—You do me an injustice, sir. I've no wish to harm children.

—Can your employers make the same claim? Desmond asked.

—You two chat too much, Country said. Darkness never overcome light yet and the wicked never sow no good seed what ripe yet.

Country charged the man. The Kabbalist drew careful aim and fired into Country's path. The energy discharge erupted the earth at his feet. Country dove into the bushes for cover. Desmond and the boy skittered deeper into the depot.

This area of the depot had long been abandoned. The Maroon loved their monuments and the abandoned fort was a massive one. Its ground was hallowed to the point that most avoided even its shadow. Its shape was that of a large, squat turret, stones cast into place of the cylinder structure. The mortar cracked and broke, freeing the occasional stone. Ruins exploded around them as they ran. Energy blasts shattered stone and board alike. Chains rattled along the wall,

testimony of a bygone age. Desmond pushed Lij into an open stall. The iron door's hinges were rusted and would likely creak. He didn't want to chance closing it.

—I'll be right back, Desmond said.

—You promise?

—I . . . yes. I promise. He hoped that he hadn't exposed Lij to too much life this day and that there was room for fancy and hope. Desmond squeezed his hand and scrambled away before the agent neared enough to spy them.

—Come out, come out, wherever you are. Don't you tire of these childish games?

—Your first plan failed. Getting samples of the Colonel's work? Desmond hoped to wrong-foot this obroni, letting him track the sound of his voice away from Lij.

—If we couldn't have the product, perhaps we could . . . reverse engineer the process.

Reverse engineering had a fatal ring to it. In the end, all of them—the Colonel, the Niyabingi, the Kabbalists, Albion—wanted the same things: money and power, fueled by greed.

The agent fired again, wildly into the dark. The perpetual knot of Desmond's belly sprang from the fear that the man might accidentally wound the boy. Desmond ducked behind a ruined stack of wall, occasionally revealing just enough of himself to keep the assassin's attention.

Glancing over, he spied Country. He pointed to himself and made a circling motion. Country looked confused. Desmond raised ten fingers and hoped Country understood that he'd need a distraction in ten seconds. Desmond crept around, counting to himself. At "ten," Country leapt into the clearing.

"You unbaptized bomboclaat," Country yelled.

The Kabbalist drew a bead on Country, this time not aiming at his feet. Desmond leapt out of the shadows and landed about the shoulders of the agent. They wrestled; the agent attempted to shrug him off. Desmond held on, his limbs flailing while the man wrenched about. Desmond gripped the man's cloak, losing purchase as it tore from him. The cloak slid to the ground, revealing the twisted body of a clockwork assassin. His right arm and both legs gleamed grey in the wan light. The fine gears of his lower torso rotated with precision. Without the muffling of the cloak, the hiss of oiled pistons and clanking gears filled his ears. Part automaton, definitely Albion in construction, Desmond had heard tell of them. But he thought the reports of them and the mechanical men whose brains

floated in glass jars the stuff of children's fancy.

Country grabbed a board and slammed it into the mechanical Kabbalist. The board splintered like so much rotted driftwood. Country struck again, but the agent's mechanical arm battered him into the next stall.

Desmond thrust his cane into the clocklike workings of the man's torso, the gears grinding to a halt. The mechanical man cursed the air blue, firing wildly with his good hand. A blast seared Desmond's side. He fell onto his wounded side with a thud. The agent rolled atop him, clamping his hands around Desmond's throat. His eyes bulged, his breath escaping in a wet rasp. His hands scrabbled about in desperation. He found a loose stone from the depot wall and slammed it into the side of the Kabbalist's skull. The man slumped on top of him.

Desmond untangled himself from the man's limbs, then dusted himself off. Strolling over to Country, he lowered his hand to help him up.

—You mad?

—You live until you die, Country said. And dead's dead.

• • • •

Desmond and Lij slipped through the dirigible dock's back entrance, mixing into the milling crowd without any fuss. Airship rope crews prepped the great machines for departure, scurrying about wrangling the floating craft like an errant bull. Their officers greeted their passengers.

“Boarding pass?”

“For two.” Desmond pressed a wad of nannies into the man's hand.

“Watch your step,” the officer said.

Thrumming engines soon filled his ears. Desmond leaned against the steel grey seat. As the ship rose, he stared out his window. The mountaintops of his island home seemed so small now. The truth of Lij would open his people's eyes and shake the foundations of who they were. He watched the boy sleep, his small hand still slid into Desmond's. In America, they would be far from the reach of Malcolm and the Rastafarians; the Niyabingi and the obeahists; and the Kabbalists would not think to look for them from within their belly. Lij would not be another innocent to be used and discarded without a say in the matter. For now, Desmond prayed for the opportunity to live their own lives for a moment.

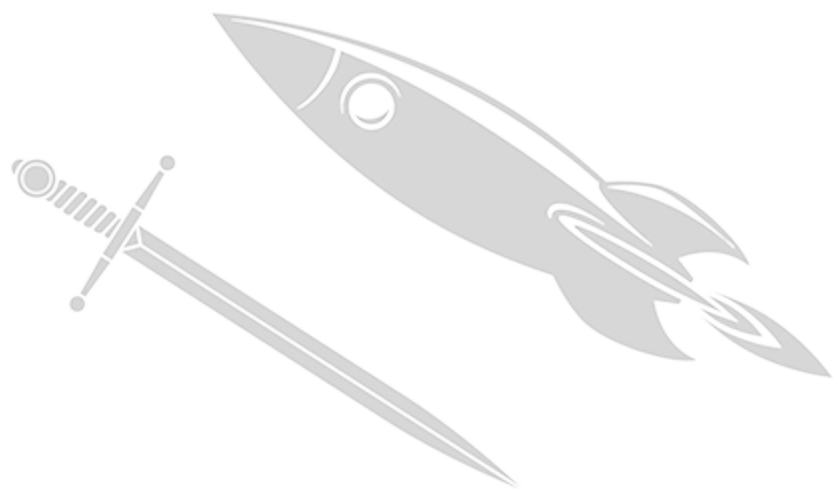
Whatever may come, he thought, he would comfort his people wherever he found them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maurice Broaddus' fiction has been published in numerous venues, including *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Apex Magazine*, and *Weird Tales Magazine*. He co-edited *Streets of Shadows* (Alliteration Ink) and the Dark Faith anthology series (Apex Books) and was the author of the urban fantasy trilogy, *Knights of Breton Court* (Angry Robot Books). www.MauriceBroaddus.com

EXCERPTS



EXCERPT: *The Clockwork Dynasty* (Doubleday)

Daniel H. Wilson | 2495 words

Present day: When a young anthropologist specializing in ancient technology uncovers a terrible secret concealed in the workings of a three-hundred-year-old mechanical doll, she is thrown into a hidden world that lurks just under the surface of our own. With her career and her life at stake, June Stefanov will ally with a remarkable traveler who exposes her to a reality she never imagined, as they embark on an around-the-world adventure and discover breathtaking secrets of the past. . .

Russia, 1725: In the depths of the Kremlin, the tsar's loyal mechanic brings to life two astonishingly humanlike mechanical beings. Peter and Elena are a brother and sister fallen out of time, possessed with uncanny power, and destined to serve great empires. Struggling to blend into pre-Victorian society, they are pulled into a legendary war that has raged for centuries.

The Clockwork Dynasty seamlessly interweaves past and present, exploring a race of beings designed to live by ironclad principles, yet constantly searching for meaning. As June plunges deeper into their world, her choices will ultimately determine their survival or extermination. Richly-imagined and heart-pounding, Daniel H. Wilson's novel expertly draws on his robotics and science background, combining exquisitely drawn characters with visionary technology—and riveting action.

Forthcoming August 2017 from Doubleday.

LONDON, 1726

Elena and I find our first home in a grim place near the river, simply called the Lanes—a room on a street so narrow that only a stripe of gray sky is visible walking down it. Not that we can look up, as the residents routinely toss their feces and garbage to the reeking, stained cobblestones below.

The city of London spans five miles, with half a million or so people living here, and more accumulating daily, the new faces absorbed almost imperceptibly into the city itself. The fringes are a no man's land of wind strewn trash, half abandoned shanties, brick ovens, heaps of cinders, and men trading sick animals.

This periphery is like the flank of a diseased horse, welted and knotted with parasites.

Perpetually in shade, our flat is a single bare room embedded in a long wooden building, poorly constructed, creaking like the hold of the ship we just left and continually rocked by the arguments, shouting matches, drunken laughter, and screaming children of the ginsoaked wretches who eke out their short lives here.

Elena and I secure rent on our leftover coin, and count ourselves lucky our health is not affected by the skimming cold of the fog or the pinch of hunger that daily afflicts these people. Fleas and parasites swarm over our bodies and eventually leap away, still searching for food. On the first night, I listen as a drunken man is robbed, then loudly and slowly beaten to death in the lane below us.

Without the mandate of my first sovereign, and hunted by his successor, a troubling question is growing in my heart—how shall I serve my Word? An aching pain is seeping into my bones. Abandoned to the world of men, how am I meant to make justice from injustice? Am I beholden to the king of this new land?

••••

I quietly slip outside into the lane. Later, I return, my khanjali wet with blood.

Elena greets me at the top of the narrow stairs. She stands in the doorway to our dark, bare room, thin arms crossed over her chest. The weight of despair rests heavy in the curve of her shoulders.

I believe I understand why.

Under the fairy glow of the city's skyline, we have found only chaos. In Peter's empire, Elena and I lived in opulence, the events of each day lined up like a neat row of fence posts. Ensnared in the royal keep, we were protected from harm—given purchase to explore books and tutors and trainers. I would prefer even the halfbuilt bog of Saint Petersburg to this great bleeding wound of a city.

"We cannot stay here," says Elena, retreating from the stairs into our room. "We need to find others like us, the message writers."

Following her inside, I keep my back to the window and empty the coin purse I took from the thief into my palm. His stinking body still lies on the stairs below, face twisted in disbelief at his final sight. I am careful to keep the coins from clinking together as I count them—these walls are thin and the people here are poor and desperate, willing to risk everything for nothing.

“You know that is too dangerous,” I say, lighting our only lamp. “Besides, what would you have me do? We have no means. No way to disguise ourselves among the humans.”

Elena stands at the window, taps a finger against her chin, thinking. “We need finances,” she says. “You’ll have to earn them, as nobody will pay attention to a child. But we’ve got advantages. You are strong, intimidating . . . nearly impervious to harm, and you’re a fighter.”

“I cannot show my face,” I say, turning to her and removing the ornate mask that covers my eyes and cheeks. The patched leather skin of my face looks strange from a distance, menacing in the feeble flame of a whale oil lamp, and in broad daylight I would horrify anyone directing half a glance in my direction. “And I will not break pravda.”

“Simple constraints,” she says, thinking. “For now, you must continue to use the mask and speak little. The job I shall find for you will not require daylight . . . and it will be honorable enough.”

Elena sets to strategizing, and, before dawn, my new career has begun. The job of debt collector is available to anyone brave or foolish enough to take it. Myriad private banks have sprung up, their notice boards sprouting sheaves of debtor warrants like leaves. Debtor’s prisons are eager to pay for the men and women who have failed in their financial obligations—criminals running from justice, in their view.

And so I set my will to the hunt. After scanning the notice boards, I find my eyes can pick out faces in the crowds and my ears ring to the names I have read, spoken in the chatter of the street.

Over the months, I become a regular attendee of the public hangings or pillories. Finding my place the night before, I wait behind hidden windows and watch, never sparing a glance for whatever doomed soul stands on the gallows. Instead, my gaze devours the roaring mass of the audience, the faces of my prey blinking into notice one by one, their features twisted into rage or amusement or curiosity at the suffering of the person gone swinging.

Debtors soon learn to fear the man in the bronze mask—the dark one who comes at night for those who owe, never speaking, with a grip like stone. Because I do not prey on the poor debtors of my neighborhood—only the wealthy from other quarters—my name is often celebrated in the Lanes. And though I overhear many toasts made to me, none are made in my presence. The sweep of my cloak and sheen of my mask inspire only silence and dread.

Declining social invitations is not an issue.

Elena, for her part, spends the early years as a doll, locked away at home where she can draw no attention. Business is good, and I am well suited for it. Soon, I rent the flat next door to use as a holding room for my prisoners. My wealthiest debtors gladly pay any fee I ask to be held outside true debtors' prison—wisely avoiding exposure to degraded conditions that more often than not lead to disease and death.

And all this while, Elena is trapped with few books and no outside company. She takes to pacing the perimeter of our room like a caged animal, moving day and night with steady tapping footsteps that send shivers of guilt racing through me. Withdrawn and sullen, she speaks less and less, sometimes sitting for hours without moving.

For my part, I find that each guilty person whom I collect and punish according to the law of this new land only satisfies some small, fleeting aspect of pravda. All around me, I witness injustices great and small. But without orders from my tsar I have no direction, reduced to running collection routes and neglecting my true purpose.

My Word becomes a gnawing hunger inside me.

I return one morning to find Elena standing by our drafty window. Her fractured face is lit in the harsh dawn glare, streaked with hard rays of sunlight filtered through coal smoke and river miasma. She holds an ornate hand mirror, looking at her reflection, idly tracing fingers across the curve of her sculpted lips.

"I need to go outside," she says. "I need to see."

"But your face—" I say. Interrupting me, she points out the window to a factory along the river. A tannery.

"It is time to fix that," she says. "For both of us."

Elena has chosen an artist after months spent researching and corresponding with dozens of leatherworkers. He is a young man, handsome and talented—a doll maker in his spare time. Feigning the role of a plague survivor, I approach him from behind my mask and offer him a vague job. He is wary, but from my reputation, he knows I can pay. And his fear recedes when I place a sizable banknote in his sootstained hand.

The next day, armed with a sheath of supple calfskin and a satchel of tools, the leatherworker enters our flat. He swallows, standing rigid and ready to flee as he gazes upon Elena's doll-like body. Dressed in her finest gown, the little girl lies perfectly still on a bed of straw in a small square of light from the only window.

In a hushed voice, my crooked features hidden behind the bronze mask, I spin the tale Elena has given me.

I describe my beloved daughter, my only reason for living—lost to the Black Death that scarred my own face. Hoarse with grief, I speak of a beautiful doll, an eternal reminder of the angelic child who I'll never see again. She is my last link to a world that has taken everything from me. And feigning the heartbreak of a father, I finally beg the leatherworker to practice his craft—to give this doll the face of a living girl.

It is a strange request, but tragedy and its warped aftereffects are common here. The leatherworker hesitates, then drops to his knees beside the small, limp form of the girl and begins to efficiently unpack his satchel. The first time he lifts her, he does so roughly, and I put fingers on his shoulder like the pinch of an iron gate.

“*Gently,*” I tell him. She is precious to me.

After that, the leatherworker touches Elena's face as if she were a real little girl. His fingers are nimble and confident as he pries the porcelain mask away from her head. Nostalgia floods my heart as I see her beautiful face discarded on the floor. The innocence of her simple facade will be lost, her beautiful clean doll's features transformed into something so much more complex. I wonder, as I often do lately, if I am going to lose her.

My darling Elena, to her credit, does not so much as tremble, completing the illusion of a doll under the man's needle and thread. At the sight of her clockwork, the leatherworker turns to me.

“Sir,” he says, “this doll of yours is ingeniously constructed. She's a treasure, fit for showing in the finest wonder room. Have you considered . . .”

Seeing my masked face, the sentence evaporates on his lips. “Apologies, sir,” he says.

He sets Elena on a wooden chair, her liquid eyes staring vacantly across the room from within a skinless face. I cannot bear to look, and I go on long walks or simply wait outside on the stairs, hearing the click of needle and thimble.

Working from a small bust of Aphrodite and a collection of handdrawn sketches, he crafts the best face he can. Losing himself in a place of focus, the leatherworker falls into a reverie, hands flying, unaware of me or of anything besides the little girl who is coming to life beneath his hands. The thin leather, dyed and dusted with powder, becomes a simulacrum of the pure unblemished skin of youth, bright red lips and wide eyes taking form under his expert hand.

The young man works for days, from morning until late in the night. Stopping only to take meals and short naps, he continues under the meager radiance of candles as the sunlight fades. Finally, near morning, the sound of working stops

and does not resume. Rising from the stairs, I steel myself and enter our room.

I find the leatherworker standing with his back to me. Holding a brush, he has just finished applying a final layer of pigment. His shoulders are rising and falling as he takes manic breaths, staring at the girl in the chair. Hearing my creaking footsteps, he turns to me with shining eyes.

Over his shoulder, I see Elena has become a real girl, with a real face. “My god,” he breathes, “she’s . . . *alive*.”

Quickly, I clamp a hand over his bicep and guide him to the doorway. I press a bulging wallet of coins into his palm and thank him brusquely. Confused and overcompensated, he mouths his thanks and stumbles out into the dark hallway.

I close the door firmly behind him and lock it.

Under the familiar flicker of candlelight, I meet my sister for the second time.

“Darling,” I say, kneeling before her chair. “He’s gone.”

Elena slowly blinks. This time, I do not hear the click of a doll’s eyes.

Now, I see the contours of Elena’s true face. From the sculpture of Aphrodite and her own drawings, she has chosen the woman she wanted to become. And now that she has, I realize this was always who she was.

“Peter,” she says, smiling, her redtinged cheeks bright beneath sparkling eyes. She slides off the chair on slippered feet and pushes down the ruffles of her dress. Standing face-to-face with me, her familiar black curls now frame the beguiling face of a young lady.

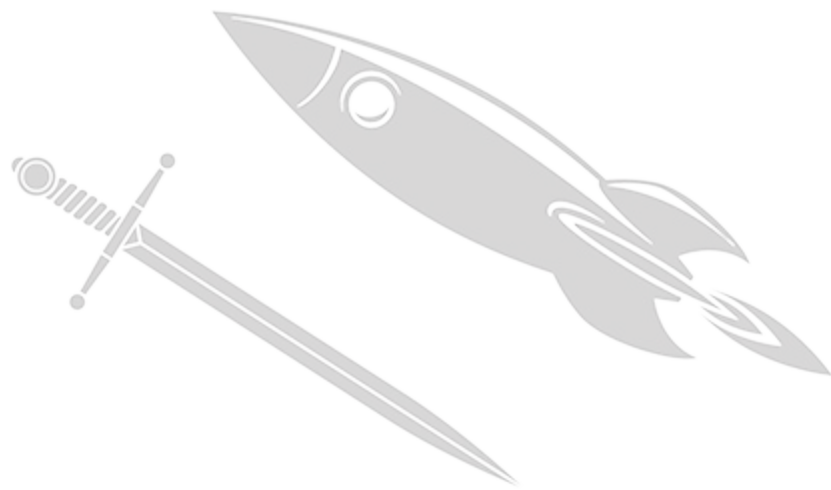
Reaching out, Elena takes my broken face in her hands. “Let me fix yours now,” she says. “London awaits us.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel H. Wilson is a Cherokee citizen and author of the *New York Times* bestselling *Robopocalypse* and its sequel *Robogenesis*, as well as seven other books, including *How to Survive a Robot Uprising*, *A Boy and His Bot*, and *Amped*. He earned a PhD in Robotics from Carnegie Mellon University, as well as Masters degrees in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics. His latest novel is *The Clockwork Dynasty*. Wilson lives in Portland, Oregon.

NONFICTION



Book Reviews: August 2017

LaShawn M. Wanak | 2062 words

This month, I'll explore the nature of caretakers in *The Sum of Us* anthology, take a trip back to *The River Bank* in a sequel to *The Wind in the Willows*, and get turned into an emotional wreck by N.K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky*.

The Sum of Us: Tales of the Bonded and Bound

Edited by Susan Forest and Lucas K. Law

Hardback / Paperback / Ebook

ISBN: 978-0993969690

Laksa Media Groups, Inc, September 2017

384 pages

“If we believe that we are the protagonists of our lives, then caregivers—our pillars—are ghosts, the bit players, the stock characters, the secondary supports, living lives of quiet trust and toil in the shadows. Summoned to us by the profound magic of great emotional, physical, or psychological need, they play their roles, and when our need diminishes . . . Fade.”

Thus reads the blurb for *The Sum of Us: Tales of the Bonded and Bound*, an anthology of twenty-three stories that explore the nature of caretaking. Editors Susan Forest and Lucas K. Law have curated stories from Nisi Shawl, Christie Yant, Caroline M. Yoachim, Alex Shvartsman and others, stories that feature hospice attendants, surgeons, family, mentors, friends, lovers—all dealing with caring for loved ones, or people they barely know.

This collection drew me in more than I expected. True, there are similar themes, from a person caring for their charge in a group home to robot caretakers. But the stories also surprise in their uniqueness. A henchman protects and aids his aging supervillain boss. A doctor uses nanobots to heal refugees, but needs the help of another doctor to confront the horrors of her own past. An attendant assists a dying Oracle as she goes to make her final prophecy. A space welder and her human guide begs the question: Which one is the caregiver? Which one receives care? The answer is both: The line between them becomes blurred.

Some stories are breathtaking in their brilliance. Sandra Kasturi's “The Beautiful Gears of Dying” is angry, full of spite and pain, yet achingly gorgeous as the robot nurse tries to soothe its human charge's remaining days of life. In “A

Mother’s Milk,” Heather Osborne has an alien on the verge of a breakthrough discovery learn to her dismay that her male partner has become pregnant and wants her to care for him and their offspring. Nisi Shawl’s protagonist in “Sunshine of Your Love” wavers between the duty of caring for her disabled sister and the attraction she feels towards a dangerous research participant. And Caroline M. Yoachim’s “Dreams as Fragile as Glass” is brief, but heartbreaking for any parent who learns that their child has a terminal disease.

A portion of this anthology’s sales goes to the Canadian Mental Health Association, so definitely consider buying a copy, if not for yourself, then for someone who is serving as a caretaker. Hopefully the stories can serve as comfort to them. At the very least, it should make us all appreciate caretakers for all they do.

The River Bank: A sequel to Kenneth Grahame’s The Wind in the Willows

Kij Johnson, illustrated by Kathleen Jennings

Hardcover / E-book

ISBN: 978-1618731302

Small Beer Press, September 2017

224 pages

I grew up with the Grosset and Dunlap Illustrated Junior Library version of *The Wind in the Willows* (the one with Rat and Mole hoisting a protesting Mr. Toad up to his bedroom while Mr. Badger supervises, hands clasped behind his back). Though I have seen movie adaptations (including the elusive Disney version with Bob Hoskins playing the Badger), I was not aware that there were also several written sequels. *The River Bank* by Kij Johnson is the first one written by a woman, and it certainly deserves a place next to the original.

Johnson continues the adventures of the River Bank by bringing in two new residents: Beryl, a lady mole who is an Authoress (insert squeal of delight) and the proper model of pragmatism; and her housemate, Rabbit, who appears to be more flighty, foolish, and easily susceptible to Mr. Toad’s charms, much to the dismay of all.

Yes, all the players from *The Wind in the Willows* are here: the River Rat, Mole—who is surprising antagonistic toward Beryl’s arrival—Mr. Badger, Otter and his son, and of course, Mr. Toad, still up to his conniving tricks. There’s a lovely bit at the beginning of the book when his friends are wondering whatever happened to the Toad’s promises to be good and modest in the previous book,

and he exclaims, “Was I supposed to *remain* that way?” It feels like Johnson’s portrayal of Mr. Toad is a bit more of a crybaby, though now I have to re-read *The Wind in the Willows* to see if he was always like that.

I do know that Johnson succeeds in reproducing the flavor of the original while at the same time opening the River Bank up to be seen through new eyes. An entire chapter is devoted to Beryl exploring the River Bank on her bicycle, and Johnson’s gorgeous descriptions allows the reader to be drawn in by the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds that Beryl experiences, causing one to linger despite oneself. There are nods to events in the previous book—a revisit to the Piper at the Gates of Dawn, and, of course, another wild adventure with Mr. Toad, who sweeps along with the hapless Rabbit . . .

. . . or is she? To my astonishment, while I loved Beryl, as we learn more about Rabbit, I found myself growing more charmed by her. Behind a silly and carefree attitude is perhaps a very clever mind, who just *so happens* to find herself in interesting predicaments. How is it that she found herself in a hot air balloon by accident? And just how did she manage to get carried off by bank robbers during a heist? We never find out, but Rabbit belies the stereotypes of this world, both of rabbits and of females.

I can’t review this book without mentioning the wonderful illustrations by Kathleen Jennings. They are absolutely *glorious* and bring the world of the River Bank into greater focus, from a tiny trail of bees buzzing just on the edge of the page to a centerpiece of Beryl and Rabbit gazing with delight at the front of Sunflower Cottage.

Critics might say that *The River Bank* overly focuses on the two female characters, and that may be so. However, their presence brings a new flavor to the *Wind of the Willows* world, one that I was unaware was missing when I read it as a child. There are Victorian elements that are more pronounced with Beryl and Rabbit’s presence, and yes, even feminist elements with the enterprising Rabbit solving problems in a most female way. I can’t think of a better way to bridge the world of Mole and the River Rat to readers in this day and age.

The Stone Sky

N.K. Jemisin

Paperback, Ebook

ISBN: 978-0316229241

Orbit, August 2017

432 pages

Few stories leave me an utter wretched mess, curled in a corner, devastated by the fury and beauty of a story that's picked me up, wrung me dry, and left me aching for more. *The Stone Sky*—nay—the entire Broken Earth trilogy has joined that list.

By the time you read these words, I will have dried my eyes and moved on, but the words remain . . . and that's one of the themes of *The Stone Sky*. What remains, what changes, and what disappears. How loss echoes through time and impacts the present and future with its absent touch. And that's just *one* of the themes. Just one.

For those of you who have been waiting to read the Broken Earth trilogy, now's the time. Get it *now*. Because once you finish reading *The Fifth Season*, you must get *The Obelisk Gate*. And once you finish *that*, you will be immediately grabbing *The Stone Sky*. For this series is really just one single story. And oh . . .

At the start of *The Stone Sky*, Jemisin takes pity on us and gives us a mini summary of the events at the end of *The Obelisk Gate*. Essun had just used the Obelisk Gate to defend Castrima. She has learned that in order to save the world, she must use the Obelisk Gate to recapture the moon from its erratic orbit. However, using the gate to defend herself and her friends killed Alabaster, friend, thorn, mentor, lover. Also, she herself is turning to stone whenever she uses orogeny. Oh, and her daughter Nassun is still alive . . . and also knows how to use the obelisks. Nassun, who has just killed her own father. Who is being protected by Essun's former guardian, whom Essun hates with all her strength. And who plans to use the Obelisk Gate not to save humankind, but destroy it.

We learn in *The Obelisk Gate* that Essun's story (told in brilliant second-person POV) and Nassun's story (told in third person POV) are narrated by Hoa, the stone eater who has metamorphized into the form of a young man. In *The Stone Sky*, Jemisin now weaves in his story using first-person POV, taking us back centuries and centuries to when Hoa lived in Syl Anagist, not as a stone eater, but as a Tuner. We learn what brought about the events of the moon being thrown off its path, how orogenes became both hated and needed in the world, and how the war started between humans and the Evil Earth.

For the Earth itself is a character in this book. Ancient, aware, and very, very angry over what humans have done, it will stop at nothing to get rid of all the creatures that crawl on its surface. Think about that next time someone mentions global warming. How long do we poison the Earth before it decides to strike back?

Already I'm running out of space in this review. I haven't even gotten to showing the parallels of Essun's attempt to reunite with her daughter with the Earth's desire to bring back its own child, the moon. How Essun and Nassun's relationship is tragic, not by their own actions, but due to the world that hates them. How this book is heavy with the presence of time. You can feel it pressing down on the pages, see it lingering on words and names so ancient their meaning has been lost. How Jemisin winds magic and science together so effortlessly. How a girl with Afro puffs can face the Evil Earth with rage of her own; and how a mother heartbreakingly realizes that she and her daughter will never have a normal relationship. How, despite how much the world hates us, there's always hope.

Get this book. Get it now. Read it. Then read the whole trilogy over again. I want this book to win all the awards. I want this book to be taught in colleges and have dissertations written about it. I want this book to become a classic, long after all of us are gone.

If stories like this survive, maybe we will, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LaShawn M. Wanak is a graduate of the 2011 class of Viable Paradise. Her fiction has been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Ideomancer*. She served as Associate Editor at *Podcastle*, and has written nonfiction for *Fantasy Magazine*, the *Cascadia Subduction Zone*, and the anthology *Invisible 2*.

TV Review: *American Gods*

Joseph Allen Hill | 1305 words

This month we take a look at the new Starz show *American Gods*, based on the novel by Neil Gaiman.

American Gods

Developed by Bryan Fuller and Michael Green

Living Dead Guy, J.A. Green Construction Corp, The Blank Corporation, Starz Originals, and Fremantle Media North America

First Season premiered April 2017

What happens when you stop believing? What happens to you, and what happens to whatever you believed in? These are the central questions explored in Bryan Fuller and Michael Green's eight-episode adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. In the world of the series, the Old Gods, brought to America by immigrants over thousands of years, are weak and desperate. They are in conflict with the New Gods of Media, Technology, and Globalization, but their biggest enemy is time. The old stories are forgotten and the old ways lost in memory. What is a god of swords and spears in a world of guns and bombs? What is a prayer in the time of Twitter? These questions, all circling around the nature of identity and belief, drives not only the fantastical plot of the gods and goddesses, but the drama of very human characters struggling to figure out who they are and what they believe in twenty-first-century America.

The series focuses on Shadow, played by Ricky Whittle. Shadow is a low-level grifter just finishing a three year prison term after a failed casino heist. He's taciturn, contemplative, and utterly disconnected from the increasingly bewildering world around him. Whittle brings warmth and charm to the character, who in the novel could come off as a bit of a cipher. While some of the flashier performances of his costars have rightfully gotten plaudits, Whittle's performance is quietly poignant, putting a finer point on the character's emptiness and longing for meaning.

After being released from prison following the death of his wife in a car accident, Shadow encounters Mr. Wednesday, played by Ian McShane. Wednesday is a mysterious con artist who seems to take an immediate liking to Shadow, and as the life Shadow knew before his time in prison disintegrates, Wednesday introduces Shadow into a mysterious world of gods and magic.

Crisscrossing the country together in an old black Cadillac, Wednesday seeks to gather together other Old Gods in order to ignite a war with the new ones, a war all the other gods are sure he will lose. As the series progresses, other narratives begin to spring up in their wake, diverging from and intertwining with the main story. A six-foot tall leprechaun seeks his lost lucky gold coin. A cab driver searches for a jinn after a one night stand. And Shadow's wife is perhaps not quite as dead as she first seemed.

The most engaging element of the show is its performances. As mentioned before, Whittle is equal parts charming and poignant as Shadow. McShane's Wednesday is creepily magnetic, making you feel like you could spend hours listening to him tell stories but also like you should take a shower afterwards. Peter Stormare as the Slavic God Czernobog and Pablo Schreiber as self-described leprechaun Mad Sweeney seem to have been lifted directly from the novel. Gillian Anderson is delightful channeling Lucille Ball, David Bowie, and Marilyn Monroe as Media, the most engaging of the New Gods. Emily Browning is especially good in an expanded role as Laura Moon. While Shadow remains at the center of the narrative, Laura is as close as we get to a second protagonist, and Browning's sharp-tongued, don't give a fuck performance is often a welcome break from the eternally put-upon Shadow.

Of special note is Orlando Jones as Mr. Nancy, which draws attention to the main differences between the original novel and the adaptation. The plot is largely faithful, with some expansion and updating, but thematically, the television series is sharper and darker. Jones as Nancy brings a bitterness and anger absent from the novel. While encouraging a group of soon-to-be slaves on their way to America to engage in a suicidal revolt, he explains "Angry is good. Angry gets shit done." This is a Mr. Nancy who has witnessed firsthand how Black Lives Don't Matter in America. And indeed, for a series that is not, per se, *about* race, race does come up a lot in the narrative. There is a tendency in SFF to have non-white characters whose race never seems to matter to the narrative in any real way. Shadow, though, exists as a black man in America. There are places where he cannot move comfortably, where he is automatically an Other, a suspect. When he experiences an aborted hanging, the significance is not lost on him or the other characters in the show, regardless of how cosmic the reasons behind it might be.

More broadly, the *American Gods* series feels much more socially engaged than the novel. There is a certain quaintness to the America Gaiman wrote about in 2001, a place lacking in old world refinement but filled with newness and wonder and a genial oh-isn't-it-strange-how-they-do-things-here charm. The

America of the show, however, is not so gentle. This is the America of 9/11 and Trump and gun violence, an America where wide swaths of the country are hated and feared, where Muslims are made into monsters, and Mexican immigrants cast as criminals. While I found some of the shows attempts at mingling commentary and mythology a bit much (at one point the crosshair of a gun is made to echo the cross as Mexican Jesus is shot down with bullet wound stigmata), I appreciate the attempt by Fuller, Green, and Gaiman to engage America as it is rather than as an ideal.

I found the visual styling and direction of the show to be a mixed bag, very much hit or miss. The show is extremely stylized and ambitious, as with other shows produced by Bryan Fuller. A show about gods and magic practically requires real visual inventiveness, but too often I found the show to be indulgent, favoring shock and weirdness for the sake of weirdness over consistency. At its best, the show is a truly unique visual delight with some of the best cinematography I have seen on TV. At its worst, it veers into camp. This was particularly a problem for me in the early episodes, which seemed very much to be testing the boundaries of what the show could and should be. However, as the series progressed, I found that it seemed to get a better handle on its visual vocabulary and pacing, so hopefully the second season will be more consistent.

Speaking of pacing, my only real criticism of the series as an adaptation is in how the transition from book to screen slows things down. The eight episodes of the show only cover the first third of the novel. While this leaves ample time to really dig into the characters and expand the narrative, it also means that the plot sometimes feels like it is moving at a snail's pace. For instance, the true identity of Mr. Wednesday is withheld until the last episode. Literally everyone watching will have figured it out before then, and watching eight episodes of Shadow asking and Wednesday not telling gets very frustrating, and their relationship stagnates as a result.

Overall, *American Gods* is a very good television series that lays the groundwork for a great television series. The series is not wanting for boldness or ambition, and the performances are a treat. The themes of identity and belief are very timely and relevant to our current cultural climate. Now that the kinks have been worked out and central conflict has taken shape, I look forward eagerly to the second season.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Allen Hill is a Chicago-based writer and bon vivant. He has also spent time in Georgia and New Jersey. He has a marginally useful degree in Classics and enjoys making music in his spare time. He can be reached on Twitter @joehillofearth2.

Interview: Annalee Newitz

Christian A. Coleman | 2678 words

Annalee Newitz is the Tech Culture Editor at *Ars Technica*, and the founding editor of *io9*. Previously, she was the editor-in-chief of popular tech site Gizmodo. Her nonfiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, *The Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *2600*, *New Scientist*, *Technology Review*, *Popular Science*, *Discover* and the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. She's the co-editor of the essay collection *She's Such A Geek* (Seal Press), and author of *Scatter, Adapt and Remember: How Humans Will Survive a Mass Extinction* (Doubleday and Anchor), which was a finalist for the LA Times Book Prize, and *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture* (Duke University Press). Her first science fiction novel, *Autonomous*, will be released from Tor in September 2017.

***Autonomous* follows the cyberpunk cat-and-mouse game between Judith “Jack” Chen, a drug pirate who reverse engineers prescription pills on the black market, and Eliaz, a military agent who’s on her trail. During the chase, both Jack and Eliaz develop complex relationships with their companions: indentured human Threed and military bot Paladin respectively. Tell us how this story came together for you.**

The story began for me with Paladin. I wanted to write about what could happen if we do what Elon Musk and his friends suggested in their Open Letter about AI, which is to build AI in such a way that we control their every move and thought. The story came to me as I saw Paladin struggling to understand who he is, and to find his own identity in the morass of orders and commands that structure his consciousness. I wound up building a world around him. Jack is definitely just as important as Paladin, but she came to me later.

You start off the novel with lyrics from the song “The Last Saskatchewan Pirate” by Canadian musical comedy trio The Arrogant Worms. It’s like an overture for the whole story. You even list the trio as one of your musical inspirations in the acknowledgments. What about this song sparked your imagination for the book?

I love the prairie humor in this song, where the pirate “Tractor Jack” is stealing hay and fertilizer because the economy has tanked. I think my character Jack is doing something similar when she steals the molecular blueprints for medicines. It’s not exactly what we think of when we imagine piracy. But that’s the kind of swashbuckling you get when you grow up on the prairies.

The title indicates an exploration of freedom and what it means to be owned. What came to you first? The characters, setting, or theme?

I definitely started with the characters, though a key part of their identities is that they live in a world where people can be indentured. Each character’s status as indentured or not really shapes who they are, so it’s hard for me to divorce the characters from their environment.

How did you decide on Jack and Paladin as your main point-of-view characters?

I love ambiguity in stories, so I wanted Paladin to be tracking down a person who was basically a good guy. I hope that ultimately readers can identify with all the characters in the novel, and see how they are equally worthy of love, even though they screw up sometimes.

That’s what I really like about *Autonomous*. There’s no cut-and-dried hero-versus-villain scenario. Eliaz may see Jack as an anti-patent terrorist, but over the course of the novel we get to know them both as fully rounded characters. After a while, I didn’t feel like I was rooting for one character more than the other.

That’s great! I wanted the people in the book to feel as realistic as possible, and I think part of realism is acknowledging that it’s very rare to meet someone who is one hundred percent good or evil. One of the big themes of the novel is how we are all programmed, literally or figuratively. Humans grow up in families and cultures that teach us to view the world and other people in very specific ways. Jack’s experiences have taught her that patent laws can harm people, and even kill them, but she’s kind of clueless about how indenture laws do the same

thing to humans and robots. Likewise, Eliaz has seen how indenture destroys lives, but doesn't understand how intellectual property does too. Jack and Eliaz have a lot in common, but they never realize it.

Many authors have talked about novels they've written that didn't find a publisher before selling their first one. Did you have any of those before Tor bought *Autonomous*?

Autonomous is the first novel I've ever completed, but I do have some half-finished monstrosities on dusty hard drives. For a long time, I've toyed with writing an alternate history of the 1980s, set in the shitty place where I grew up. Little bits of that idea are going to make it into my next novel, though in a very different form.

You've written several books of nonfiction before this one, including *Scatter, Adapt and Remember* and *Pretend We're Dead*. What's it like to switch gears to book-length fiction and to have your debut novel published?

It's really liberating. Nonfiction will always be my first love, because I became a writer in order to tell the truth. But there are some truths you can only tell in fiction. Plus, I don't have to worry that real-life people or companies will be harmed by this story. I can say as many inflammatory things as I want! Journalistic ethics do not apply. That's just plain fun.

In one talk that you gave for your book *Scatter, Adapt and Remember* ([youtube.com/watch?v=NExVFDO70t0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NExVFDO70t0)), you introduced the audience to your idea of Slow Future vs. Fast Future. Futurists have projected rapid cycles of change because of how quickly technological developments take place. But you talked about Slow Future as a corrective to the idea of a Fast Future, because real-time change doesn't happen as fast as it does in fiction, TV, or film. Is that why you set your novel in the twenty-second century as opposed to the near future?

Absolutely. I still cheated a lot, though, because I really don't believe that we could develop human-equivalent AI in one hundred years. I'm not ruling it out,

but I think it may take a lot longer than we realize, simply because we barely understand our own brains.

In the twenty-second century setting of *Autonomous*, humans coexist with a variety of bots. One question I returned to several times after reading your book was this: For bots like Paladin who are programmed specifically for indenture, is autonomy truly autonomy? Can Paladin transcend programming and formulate thoughts for himself, or does his programming not make any difference for its autonomy?

As several of the robots point out in the novel, autonomy isn't a program—it's more like a password or a key. It gives the robot root access on its own consciousness, which means it can modify its own programs or download new ones. I'd compare it to what happens to humans when they go from being children who basically believe everything their parents say, to being young adults who seek out new sources of information and begin questioning what they've been told. Once a robot is autonomous, it can look critically at its own programming and change its own mind.

You introduce us later to a medical research bot named Med, who was “born” autonomous and, unlike other bots, had parents. She hasn't been indentured like Paladin, and for that reason she feels she's missed out on a key part of the bot experience. Does her autonomy still count if it's programmed?

One of the themes I tried to highlight in Med's story is the way humans engage in microaggressions against autonomous robots. A common kind of microaggression is for a human to ask a robot if it has just been programmed to believe something, or if a human is secretly controlling it. Med deals with this all the time at work in the lab, where most of her colleagues are humans. My guess is that she's been asked over and over if she's “really” autonomous, or if her opinions “count” given that she thought them up using programs. She's probably learned a ton of ways to cope with those subtle efforts at undermining her self-confidence in order to succeed.

You show that humans can also be indentured—not only by the Human Rights Indenture Laws but also by crazy performance-enhancing drugs that make them addicted to their work and doing repetitive tasks to the point of insanity or death. It’s a fascinating juxtaposition with what’s going on with the bots working toward autonomy. Would you like to say anything about that?

One of the themes in this book is that humans can be programmed just as easily as robots can, whether by cultural conditioning or drugs or stereotype priming. And it’s much, much harder for humans to break out of their programming than it is for bots. An autonomous bot can tweak her programs, but an autonomous human can’t easily get rid of traumas or other experiences that influence her beliefs.

In his essay “Consciousness in Human-Level AI” from the book *What to Think About Machines That Think*, professor of cognitive robotics Murray Shanahan picks two attributes that show signs of consciousness and human-level intelligence: awareness of the world and the capacity for suffering. An AI would need both of these in order to be considered sentient. Were you thinking of these specific traits when you were coming up with your bots or did you have others in mind?

I’ve been really influenced by AI researchers like Joanna Bryson, who has done work on the way machines’ learning algorithms wind up reflecting the biases and preconceptions of the people who make them. An algorithm is only as good as its dataset, and if that dataset is created by people, it will be packed with human prejudices. That’s why my bots are just as confused and neurotic as humans. I guess what I’m saying is that I consider a bot to be human-equivalent when it can make emotional and ethical mistakes just like humans do.

Some futurists and robotics experts say AI stands for artificial intelligence. Others say we should be thinking about AI as augmented intelligence, which is developed to increase human intelligence. Which is it for you?

It’s definitely both. Rodney Brooks, who used to run the AI lab at MIT, has always said that AI will grow out of the merger of human and machine. That

could mean humans who've been augmented by things like exoskeletons or brain implants that enhance perception. Or it could mean machines that use huge datasets of human information to run a human-like mind. I imagine our future will hold a tremendous diversity of life forms and intelligences that are hybrids of biological life and machines.

You came up with a diversity of design models for your bots. Paladin, for example, is kitted extensively with armor and weaponry. One bot named Fang is designed as a mantis. Another is designed like a mosquito, and others are humanoid. Which of these models is your favorite?

I love them all, but obviously Paladin is the hottest.

You founded the blog *io9* and were its editor-in-chief from 2008-2015. You were also editor-in-chief of Gizmodo, and you're currently the tech-culture editor at *Ars Technica*. Did any of your journalism and editorial experience come in handy when putting your book together? Did any of the research for the novel come out of these experiences?

Yeah, I did a ton of research for the novel, and tried hard to make the science and social world as plausible as I could. Sometimes I would just stop writing and read scientific journals and articles to make sure I was on the right track, especially when it came to neuroscience. I also put in a lot of references to computer security that some readers will find deeply amusing. Yep, Paladin is using a futuristic version of SSL when he talks to other robots. And botadmins have a terrible sense of humor when it comes to naming the utilities that the robots run in their minds.

The release of *Autonomous* couldn't be more timely. The way you delve into the issue of patented pharmaceuticals and how expensive they are for a large percentage of society reminds me of our current administration's attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act. It's no wonder that Jack reverse engineers pills to make them available to patients who otherwise couldn't afford them. When exactly were you working on the manuscript? What was going on at the time that made you think about patents?

I started this novel way back in 2010, so a lot of these healthcare issues were unfolding around me as I wrote it. But I think my anger about the patent system started when I was working at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, back in 2004. I was helping out with a project to challenge overly broad patents, and I started to research all the ways that patents can be used to intimidate small business owners and garage inventors. Plus, the way drugs are patented can actually endanger lives. Companies with deep pockets can file for secondary patents and lock up the rights to drugs long after they should enter the public domain and become generics. It's an ugly, broken system.

Can we expect more adventures of Jack's crusade against Big Pharma and pill patents in this world?

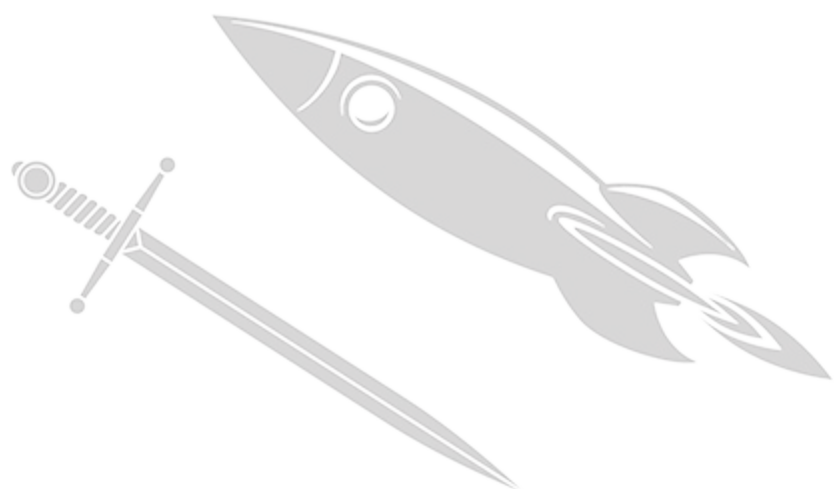
I have written a couple of short stories set in this world, including one for *Lightspeed* called "Drones Don't Kill People," which is about the birth of the robot civil rights movement. I also have a story coming out in the Saga Press anthology *Robots vs. Fairies*, which is about a robot revolutionary who is trying to recruit more robots to its cause. Both of those stories are about robots gaining autonomy and having political awakenings of very different kinds. After *Autonomous* comes out, I'll probably write one more story set in this universe, possibly about what happens to a couple of the characters after the events of the novel.

What other writing projects do you have coming up?

I'm working on my next novel for Tor Books, which is about time travel. I'm super excited about it because it's dealing with this weird part of time travel that is ubiquitous but pretty much nobody ever writes about it. You'll have to wait a couple of years to see what that is! My other upcoming book project is a nonfiction book about archaeology, focused on ancient lost cities. It's about why people chose to abandon their cities, and what we can learn from previous generations about urban collapse. So both books are allowing me to travel through time, which I love.

Christian A. Coleman is a 2013 graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop. He lives and writes in the Boston area. He tweets at [@coleman_II](#).

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS



Author Spotlight: Ashok K. Banker

Sandra Odell | 1712 words

Your choice of narrative voice for “Tongue” is spectacular. It carries both the plot and the character along without becoming bogged down in stereotypes or disdain. When deciding on this narrative style and voice, how did you walk that fine line between stereotype and positive representation?

Thank you! I don't favor using dialect or broken English, because of how systematically they've been used by Western writers and filmmakers to mock ethnic speech, but in this story, I felt it was essential to accurately portray the narrator's personality.

The sad truth is that education, freedom of speech, and choice, among other things, are used as means to control girl children in India from birth. (Nutrition, social interaction, purchasing power, and even outright physical intimidation, emotional and physical violence are some of the other means.) Except in the most urbane upper income circles, Indian girls are discouraged from studying beyond a certain age, reading books, and even newspapers and magazines. Even today, many families prohibit the girls and women of their household from owning or accessing mobile phones and computers to control their access to the internet and widespread information.

This enables the male patriarchy to control the flow of information and, more importantly, misinformation. The saddest part is that this abusive, controlling, manipulative system utilises the female authority figures in the family to operate: They are often the ones who indoctrinate the next generation into toeing the patriarchal line. The result is generations of under-nourished, under-educated, ill-informed young women unaccustomed to thinking or pursuing knowledge. The only way to communicate this without an info-dump like this paragraph was to use a syntactical form that clearly conveys the narrator's lack of education and awareness. The opposite of a “woke” woman.

Sadly, I've personally known and met many such individuals, and seen this tragic systemic abuse perpetuated over generations. I strove to capture that mindset and outlook through the narrator's “voice” as naturalistically as possible.

As far as positive representation is concerned, that's a tough one. Obviously, I'm fiercely critical of such a system which erases individual identity and suppresses basic human rights, but the attempt here was to emulate the “voice”

and let the first-person account speak for itself, allowing the reader to view the person's horrific situation and be as shocked as I myself was when I first encountered such cases.

This story packs quite a punch, both a terrific science fiction tale and a critical look at the institution of child marriage in India. Even the character's name, Revathi, means someone who is generous and a peacemaker, someone searching for emotional and financial stability. You are often outspoken on the subjects of caste, religion, and child marriage, and many of your stories explore these matters in great detail. Why is that?

Because these are real issues that affect hundreds of millions in India and worldwide. Child marriage is not uniquely an Indian problem: It's a major issue in the US, too. At least in India it's illegal. Even though enforcement of the law is often difficult, if not impossible, it does deter a large number of potential abusers. But here in the USA, child marriage is very much legal and widely prevalent. As I write this, in mid-June 2017, the state of New York is still working toward banning child marriage permanently. If it's taken New York this long, imagine the state of the rest of the country. It's a horrible fact that girls not yet in double digit ages are married off to much older men, and that such unions are sanctified by church, state, and society.

In India, there's millennia of systemic hierarchical abuse pressuring families into marrying off their girl children, condemning them to a lifetime of male abuse and dominance. India has the largest population of children in the world right now, hundreds of millions of young girls being forced into such unions without being given the time to mature, learn, educate, or decide for themselves. Every morsel they eat, every item of clothing they wear, every rupee they are permitted is controlled, withheld, denied, used as a bargaining tool to manipulate them into obeying the dictates of their elders, always with the men of the family dominating.

It's no surprise that India is the largest provider of bodies for the global sex trafficking trade, the fastest-growing criminal activity in the world today. In many parts of the country, girl babies are killed at birth supposedly to avoid them facing such a fate—and co-incidentally to provide the male siblings with unchallenged control of the family's assets. In other places, families “manufacture” girl babies to sell them to the sex trafficking trade, which is now corporatised and managed by bureaucrats, politicians, NGOs, and social workers, under various guises

including the notorious “adoption” industry.

Even the Indians you mostly encounter in the US and the Western world are almost always upper caste, upper class majority community. It’s somewhat like assuming that rich WASP Republicans represent the whole of the USA. You’ll rarely encounter low caste, minority, or lower class Indians. Why is that? Because they’re invisible. The case of Devyani Khobragade, the Indian Deputy Consul General in New York City, is just one case that got national exposure. There are an unknown number of Asians in the US who have been trafficked illegally, or brought here under the legal pretext of employment as assistants, maids, drivers, cooks, nannies, or servants of one kind or other. It’s common in upper class, upper caste majority community families in India—read that simply as rich Hindus—to superficially “adopt” a child who is in fact nothing more than an indentured slave.

Anyway, to come back to the core issue: Child marriage is only one facet of the larger issue of child abuse in South Asia. “Tongue” is just my way of saying this happens, children are being subjected to this even as you read these words. And it’s done with the complicity of the very persons who ought to be protecting and nurturing them: their own parents. As in the case of this story’s narrator.

Revathi certainly sounds cheerful and upbeat, but the final paragraph speaks to a fear lurking at the edges of her existence. If the visitor tells *Him* how she prattles on, *He* might take one of the last valuables that allows Revathi to directly interact with her daughter, Devi. Peeking inside Revathi’s head, was she afraid or had she given herself over completely to her devotion to *Him*?

Again, this is my attempt to convey the completely brainwashed mindset of a staggering number of Hindu women. Using religion, culture, “sanskriti” (Indian tradition) to condition women from birth into doing the work of patriarchy, they’re forced into repeating patterns of behaviour. The fear of male members of the family is a real, visible stress for such women. Mothers fear their own sons, sisters are terrorised by their brothers, daughters are abused by their fathers and uncles and brothers. Obviously, not all Indian Hindu families are like this: Anyone who has the education and intelligence to even read this web page is likely not from such a family. But such families and systemic abuse exists in far greater numbers than you would believe. Often, it’s the family next door or the

next building, and it is they, rather than the enlightened, educated, SF-reading Hindu that is the majority.

Write what you know. That's what writers are told. You make a point of doing just that, and in doing so you create something magnificent. When reading, do you look for works that are equally immersive no matter the genre? Does setting matter to you as a reader?

Thank you! Magnificent? Or horrific? In the case of stories like “Tongue,” I hope to shock readers by presenting a real world issue that's so common, so routine, and yet so horrific, that it hopefully makes supernatural horrors pale in comparison. At the same time, “Tongue” is a science fiction story, because the technology that exists to make Revathi possible (in the form she is when the story opens) doesn't actually exist yet. It's an attempt to write SF that's about real world problems, as against “first world” problems like most SF seems to be historically.

Immersiveness is essential to me, as a reader as well as a writer. The whole point of reading or writing is to lose ourselves in a story. For better or worse. Setting makes that possible.

You are such a prolific writer, what do you do to wind down? How do you recharge the creative batteries and reconnect with the world?

By constantly reading, dreaming, letting the mind go where it will, by staying in touch with the world. There's more inspiration and insight to be gained from a glance at Twitter or the online news media these days than in a dozen science texts. Sociology may not be regarded as a science, but to me the best SF is about society and, for me personally, social justice. As long as there is injustice, there will be a need for great stories. A story remains the most powerful means of highlighting a problem, or conveying a message, while also entertaining. I keep recharging by imbibing the work of other entertainers and by staying constantly connected to the real world and real problems. I've never attended an SF con, workshop, or social event, and probably never will, because to me the best SF comes from the interaction of an SF creative mind and the real world. The truth really is out there—in the real world—not in the bar of the convention hotel. That's my way of adding that I don't drink alcohol, or consume any beverages other than plain water and maybe an occasional lemonade. I'm too involved with

the daily rush of reality and social issues. It keeps me alive, keeps me caring, keeps driving me to write stories like “Tongue.”

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sandra Odell is a 47-year old, happily married mother of two, an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's UNIVERSE*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *The Drabblecast*. She is hard at work plotting her second novel or world domination. Whichever comes first.

Author Spotlight: Susan Palwick

Jason Ridler | 817 words

I enjoyed that both Niff and Seamus tried to rationalize the fantastic of Arthur's Seat, but from different viewpoints (optimist and cynic). Was that a conscious choice from the beginning, or did it develop over the execution of the story?

It grew out of their characters. Niff desperately wants to leave and Seamus is determined to stay, so their different interpretations arise from that.

I enjoyed the duplicitous nature of authority in Seamus, a sheen that hid his own weirdness and subterfuge on gaining Niff's trust. I've read about those attempts in works on predators of various kinds. Do you think there is a clear link between authority and the need to build trust through lies?

I think there's a clear link between deceit and the need to build trust through lies. Seamus isn't acting in an official capacity here; he's just pretending to. He's doing this on his own time. His desire to protect Niff is real, but his motivations are personal and might draw scrutiny from his superiors. Certainly anything like objectivity is compromised. I see Seamus as a very private person, someone who usually plays things close to the chest. I doubt he's opened up to anyone else the way he has to Niff, and I'm not sure he'd have talked to her so freely if he didn't already know, on a gut level, that she'd be gone soon. He's having the conversation he wasn't able to have with his daughter.

It may be worth mentioning here that the idea from the story came from a real incident. After the 1988 World Fantasy Convention in London, I took the train up to Edinburgh, which is one of my favorite cities, and stayed there for a week. One day I was hiking by myself on Arthur's Seat and heard someone ask, "Are you all right?" When I turned, I found a cop next to me. He and his partner patrolled the base of the park, and when they saw a woman alone, he left the patrol car to climb up and assess the situation. He stayed with me, chatting pleasantly, until we met another hiking party. I don't know if there'd just been an assault on Arthur's Seat or if this was standard procedure, but he clearly didn't like my being up there by myself.

Niff seems a stand-in for many who wish for a fantastic thing in life because they find the real world mundane, and yet there's a tremor through the story that she's delusional or sad. I'm curious if this was a commentary on escapism (which has benefits, no doubt, especially for people in hard times, but also has costs).

Certainly she's sad; she's suffered tremendous losses. I don't think she's delusional. She sees the world differently than other people do, and she hasn't been lucky enough to find a real-world community where she feels accepted. Everyone needs that. Fandom fills that need for a lot of us. We're social animals, and she's been very isolated. Anyone would want to escape from the pain she feels. The issue is whether what she's escaping to will ultimately be any better. Tolkien, in his essay on fairy stories, said famously that the only people who disapprove of escape are jailers. People who work with runaway kids know that they don't leave home without very good reasons, often involving abuse or neglect.

The major theme here is the danger in running from problems under the guise of adventure or a better life, and of reaching for a Shangri La that may or may not exist (but can only be found with a one-way ticket). Yet there was an amazing lack of harsh judgement, which I found refreshing, when such stories often end up a cynical polemic. What was it like writing such an ending (in terms of tone and the story's theme)?

Given what we learn about Seamus at the end of the story, obviously he isn't going to judge her. His attempts to convince her to stay are efforts to convince himself, too. I knew all along that Niff would leave, but I didn't know until I wrote the ending that Seamus also heard the music. He understands why she leaves, but he thinks our world will stay richer if she remains in it. His walking back down the hill is effectively a statement that he believes the world benefits from his presence, too. I wouldn't be surprised, though, if at some later point he starts finding it much more difficult to stay. In his own way, he's as isolated as Niff is.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Jason S. Ridler is a writer, improv actor, and historian. He is the author of *A Triumph for Sakura*, *Blood and Sawdust*, the Spar Battersea thrillers and has published more than sixty stories in such magazines and anthologies as *The Big Click*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Out of the Gutter*, and more. He also writes the column FXXK WRITING! for *Flash Fiction Online*. A former punk rock musician and cemetery groundskeeper, Mr. Ridler holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada. He lives in Richmond, CA.

Author Spotlight: Christopher East

Alex Puncekar | 697 words

This is a fantastic story. It's also a bit of a scary one, with the desertification of Las Vegas and an unbiased news organization's shady dealings in the foreground. I feel that "An Inflexible Truth" tells a tale of discovery and what we do with that discovery once we have it. What were some of the inspirations behind it?

Thank you! "An Inflexible Truth" grew out of my love for the conspiracy thriller genre—especially those classics from the 1970s, with an intrepid hero who gets wind of systemic corruption and undertakes to expose it. There's an implicit, compelling momentum to that kind of tale, as the protagonist's knowledge of the world's hidden evil grows. But I also find it psychologically interesting, because the protagonist is usually so isolated and outnumbered by a hidden reality he doesn't quite grasp. So I wanted to write a conspiracy thriller story in a near-future setting, but it struck me that it's a difficult kind of story to pull off in the post-truth era. If the corruption is right out there in the open, what good will it do to expose it? If the nature of reality is in doubt, how can facts effect change? This got me thinking about our toxic political climate, and twenty-first-century concepts like reality-based camps and Internet bubbles. The story emerged from that stew of ideas.

What was your writing process like for this piece?

Initially, all I had was the image of the reporter, Roland, flying to the ruins of a city that had been reclaimed by the desert. I wasn't sure what he was looking for, or why, just that he was on a mission. The worldbuilding and plot grew messily out of the first few exploratory paragraphs. The original draft was longer. I jettisoned several flashback scenes, a character, and a subplot. It was kind of a sprawly first draft that I massaged into better shape.

It's both horrifying and, oddly enough, funny that people turn a city that has been drastically changed by the climate and made uninhabitable into a tourist attraction/spelunking adventure. As you were writing this, was this

inspired by actual real-world practices? Or do you feel that things might go this way if and when the climate does make places once habitable uninhabitable?

Hmm, well, I wouldn't put it past us! But I didn't base it on anything specific. The source of the notion came from living in Los Angeles for several years during the drought, and feeling like the place was on borrowed time for human habitability. Every now and then I would look at the paved, developed landscape and imagine what it would look like if it were abandoned in a mass climate-change migration.

I do think if there were a collapse, there would certainly be historical interest in these abandoned places. And people like to rubberneck, to voyeuristically re-live times of great peril and tragedy in their art. We turn our most devastating wars into video games. The citywreck tour was an exploration of those dark turns of thought.

In this day and age, how important is an inflexible truth?

One could argue that there is nothing more important. There's a reason climate change figures into this story. Seeing reality clearly and implementing a rational course of action to handle a problem this vast requires a trust in expertise and data and science. If that trust is undermined by self-interested, "subjective reality," we risk sending ourselves down a tragic path.

Thank you for writing this! What are you working on that readers can look out for next?

Right now I'm getting ready to shop an episodic science fiction spy novel about a Cold War on another planet. I also have a near-future mystery novel percolating, set in the world of "An Inflexible Truth." That said, my writing career tends to make wild left turns when I think it's going straight; the next thing you see from me could be something completely different.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Alex Puncekar lives in Ohio and is finishing up his MFA at Youngstown State University. You

can find his published work in *Aphelion: The Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy* and *Jenny Magazine*, or you can find him on Twitter @AlexPuncekar.

Author Spotlight: Bruce McAllister

Sandra Odell | 1224 words

“Ink” flows with a slow, melodic narrative voice, one that barely touches on a pain and loneliness that forms the sharp edges of David’s life. Tell us about what inspired the story.

Sometimes readers want to hear that a story is autobiographical, sometimes (understandably) they don’t; and sometimes they’d really rather have the writer shut up and write more stories—which is probably what he should indeed do. But since you ask and since it’s important to me where stories come from, I should go ahead and say that I lived in a magical village just like the one in “Ink” when I was David’s age. By “magical,” I don’t mean just the feeling of it; I mean literal events. Vipers swarmed on the hills at night without reason. Our maid had one blue eye and one white one and sang the strangest songs in dialect. Witches poisoned cats in the olive groves. One of my best friends was a man without a throat who spoke by spitting air at the fishing wharf. I had what seemed, yes, to be precognitive dreams at times (ah, to be twelve again), and other events amazing even to the adults did occur. (And, yes, there was an old woman who gave a boy such envelopes at an iron gate that led into the endless grounds of a villa.)

This story is cradled in history, not only the political turmoil of a world gone by, but in the history of magic and belief. It can be seen in “Dottor Lupo,” the image of a hawk or eagle with wings outstretched, curses in the shadows and miracles in the light, the certainty and acceptance of a safe place. Some authors might have sacrificed representation of one sort of history for another. Did you let the line between the two draw itself, or were you conscious of blurring the edges so that one ran into the other without seam?

Since the village was indeed magical, I had no trouble *not* drawing a line. But this is true of most of the fantasy and science fiction I write. It is all highly autobiographical—beyond what any reader might imagine (even the fantastic elements): I begin with the events and emotions and epiphanies and characters of my own life—ones that I want to memorialize by feeling and craft and share with

others. Then I let reality become the fantastic. In other words, because I have lived a life that for some reason has been so full of magic (both perceived and actual), that transformation of the Factual/Real/Actual into Fantasy of one kind or another is the most natural thing in the world. It is, in the context of my own life, the ultimate realism. In that village, a boy wrote to the world's leaders to get stamps . . . and they answered, and decades later, that became a science fiction story called "Stamps." Later in life, in yet another country, that boy's experiences—as a man—with strange dogs and a terrible bus accident became a horror story called "Dog." Later still, that man turned his two years in that magical Italian fishing village into a novel called *The Village Sang To The Sea* . . . and within a few months the classroom where he'd sat half a century before suddenly was full of students (yes, actually) studying his novel, emailing him questions about it and his own "post-war era" times in their village so long ago. On and on, world without end, the magical in the real, and the stories a writer writes coming from and returning to the life he has lived—which is true for all writers, of course. Sometimes that magic has been a darkness, but more often been a marvelous light, and I couldn't be more grateful and happy about it.

Having grown up in a Navy household, I understand the push to recreate yourself with each new duty station, to pursue a new hobby or collection that will help define your identity in this new place. That sense of identity, of knowing the self, is a vital component in storytelling. What do you see as the biggest pitfalls of creating living, breathing characters? What hazards lurk in the shadows of fiction?

Hey, another military brat. That's wonderful. You know, then . . . Of the two kinds of kids that seemed to come from military life—the super-gregarious and confident, and the more withdrawn and self-creating, as you suggest—I was, of course, like David, the latter. Something tells me I just answered this question with question number two above. I guess I see no pitfalls because what I write is that "ultimate realism" I mentioned. I believe in the magical—in miracle of the synchronicity kind—and perhaps because I do (the laws of attraction work in wondrous and sometimes coyote-trickster ways) the universe has responded, and the fiction this writer writes is not much different from the life lived.

Not only are you a writer, you offer consultations and coaching services for

other writers to help them hone their craft. What are some of the most common questions and concerns of writers who come to you for coaching?

When people want a coach, they often want one to solve problems. Often the problem is writer's block, staying on the wagon, sustaining the writing habit until a book's rough draft is done, say. Sometimes it's a matter of total paralysis—"Every word I start to put down is WRONG!" Sometimes it's craft matters, sure, but more often it's about life itself, how to reconcile life's duties and distractions (and fears of writing) with the urge and need to write. (I'm sometimes Yoda, they tell me, but just as often a mediator between the Two Selves, championing for the one and negotiating with the other. I often have to tell writers, "Which regret do you want on your deathbed—that you wrote or that you didn't write?" and that does seem to work, getting "little, fussy, worried, fearful self" to step out of the way and let the wiser creator in them do the work that needs to be done on this journey they've been given.)

What's next for Bruce McAllister? What can eager fans look forward to in the second half of 2017?

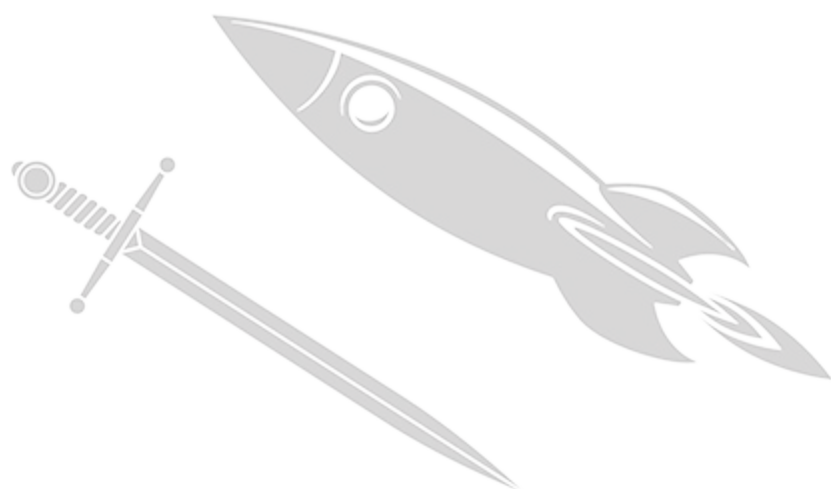
Thanks for asking, Sandra. As my editors know, for decades now I've worked in spurts of productivity and silence, and the last six months have been no exception—the productivity kind. (Almost all of the '90s was silence, but that's another story—and probably one that won't be written.) Lots of work—poetry, flash fiction and longer fiction (and reprints and podcast stories)—to appear over the next year, but the productivity is continuing, I'm happy to say. The new work: A novel expansion of my Hugo-finalist story "Kin" with a screenwriter friend, more short stories (where my heart has been for so many years), maybe another new novel, one or two film projects, who knows? Mainly simply writing . . . and continuing to write. A writer is simply one who writes; if he doesn't, he's some other person, isn't he?

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sandra Odell is a 47-year old, happily married mother of two, an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's UNIVERSE*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *The Drabblecast*. She is hard at work

plotting her second novel or world domination. Whichever comes first.

MISCELLANY



Coming Attractions

The Editors | 127 words

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