

## Special Feature:

Interview with Multiple-Award Winning Author Carol Berg

By

David E. Hughes

Carol Berg is a fantasy writer who lives in Colorado. Since *Transformation* was published in 2000, Carol Berg's novels have won the Prism Award for best romantic fantasy (*Daughter of Ancients*), the Geffen Award, given by the Israeli Science Fiction Society for best translated fantasy (*Transformation*), and the Colorado Book Award (*Song of the Beast*). They have been short-listed for the Compton Crook/Stephen Tall Memorial Award and for the Barnes and Noble Maiden Voyage Award, both given for the best first science fiction/fantasy/horror novel of 2000 (*Transformation*). In 2002, *Restoration* was short-listed for the Romantic Times Book Club Reviewers' Choice Award for the best epic fantasy. Her books have made the *Locus* fantasy and science fiction journal bestseller list and have been translated into Russian, German, Czech, Hebrew, and Polish.

### Tell us about your new novel, *Flesh and Spirit*:

*Flesh and Spirit* and *Breath and Bone*, the two volumes of *The Lighthouse Duet*, are probably more integrated than any two of my books so far. They shape one large story about a man searching for his place in a dying world.

Valen is the rebellious son of a long line of magical cartographers in a society where pureblood sorcerers live a privileged and highly constrained life. Valen hated that life. He ran away at fifteen and has spent the years since trying to have a good time, keep his stomach full, and avoid notice. Survival is getting harder and harder, though. The natural world is in ruinous upheaval, from plague, pestilence, and strangely skewed weather. At the same time, the fertile, wealthy kingdom of Navronne is embroiled in a civil war, and a legion of doomsday fanatics has decided that the only way to set things straight is to destroy cities and drive everyone out into the countryside. Of course, Valen has his own issues – a nasty little addiction problem, for one, and the dismal conclusion that at twenty-seven he is not really very good at anything. The story opens when a comrade and fellow deserter abandons him in a rainy wilderness, starving, wounded, and with only his boots and a stolen book of maps that legend claims can lead men into the “realm of angels.” When he’s given sanctuary in a nearby monastery, a brotherhood of scribes “given to charity and good cooking,” Valen thinks he’s found the solution to all his problems—a roof for the winter, a bed, and three meals a day—although, alas, no girls. But instead—

Well, that's the crux of the matter! We've got monks and princes, secret societies, fanatics, and beings who walk right out of myth, and someone is stealing the eyes of the dead.... It's a big story.

**What most distinguishes *The Lighthouse Duet* from your other two series, *The Bridge of D'Arnath* and *Books of the Rai-kirah*?**

One of my early readers commented that in these books, the world itself is one of the characters. So you might call this my first foray into environmental fantasy! This is also my first take on characters whom other stories might call "the fae," but really aren't at all - mythical beings who cohabit the world, but who, in essence, are not human. Thematically, the Books of the Rai-kirah dealt with the transforming power of human relationships and a warrior's journey of faith in a world where the objects of his faith shifted out from under him, while the Bridge of D'Arnath series dealt with the transcendent power of love and family. The Lighthouse books deal with the other side of these coins – the destructive power of broken relationships, broken families, prejudice, greed, and fear.

But Valen is the heart of these books, and he is quite unlike my other heroes. Whereas Seyonne (of the Rai-kirah books), at his core, knew exactly who he was, grounded in duty and compassion taught by his family, and Seri and Karon (of the Bridge series) remained steadfast in love and honor throughout their trials, Valen has no such steady grounding. Though he thinks of himself as an easy-going, mead-loving, give-the-girl-a-good-time kind of guy with lots of friends, he has essentially spent his life alone, and by the time we meet him, he has learned a lot of hard lessons about the world. He is not ambitious, not noble, and not dedicated to any good cause except staying alive in an increasingly dangerous world. Intelligent, but not intellectual, he's bothered a bit by the fact that he's never found any occupation that he's particularly good at, certainly not the sorcery that his horrid family so prizes and wants to sell to the highest bidder. But he can laugh at anything.

**You also have another project coming out, a novella in a compilation called *Elemental Magic*. Tell us about that project:**

*Elemental Magic* is the third in a series of romantic fantasy anthologies from Berkley. Each book comprises four themed novellas, two from fantasy writers, two from romance writers. In the case of *Elemental Magic*, each novella centers on one of the four elements: earth, air, fire, or water. My story, called "Unmasking," is the "water" story. It tells of a young enchantress who has immense talent, but forever fails when she attempts to use it in "great deeds", and a young man born without any scrap of talent for magic among a people whose sorcery defines their every activity, every action, and every choice. When a spy is detected crossing the border, putting their country's security at risk, these two are chosen to carry off a tricky deception that involves the nature of magic. *Elemental Magic* will be released in November of this year.

**How did writing a novella compare to writing a novel?**

I was a bit wary when my editor asked if I would be interested in writing a 25K word novella. I've written exactly one short story that remains firmly in my trunk, and my novels average 170K words. I just don't think "short." But after coming off two intense years working on the Lighthouse books, I was ready for something less demanding, and the encouragement to attach the story to one of my existing worlds tempted me. I took the opportunity to return to the world of my Rai-kirah novels, setting the story about forty years before the opening of *Transformation*.

It turned out to be a delightful experience. I had a very limited time frame in which to write the story, which helped me tell myself "no" whenever I was tempted to...digress. And having already developed the world enabled me to pare down the elements that needed to be included. But it was definitely a challenge to get a multilayered story of the kind I like into such a tight word count, without making it a complete muddle. The two techniques I found the most helpful were focusing on a short timeframe—the action takes place over about three days—and trimming characters—fewer characters equated to fewer subplots. So it all came down to focus. Once I got that under control, I found I had plenty of opportunity to develop both the relationship of the characters and the larger story in which they were involved. When I submitted the story, it was 24,994 words – which made me very proud!

**Did writing a novella inspire you to write some even shorter fiction in the future? This question is, of course, purely unselfish on our part.**

The answer is a resounding maybe. (Three months ago, the answer would have been no way.) The novella certainly gave me more confidence that I could write shorter without sacrificing my love for language and rich characters. But I believe that true short fiction is an art form akin to poetry – and I don't know that I can pack that much wallop in less than 25K words!

**Both *The Bridge of D'Arnath* and *Books of the Rai-kirah* address questions about the nature of the soul and essence of individual identity. Why do you explore these issues in your writing?**

I don't consciously set out to write about these issues (or any issues, as a matter of fact). It's kind of a surprise when I can come up with statements such as "the transcendent power of love and family" with regard to something I've written! My first aim is always to tell a good story about interesting people involved in cool adventures. I love a good dollop of mystery along the way. I like to set these adventures in worlds and societies that are not exactly like those we know, yet seem very real to the reader. To me, real implies complex, that is, not black and white, but many shades of gray. And of course, story implies people in conflict with each other and/or themselves. I happen to enjoy stories where these conflicts happen on many levels, including inside the

heroes, heroines, and villains—which is where these questions of identity and spirituality often come into play. When you challenge people with extraordinary circumstances, they often have to reach deep inside themselves for answers. And yes, as you might have guessed from the description, *Flesh and Spirit* addresses these issues yet again, as Valen discovers that his destiny is not to visit every tavern and bed every woman in Navronne!

**You've dedicated a lot of your time to helping other writers with their craft, such as volunteering at the Colorado Gold Conference, and mentoring young writers in Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers, the Poudre R-1 International Baccalaureate program, and writers' workshops. You've presented writing workshops at Colorado Gold, RMFW monthly program, Metro State, CU Denver, Pikes Peak Writers Conference, Colorado Writers Workshop, World Science Fiction Convention, World Fantasy Convention, Opus Fantasy Arts Festival, and other science fiction conventions in the US and in Canada. You were also a guest faculty member at the 2006 Surrey International Writers Conference in British Columbia. Why do you spend so much time giving back to fellow writers?**

For eight years, I wrote as a hobby. Working full time and managing a family, I didn't have time for creative writing classes. I wanted to spend what writing time I had *writing*. I am fortunate to have an excellent formal writing foundation from my school days, and I have always been a reader, which is the most important of all writing apprenticeships. But where did I learn to hone my fiction-writing skills? From articles written by authors sharing what they knew, from contest judges who managed to give me both encouragement and useful critiques, and from pros who shared their experiences and insights at writers' conferences, on panels, and at the lunch table. Every time I learned something new, I would go back and revise all my stories, and with each turn, my work improved. I have always had a love for teaching – it runs in my family. And now that I have chucked the day job, and the boys are on their own, it is just great fun to pay back some of this marvelous education that was provided for me.

**Speaking of giving back to fellow writers, what is the most important piece of advice you give to up-and-coming writers, especially in the fantasy genre?**

Well, I can't keep it to just one piece of advice. It's more like three big ones!

1. Read, read, read, Read good writing. Read across genres.
2. Write, write, write. Revise, then write more. Find serious fellow readers/writers with whom to exchange critiques. Learn to give critique and learn to take it.
3. Learn the craft of writing. Learn grammar, learn the cliches of your chosen genre and how to avoid them (this is particularly important for fantasy writers where cliches are rampant thanks to the heavy influence of Tolkien imitators and D&D-like role-playing games!). Learn about maid-and-butler dialog, said-bookisms,

and using your opening to make a contract with the reader, always remembering that craft does not diminish art.

**Fantasy as a genre seems to have really developed over the past several years, both in terms of the quality and quantity of writers on the market. It has also become more "mainstream" in terms of being marketed to a larger audience through television and film, the most recent examples being the successful "Heroes" at NBC and HBO's decision to produce George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* as a series. To what do you attribute this recent surge in fantasy? Would you be interested in seeing any of your work made into a movie or television show?**

I hope that this infiltration of fantasy into the mainstream of best sellers and popular media is a result of people recognizing the marvelous storytelling possibilities of fantasy. Fantasy is our oldest form of storytelling, and for centuries people didn't think twice about the fact that legitimate truths about human nature and human relationships could be revealed through fantastic literature. "Realistic" fiction is a fairly recently invented genre.

I would be delighted to see one of my stories well dramatized, and, crassly speaking, it pays very well. But I don't know if I could bear seeing someone else's vision of Valen and the Danae, or Seyonne or Aleksander or Seri or D'Arnath's Bridge or Aidan's dragons. And to see a story chopped and chewed and spat out as unrecognizable as was Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* would break my heart. In general, I think short fiction translates to the screen better than novels. On the other hand, if I could see a *Flesh and Spirit* mini-series so well done as the A&E *Pride and Prejudice* or Mystery's *Brother Cadfael*.... Truthfully, I have a lot more books to sell before any of this ever becomes an issue.

**Although you've only been a professional writer for seven years, you've achieved much success from the standpoint of awards and sales. What would you would like to accomplish in the future?**

I would love to see my books stay in print, constantly read and enjoyed. I would love to continue to hear from readers that my stories make them think, make their lives richer, inspire them to pursue their own love of writing, or just have a few terrific hours of adventure. And a World Fantasy Award would be very nice.

## Going Home

By  
Jeremy Schneider

I haven't always lived in a closet. Daddy used to let me live in the house proper. I even had my own room that I shared with my older brother Malcolm (I'm eight, he's eleven). It wasn't until I changed that Daddy locked me in here. Malcolm says it's because he's scared of me that he keeps me locked in here. When I ask Malcolm why Daddy would be scared of a kid (I am eight after all), when he is a grown up and way bigger than me, Malcolm says it's what's inside my head that Daddy is scared of.

I see what Malcolm means because one time, before I started changing, Daddy brought Malcolm and me out to the Ott's Farm and we watched as Daddy and Mr. Ott cut open this big old pig that was just about as fat as a pig can get. The guts were all over the place and boy it was a mess. And then Daddy cracked open that pig's head and scooped out the brains and put the brains in a big metal bowl. And when I saw the brains all wet and squishy in that metal bowl, I nearly got the all-overs and I had to run out of the barn and puke and I heard Daddy and Mr. Ott laughing as I ran. But Malcolm wasn't laughing.

I am lucky because if a guy has to have an older brother than Malcolm is the best older brother a guy could want. I'll tell you how great a brother Malcolm is: during the days, when Malcolm comes home from school and when Daddy and Mommy are away at work, Malcolm comes into my closet with me and reads me books. It doesn't matter if we have read the book a hundred times before; he will still read it to me. I especially like the books with color pictures in them, what are called *illustrations*, on the cover and inside the book. Malcolm is smart because he can read. I can't read. But I can do other stuff.

Like this one time me and Malcolm were in my closet and he was reading to me, and we got to losing track of the time, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, we hear Daddy's rattling old truck pull up in front of the house. And Malcolm gets scared because Daddy told Malcolm that he wasn't to come in my closet, and he has even locked the closet to keep him out, but Malcolm is good with tools and he just picked that lock with nothing but a piece of wire from an old coat hanger.

So we hear the truck, and we hear the squeak of the breaks and the rattling as the engine shuts off, and then we hear the scrape as the door of the truck opens and pretty soon we know Daddy is going to come in the house and find Malcolm in my closet and he is going to be all mad because he is always kind of mad when he gets home from work anyway.

So Malcolm says, real loud but sort of under his breath, "Shit!" And I know he is going to get caught and Daddy is going to be mad and when Daddy gets mad he uses his hands, and I don't want him to use his hands on Malcolm because he is my older brother and I love him.

So I get this picture (*illustration*) in my head of Daddy walking from that old rattling truck, passed the old metal mailbox, and up the walk to the door and then I say in my head “*Fall Down!*” real loud, but only inside my head. And I hear Daddy’s lunchbox hit the walk outside, and I hear another sound like of falling, and then I hear Daddy say, real loud so anyone can hear, “Shit!!!” And then I hear, but I can sort of see it too, Daddy on his hands and knees putting his leftover lunch back into the lunchbox. And then I say to Malcolm, “Go Malcolm. Its okay now.” And Malcolm picks up the books he brought and sticks the metal door opener in his pocket and runs out of my closet slamming the door real hard and then I am alone again.

And he must not have gotten caught because he came into my closet later on at night when I was asleep and sort of snuggled up against me and put his arms around me, and I woke up and saw it was him, and he whispered in my ear real low, “I thought we were toast, Kip. Next time we have to be smarter. We have to have a look out or something.” And I said still kind of sleepy, “Yeah. We should.”

But in my mind I kept thinking how two people like me and Malcolm could be toast? Because I know toast is two pieces of bread that are heated up in the toaster until they are all crispy and have a black coating on them. But I don’t ask him this because I remember that there are such things as *metaphors* that they use in the books he reads to me. Being toast is a *metaphor*. I can’t read those books. But I can do other things, like with Daddy and the truck that time.

So, sometimes it’s not all bad in my closet, like when Malcolm comes and reads to me or when I get the food that Mommy cooks for me. Usually she makes me something with meat in it. Like meatloaf or hamburgers or pot roast (but only once and awhile with the pot roast). But the funny thing is, no matter how much food I eat, I keep getting smaller. Mommy says I am small for my age (I am eight), but I know that I should not be getting smaller and skinnier if I eat normal meals. Malcolm eats normal meals like me and he is getting bigger, but not me.

I have to eat in my closet, not at the table with Malcolm and Mommy and Daddy because Daddy says he gets disgusted looking at me since I have changed and he says that he will barf if he has to eat and look at me at the same time. So I eat in here and listen to the TV out in the living room, and I hear the clink of the silverware on the plates out in the kitchen, and sometimes I hear Daddy yell at the TV in the living room, especially if there is a sports game on. Then when I am finished with my plate, Mommy comes and takes the plate away, and I see Daddy standing behind her swinging the key on his finger and watching me like I am going to do something.

Then it’s dessert time, but I have to wait until Daddy goes up to bed because he has to get up early in the mornings. Mommy comes in my closet (Malcolm opens it for her) and gives me the dessert and sits down with me (These are also my favorite times in my closet, right next to the times with Malcolm reading to me). Sometimes she will hold me and kiss my head with no hair on it and tell me she loves me. That seems funny to me that she would say that because I know she loves me because I can see she loves me in her eyes and also in her head.

But I don’t tell her about that because I am afraid that she will then get scared of me like Daddy is scared of me, and then she won’t come into my closet and sit with me and give me dessert (pie, pudding, cake sometimes).

I know that Mommy also thinks about how she can get me out of my closet and

away from the house. But I also know that she is too scared of Daddy to try it because he sometimes uses his hands on her too. And she also wouldn't have anytime to do it because she works all day doing something with phones and when she gets home Daddy is home too and when she doesn't come to bed at a certain time at night Daddy yells for her to come to bed. So there isn't time for her to do anything. I see she thinks about taking me out of my closet and away from home a lot more now that I have changed.

Sometimes when she is in the closet with me, I tell her that I like being in my closet just fine and I really don't want to go anywhere anyway. Just to put that thought out of her mind. She smiles at me, but only on the outside. I can still see on the inside she is thinking about it. And sometimes she sings to me very low so Daddy won't hear. She sings songs like *Mocking Bird* and *Angel of the Morning* and *Fly Me to the Moon* and *Beyond the Sea*, songs like that. And boy you don't know how beautiful her voice is. Sometimes her voice is so beautiful that it makes me cry, but in a good way, and then Mommy cries sometimes too.

So, sometimes in my closet I play games with myself. One time Malcolm asked me what I do in my closet all day when it is locked and dark and he is at school and Mommy and Daddy are working, and I told him I play with myself. And he started laughing so hard his face got all red and tears started coming out of his eyes and I asked him what was so funny? But he said I wouldn't understand (which is probably true).

So, the games I play I made up myself. With all that time I got to thinking, what would be a really good game for being in a closet? And then it came to me: with all the stuff in here like shoes and coats and hats and dresses and mittens, I could play dress up. But I didn't want to dress up in any of those old clothes anyway. So I thought that if there were other people, like a woman to wear the old dresses and a man to wear one of those old coats, it would be a lot better than just me in those old things.

So I closed my eyes and I pictured in my head an old man with gray hair to wear the hat with the red checkered pattern on it and the old green coat, and I pictured a woman with long curly red hair to wear the yellow dress with the flowers, and before you know it there they were in my closet with me.

The old man had the hat and the coat on just like I saw it in my head and the lady with the red hair had on the yellow dress with the flowers. I was so happy that they were actually there that I started laughing in delight, and clapping my hands with my long fingers, and then the man with the hat and coat and the woman in the dress saw me and then saw where they were (in a closet) and they started to get scared.

The man asked me where he was, and I told him in my closet with me, and he said he didn't know how he got in the closet, and I said I thought him up, and then he got here, same thing with the lady with the red hair. But he told me that he wasn't made-up, his name was Arthur and he lived in Minnesota and he would really like to go back there if I could manage that. I told him he wasn't in Minnesota now, and he asked me where in the world he was, and I told him he was in Michigan, in the United States, in my closet, which is also in the United States. Then Arthur asked the lady with the red hair where she was from, and the lady said she was from New York, and her name was Carolyn, and then she asked the man if she was dreaming, and Arthur really didn't have an answer for that.

So I got to thinking, how would I like it if someone from New York or Minnesota



stuck me in a closet without me knowing it? And then I felt kind of bad for doing that exact thing (except the opposite) to Arthur and Carolyn. So I told them that if they wanted to go back to where they came from than they would just have to tell me what the places they left looked like, so I could picture them in my mind, and send them back there.

So Arthur told me that he was in his den, reading the newspaper, before he came to my closet, and he told me it had a long sofa on one wall and a TV in the corner and pictures of him and his family on the wall and also a picture of him and a really big fish that he had caught when he was 18 years old. I could kind of see the room in my head, but not really.

So I asked Arthur to get a really good and clear picture of his den in his mind, and when he did that I could see it really good in my head, so I closed my eyes and when I opened them again Arthur wasn't in the closet anymore. So that just left Carolyn to send home.

I asked Carolyn what she was doing before she came to my closet, and she said she was at work doing hair. I asked her what did she mean by 'doing hair'? And she told me that she was a *beautician* (that means cutting and styling people's hair) and she looked kind of embarrassed when she mentioned hair because she saw that I didn't have any, and then she asked me if I was sick. I told her that I wasn't sick; all my hair had just fallen out after a while. My hair falling out was the first part of me changing.

She really didn't know what that meant, and I could see she was getting kind of nervous and she was thinking things like, she would never get out of this closet with this little bald kid and back to her job. So I told her to just close her eyes, and picture in her mind what she was doing the minute before she came to my closet, and she did. And then she was gone too.

So, sometimes I have funny dreams. Not funny in a good way, funny like when someone says, "Ewe. Something smells funny in here." Or, "That dog with the foam on his mouth is acting funny." It's pretty much the same one over and over again. I'm not in my closet anymore. I am in this big wide open field, and the stars are out and shining so bright, and the night is so clear that you feel like you can reach up and touch one of them. And then I get to hearing this buzzing in my ears and all throughout my head, and then one of those stars up in the sky gets really bright like the sun (which is also a star but not dead like the rest of them) and the light from that star comes down and washes over me, kind of like water from a hose, except this is light now, and I feel my feet leaving the ground and then I am up in the air, and I know I should be scared being up in the air like that, but I'm not for some reason, and then I look around and I can see the whole field I was in, and all the trees around the field, and the roads leading to the field and then I see the house and Daddy's old rattling truck and I can hear voices too, but I don't know what they are saying because they sound very far away, and then I wake up in the dark in my closet.

Is that funny or what?

So, sometimes I hear Mommy and Daddy yelling at each other and what they are yelling about is usually me because I hear my name being yelled a lot. Mommy says that Daddy shouldn't be treating me like he is because it isn't what a good Christian would do to another human being and their son on top of that. And Daddy says that I am not his son, and as far as being a human being, he says, there is no evidence that I

am one of those either, so what does it matter? Mommy asks him how he can say things like that and how he can be so cruel and he says, "Just look at the little freak." And he means me, and that's when he calls her all sorts of names that I don't want to mention. And then the crying starts, and I know that the crying only makes Daddy madder because he tells her to "Shut Up!!" real loud, and I know that if she doesn't stop crying soon that he is going to use his hands on her, and I don't want that, so I close my eyes and think of all the times she has come in my closet with dessert, and sat with me and hugged me and kissed me and sung to me, and all the good feelings it gave me, and I send those pictures in my head to her head and that usually makes her feel better and she usually stops crying.

Except this one time, I sent pictures of my dream to her head by accident, and she started screaming real loud and the crying came on even harder. So the next time I had to try really hard to just send the good feelings to her. But it's funny, the dream always gives me good feelings, but not her, maybe she is scared of being so high in the air like that?

So, remember me telling you that I like the books with the pictures (*illustrations*) that Malcolm reads to me the best? Well here is why I like them the best. The pictures are all of something other than a closet, which I already know what that looks like, so all I have to do when I am in my closet is picture the places that are pictured in the books and then I can go there.

There is this one book named *Where the Wild Things Are*, that has these great pictures of jungles with all sorts of animals and stuff, and sometimes I go there. You think a kid would be scared to be all alone in a jungle with animals and other things, but you would be wrong. It is one of the best places to be. The dirt of the jungle feels great on my bare feet and the sounds that those animals that live in that jungle make is also great.

Or there is this other book named *The Polar Express* and that takes place on a train and in the North Pole, and boy the cold air in the North Pole is just about the best air there is. Not at all like the air in my closet that smells like old clothes and shoes. And on the train they give you all sorts of food and hot chocolate whenever you want, it's like having dessert before dinner, or no dinner at all. I have to be careful not to be gone too long or else Malcolm or Mommy, or even worse, Daddy, would get home and look in my closet and not see me there and then they would be scared, or if it's Daddy, mad.

I really don't know why Daddy is mad so much all the time and why he has put me in my closet. I ask Mommy sometimes if he is mad because of something I did, and she always tells me that it is not because of me. Sometimes, she says, that people are just mad for no reason. But I think I know why Daddy is mad all the time.

Before I changed, or maybe it was while I was changing, Daddy and me were driving to town to pick up something for his old rattling truck, and we were driving along and I was looking out the window and he says to me, "How come you're always so quiet, Kip?" and I say to him, "I don't know." And he says "What are you thinking?" and I say, "What was Grandpa like?" And he asks me why I want to know about him for. I say, "I don't know," again and then I say, "You were thinking about him, weren't you? You were thinking about that time in the field."

And he stops the truck real hard and the old breaks squeal on the road and I am thrown forward in the seat, but the seatbelt is on so I am okay, and he turns to me real

mad and asks how I know about that. And I say "I don't know" again, and he grabs my shirt and asks me who told me? And then I say no one told me anything. I only saw little pieces of pictures, like the field, and the birds flying in the sky, which is really blue, and the sun, which is out and shining down on him when he is a little kid, and Grandpa, whose pants are down and his penis is out. And then he slaps me hard across the face and tells me real loud, "Shut up!!" And then I start to cry and he looks away and I know he is trying hard not to cry too. And then he gets real quiet and looks at me for a long time and then we turn around and never get to the store for the piece to his old rattling truck. And when we got back to the house he used his hands on me until I could barely walk, and then he put me in my closet.

So I had the funny dream again, and it was the same one, except this time it was different. I was in the field like always, but this time Malcolm and Mommy were there with me, and both of them were crying and Mommy kisses me and tells me she loves me and tells me to "be good" and then Malcolm hugs and kisses me and gives me the book named *Where The Wild Things Are*. And then I am up in the sky again, moving towards that really bright star, and I am crying too because I know I am never going to see Mommy or Malcolm or Daddy ever again.

And when I wake up I see that the door to my closet is open, and someone is standing in the middle of the doorway and when my eyes get used to the light and being awake I see that it's Daddy standing there in the doorway. He's just standing there and not saying anything to me. The key to my closet is dangling from his finger, but he's not swinging it around like he sometimes does and I can hear his breathing which sounds low and funny.

With the light behind him and no light here in my closet I can't see his face and I say, "Daddy?" and he still doesn't say anything, he just keeps standing there and breathing. And then he backs up without saying anything and closes my door and locks it and I am alone in the dark again.

So Daddy didn't come home from work today at the normal time. He didn't come home for dinner tonight either and I could tell Mommy was worried, and by the time it was time for bed I knew she was really worried. I was also kind of worried too, but I was also tired, really tired, so I fell asleep and I don't know anything until I hear screaming and crying out in the living room later on.

The screaming is from Daddy who is yelling at Mommy and also Malcolm and the crying is from Mommy. Daddy is screaming and saying things like, "I can't live like this anymore!" And Mommy is crying and telling him he is drunk and telling him he should go to bed. And her telling him that he should go to bed just makes him madder so he hits her across her face making her fall to the ground. He hits her so hard I could hear the slap even in my closet. And then Malcolm screams, "Bastard!" and tries to grab his arm because he is going to hit her again, but he just tosses Malcolm away on to a table and I hear a lamp breaking and Malcolm hitting the floor. Then it is quiet for a while and I hear footsteps walking away to another part of the house and then I hear Mommy scream, "No!"

And then the door to my closet opens and Daddy is standing there with his shotgun and I can really smell the liquor on him now. I am too scared to do anything because I know he is going to shoot me because I can already see in his head where he is going to bury me in the woods. He points the shotgun at me and I grab the book *Where The*

*Wild Things Are* and put it up in front of my face to block the bullet, and I close my eyes and wait to get shot.

But then I hear a sound like a hammer hitting a watermelon and then something hitting the floor, and I open my eyes and see Daddy laying on the floor moaning and Malcolm standing over him with a big gold trophy with a football player on top of it. Malcolm has his mouth hanging open like he can't believe what he just did, hitting Daddy and all.

And then Mommy pushes past him and steps over Daddy, who is still moaning, and picks me up and takes me out of my closet. She grabs Malcolm by the arm and pulls him toward the door and then we go out of the house and into the night air, which smells wonderful, and all the crickets and things are making noise in the trees around us. And the sky is so clear and all the stars are out.

Mommy takes me and Malcolm and we go over to her old yellow car, but just as we are about to get in the car she says real loud, "Shit!" and I know why she says that because she doesn't have her keys to her car, because she is in her night clothes and the keys to her car are in her purse, which is in her bedroom, in the house.

And then we see Daddy walk out of the house with the shotgun in one hand and the other hand holding his head where Malcolm hit him with the trophy. And Mommy and Malcolm scream at the same time and Daddy gets this real mad look on his face and starts walking over to us. And I close my eyes and say real loud in my head, "*Fall down!*" And I hear Daddy fall down on the ground, and I open my eyes and see him on the ground and blood is all over the front of his face and coming out of his nose, and that's when Mommy takes me and Malcolm and we run off down the driveway toward the main road.

I can tell Mommy doesn't know what to do when we reach the main road because we are way out of the way and not many cars come down this road, especially at night. And that's when I send the pictures of my dream into her head and I know this is a bad thing to do because the last time I did that she started to scream and cry, but this time when I do it she just closes her eyes and I can see little drops of tears coming out and then she sort of shakes her head no at me. And that's when Malcolm screams and we turn around and see Daddy stumbling down the driveway toward us, and that's when she makes up her mind, and we run off the main road and into the woods that lead to the field.

The moon is out really big and bright, so we can make our way easily through the woods. Mommy and Malcolm are both in their night clothes and they both have no shoes or socks on, and as we run through the woods I wonder how they can stand the sticks and rocks and pine needles sticking into their bare feet. But pretty soon we are through the woods and into the field and at least the field is a little softer on their feet.

Mommy lays me down in the long grass and it is cold on my bald head, but it is also a great feeling because I don't feel this kind of thing in my closet. And I look up into the sky and I see all the stars and they are just as bright and clear as they were in my dream, and then I think that maybe this is a dream because everything seems the same as when I dreamed it, except for the feeling of the wet grass on my head. That's new.

I start to laugh because the wet grass kind of tickles my head, but Mommy tells me to be quiet because she and Malcolm are both being quiet because we are hiding in the long grass. And I can hear the crunching of sticks in the woods and the breaking of

branches and I know Daddy is on his way to us in the field.

And then I hear the buzzing sound in my head and I can feel it all over my body too. And I know Mommy and Malcolm feel it too because they both look at me and I can see that their hair is floating over their heads like they were underwater. And then I look up into the sky and I see the stars and they start to move.

All the stars I see start to come together and swirl around and make sort of a tunnel in the middle of the sky. And then this light shoots out of the tunnel and the light is so bright that it makes the field at night seem as if it is in the middle of the day. And the light is really warm on my face and my arms and my bare feet, and it is the best feeling I have ever had, way better than in my dreams.

Malcolm and Mommy are still staring at the stars in the sky and I can see their mouths are open because a sky doesn't do this that often and it is really something to see. And I can see at the edge of the field that Daddy is also staring at the sky with his mouth open, and the shotgun is on the ground at his feet.

I look at Mommy and say to her that this is my dream, and she is smiling, but also crying a little too, and I can see in her mind that she doesn't want to let me go, but also I can see that she thinks she has to because I will be better off wherever I am going, instead of sitting in a closet, and she says, "I know, honey." And then she kisses me and hugs me and tells me she loves me (even though I know it), and then she tells me to be good.

Malcolm gives me the book named *Where The Wild Things Are* and this surprises me because I thought I was holding the book in my hands, and then he says to me, "Don't forget about me, Kip, okay?" Malcolm is my brother and I love him, how could I ever forget about him? And I say okay, even though I think this a pretty dumb thing to say, but I say it anyway because he is my older brother and I am supposed to listen to what he says. And then he kisses me and he doesn't have to say he loves me because I already know he does because of all the times he came into my old closet and read to me even though he didn't have to.

And then I am up in the air and I can see the field and I can see Mommy and Malcolm and Daddy, way back near the trees, and I wave good bye to them. And then I can see the house where my old closet was and I can see the old rattling truck and then I look up into the light, even though I know you're not supposed to do this because you could hurt your eyes, but my eyes don't hurt. And then I hear the voices again, but I don't hear them with my ears I hear them with my brain. And this time I know what they are saying They are saying welcome home.

## Sick Days

By  
Clare Kirwan

No one I knew had ever called in sick. No one I knew had ever known anyone who had *been* sick. Yet, I stared at Shel's blotchy face and too-bright eyes on the telecam. She glowed strangely, almost wetly. I touched the screen. "You look terrible!"

"I know!" She smiled. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

"What is it?"

"Measles," she told me, leaning in so I could get a better look. "Everybody's getting it 'round here. Haven't you had it?"

"Er...no," I admitted. "Does it hurt?"

"Not exactly. It's a weird feeling. I had a high fever yesterday." She touched her inflamed skin.

I cringed, but realized I was intrigued. "Where did you get it?"

A few days later, I found myself on Corporation Road looking for a supposedly thriving office among the unmarked warehouses, dodgy repair shops, and fences topped by barbed wire. I spied Central Station, all the windows broken, and, on the other side of the street, the old terraced hotels fashionable back when the railways operated. Then, I saw the grubby plate on Number 59:

*D McCabe, MD  
Catering to all kinds of sickness  
® Restorin Registered*

Ringling the bell, I saw the CCTV light blink on and smiled nervously into the lens. "Shel sent me."

The lock clicked. I pushed the door open and entered a foyer brilliantly lit with illegal incandescent bulbs. I waited for someone to appear, feeling a bit queasy, but trying to savour it. That's what it was all about, right?

When no one appeared immediately, I leafed through some well-thumbed medical encyclopaedias on a side table, amazed at the sicknesses people used to suffer. I heard footsteps and looked up into the face of a monster.

"Come in!" It had a woman's voice.

I stared.

"Don't pay any attention to this tumour. The doctor's working on it." She gestured me forward. "Come, we haven't got all day."

The surgery resembled an old science fiction movie set, all pristine white and shiny stainless steel.

The doctor's monkish semi-baldness had been fashionable a few years ago. "Ah, Alyssa, isn't it? You haven't visited us before, have you? You must be in excellent health!" He laughed.

I'd never seen anyone actually wearing spectacles. The lenses flashed with weird reflections and I couldn't tell the colour of his eyes.

"Er, yes." I looked away, distracted by so many unfamiliar objects. Antique public health posters, some of which were truly disturbing, lined the walls. *Don't die of ignorance*. What was that about?

"Don't be alarmed at this set-up. Many of my clients like the retro look." He settled himself beside me, pulling a hinged table closer. A cabinet swung open, revealing rows of vials. "Ever had anything before?"

"I nearly had a cold once. Caught it from someone else, but..."

"Restorin did the trick, eh? The cure for everything. 'Don't get sick! Don't get old! There's no need to catch a cold!'" He sang the old playground rhyme. "Well, Alyssa, what can I do for you today?"

The injection didn't hurt much. He said he didn't have to use the needle, but his clients usually preferred it. Part of the experience. Exiting into the dull evening light, I already felt different, my breath quickening. Dr. McCabe had said the sickness would take effect in a few days. I couldn't wait to see Shel's face.

I booked a week off work. The StatCentre was quite flexible about leave.

"Going anywhere nice?" asked Sam. "Have you tried Cuba4? It's wicked."

"Yeah!" said Lu. "That guitar player at the theme night half way through. Wow! The things he'll do! I can give you some shortcuts."

"Oh, I don't know." I shrugged. "It's a bit...samey, isn't it? It's not like you're really there."

"Really there?" Lu laughed. "With insects and no one speaking your language and buses that don't turn up and bad food and lumpy beds.... Shall I go on?"

Sam nodded. "And anyway, you can't *really* go to Cuba anymore, not after what the Yanks did. It'll take decades to clean up."

"Anyway," I said, "Shel's been there, so I have to do something better."

Sam shook his head. "It must be hard always trying to outdo your best friend! So, come on, Alyssa, what *are* you going to do?"

"I'll tell you later," I whispered, noting the cam light on. "We should get back to work."

Two days later I woke up scratching. My head banged. I reached for the thermostat controls. The temperature seemed too high, but it was at the regulation level. My breath quickened, coming in hot blasts. I staggered to the bathroom, splashed myself with cold water, and looked in the mirror.

Spots! Hundreds of raised, red pustules with creamy centres dotted my face, neck, chest, arms, everywhere. They itched like crazy. I'd already broken the surface of one and it seeped yellow pus. I almost heaved, and reached for the Restorin to calm my stomach before remembering I wasn't supposed to take it. That's what it was all about.

I staggered back to bed, the sheets still damp where my body had leaked real perspiration. The ambient systems hummed with the effort of equalising the humidity. I lay on my back, trying not to scratch and listing the unfamiliar sensations: waves of heat, fatigue, the itching, dry mouth, my panic. Everything exactly as advertised. Lie back and enjoy it, I told myself.

To be honest, I felt really rough. Dr. McCabe said I was imagining it — he had bred out those aspects of the disease. Still, I stayed indoors for 48 hours before I even called Shel.

She screamed when she saw me. “You cow! What did you get?”

“Chicken pox.”

“Chicken pox?” She squealed, hurting my ears. “I don’t believe you. There’s no such thing!”

“Yes there is. Look it up. I went for it because of the name. It’s mad, isn’t it?” I was quite proud of my sickness now. “Major itchiness, though.”

I could see she was researching it on the Net as we talked.

“Wow! A pox!” She looked at me. “Did you read the full thing?”

“No, just what the doc gave me.”

Her finger moved across the screen. “It says you can scratch them and then you’ll have scars if you want...until the next time you take the big R. You can’t choose where, of course.... Anyway, I’m very impressed with you, ‘Lyss, but what are you doing moping at home? You should be out showing off!”

I texted Sam and Lu to meet me for a drink, selecting Brooklyn’s because the people there were hip enough to appreciate my efforts. Some places, the square ones, just wouldn’t have understood, probably wouldn’t have let me in.

I glanced around the club full of beautiful, perfect people. No surprises. I remembered learning at school about an age when only highly-paid movie stars were beautiful and perfect. Before Restorin, the faultless health and appearance we now took for granted was achieved only with lots of money, painful operations, or impossibly good luck. In those days, the beautiful and perfect were elevated to god-like status. When Restorin emerged, it was incredibly expensive. People who needed it couldn’t afford it and those who had it tried to hoard it. In the end, the government had to distribute it for free.

It cured everything from the slightest headache to the worst injuries and diseases. Restorin made us the best we could be without side effects, disorders, or deformities. It even regenerated body parts. Now, the houses and streets, shops and offices, schools and theatres, detention centres and doss houses all contained only beautiful, perfect people.

Sam and Lu appeared and we pushed our way into Brooklyn’s.

“Let her through. She’s contagious!” shouted Lu.

The crowd separated. I noted approving glances from the other trendies, one or two of whom were sporting scary-looking skin diseases. Other people gasped and reached reflexively for their Restorin.

Sam had waded through to the bar and back, handing us a couple of fluorescent shots.



I heard Shel. I couldn't wait for her to see me. "Shel!" I called and she turned, her face plum purple.

"Lyss! Hi! I thought yours was a bit tame, so I went for enhanced rosacea. It changes colour when I drink!"

"It's fabulous!" I said brightly, cursing her under my breath.

I went straight back to Dr. McCabe, of course. He recommended special edition jaundice and goitres, but Shel countered with a combination of alopecia and psoriasis. She caused a commotion at work when everyone saw her bald head, the skin crusted and flaking. I tried a tumour like the one Dr. McCabe's nurse had, but Shel's was twice as big.

"I'm desperate, Doc!" I said on my next visit. "What have you got that's really spectacular?"

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well, I've invented a new, fast-acting leprosy. It was considered the most feared of ancient diseases. It's very disfiguring, but completely painless."

"Why was it the most feared?"

"Bits of you drop off."

"Perfect!" I clapped my hands. This would show her!

He explained that leprosy commonly developed over years, decades, but he had created a strain so rapid that the disfiguration was almost visible.

I timed my entrance perfectly at the new, hip scene O-Zone. My skin had started to decay as I arrived. By the time I sat down, it was sloughing off, keeping the tiny nanobots busy Hoovering up whole sheets falling off my arms. When I waved to someone, my right index finger fell off. Time to find Shel.

I trawled the bar for her, leaving two of my left toes behind as I walked around in my strappy sandals. I lapped up the attention, savoring the widened eyes, the gasps, the retching sounds. Wait until Shel saw this!

Sam was chatting up a girl near the bar. He'd had epilepsy a week ago, a big hit on the dance floor. "Your mate's over there!" he shouted, nodding toward a group of people swaying under flashing laser lights.

I smiled too broadly and lost my nose. I kicked it off the dance floor and saw some guy in black boots stomp it flat. Yes, my big appearance! I couldn't wait to see her face when she saw mine!

In the centre of this crowd, Shel gyrated on the floor to some drum 'n' bass oldie. Everyone cheered, but they weren't gazing at her face. She had gone and had both legs amputated. Bitch!

I groaned and covered my face with both hands. The ridge above my nasal cavity was sharp and I accidentally sliced all the fingers off my left hand. Plus, my left eye popped out of its socket. Being sick was hard work.

## The Arkham Kids

By

J. J. MacMillan

Five little girls stared up at me, their jeans, cartoon character t-shirts, and pigtails signs of an evil, midget barbarian horde that could disrupt the ‘Skins-Cowboys game starting in 10 minutes. My three blonde daughters – Alexa, eight, and the seven-year-old twins, Haley and Kayleen – stood next to two other girls of about the same age, also twins, with black hair, brown eyes, and skin the color of roasted almonds. I knew exactly what they *all* were thinking: can we take him?

Janie, her purse over one arm and her coat over the other, breezed past through the open door. “Thanks, Mike. Have a good time with the girls.”

I clutched my ex’s wrist. “There are *five*, Janie.”

She glanced at the pigtailed gaggle, back at me. “Yes. The girls have a couple of friends over.”

I stepped outside with her. “But—“

“Mike,” she pushed me back inside, “for God’s sake, can’t you handle a few little girls for half a day? They’ll entertain themselves, and you can watch your game.”

My eyes widened as I pressed my hand to my chest. “You think I would come over here to be with my girls and spend the time watching football?”

My ex rolled her eyes and said through the closing door, “Just make sure they behave.”

The door shut. Her heels clicked across the driveway, her car’s engine revved, and she was gone.

Alexa turned the deadbolt while beaming at me, her front tooth still missing from when the Tooth Fairy had nipped it last week. “I’m glad you’re here, Daddy.” She took my hand and turned me around.

“Me too, sweetie.” Maybe this won’t be so bad, I thought. “Who are your friends, girls?”

“Harmony and Bridget,” the dark twins said in unison. Their thin voices chilled me for some reason and made me want to warm up in front of the TV. “Great, great.” Four minutes ‘til kick-off according to the old Timex. With \$600 riding on this game, I didn’t want to miss a minute. “Well, I’m sure you girls want to go play...”

“Play with us, Daddy,” Haley said. She smiled so her adorable dimples appeared.

“Yeah!” Kayleen nodded, her dimples just as adorable. She took my other hand.

They pulled me a few steps down the hall. I even felt the new girls pushing me from behind. Again the chill. “How ‘bout this, everyone? Let’s play the game-game!”

“What’s that?” A concert of five little voices piped out the two syllables.

I kissed the soft hands holding mine and extricated myself. “You go in the play room and show Harmony and...um....” I’d lost the other kid’s name.

“Bridget,” said Harmony and Bridget together, like a single creature. *Har-Bridge* wafted into my mind unexpectedly as their dark eyes pierced mine. “Yeah,” I looked at the sunny, reassuring faces of Alexa, Haley, and Kayleen. “Show your friends your doll house and some of your cool pop-up books while I watch the football game on TV. It’s a competition. See?” I rubbed my hands together to ignite some team spirit. “After three hours or so, whoever has the most fun wins. Won’t that be great?” My voice ended an octave higher. I grinned at all of them, clapped, then shepherded them toward the back bedroom, my daughters’ frilly, pastel, stuffed-animal domain.

Har-Bridge studied me a moment before Alexa led everyone down the hall. They all giggled and spoke the secret language of single-digit-aged girls.

Finally. I repositioned a chair and ottoman in front of the television. Checking the hallway to make sure no pigtails could be seen, I unlocked the front door, retrieved a bag of chips and onion dip and a cold six-pack from my car since Janie didn’t keep “that junk” around anymore, tiptoed back inside, and settled in. Ah, middle-aged heaven.

My first inkling that the afternoon would not proceed according to design came during the kickoff. Just as the Cowboys receiver dropped the ball and scrambled for it, Har-Bridge appeared at my side with a cup of hot chocolate.

Two ideas popped into my head. First, I realized it had started raining in Dallas, making the ball slippery. Second, I considered calling my bookie, Joey, and upping my bet another couple hundred to take advantage of this unexpected gift from the weather gods. When I noticed that Har-Bridge was still present, two pairs of hands holding a steaming cup, two sets of eyes staring at me, I wondered if kids this young should be fooling with hot liquids.

What the hell, they weren’t my kids.

“Would you like some hot chocolate?” Har-Bridge intoned.

“No, thanks. You run along and play your game so we can see who wins.”

The cup moved closer. “Have some hot chocolate.”

“No thanks.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“Look,” I barked, “go play, okay?” I craned my neck around the chair to see if my girls were behind these dark twins, maybe egging them on. Nope. Har-Bridge seemed to consider me for another few seconds, then scurried off, whispering.

On the TV, the Cowboys had recovered not only their fumble but run 90 yards for a touchdown. And they kicked the extra point. “Hey, what just happened?”

“Would you like some orange juice?”

I jumped. “No.” I waved away the glass Har-Bridge held out. They probably wouldn’t get off my back until I had accepted a beverage. What the hell. “Get me a beer.” That should keep them busy. The only beer in the house was the stuff I’d brought, one can almost empty in my lap and the rest on the floor next to my chair.

They returned promptly with an open microbrew.

“Oh. Thanks.” So, Janie did have *some* “junk” around. I placed the bottle on the floor.

“Drink ours first.”

Commercials were on so I glanced at the them. “It was opened second. It gets drunk second. Or drank. Whichever. I’m not an English teacher.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“Oh, for Christ.... Okay, okay. I’ll drink yours first.” I sipped. “There? Are you—” I spit the nasty stuff right onto the carpet. “Did you put something in this?”

Har-Bridge giggled. Their smiles were wide, toothy.

I went into the kitchen, emptied the bottle in the sink, and returned to find them messing with my other beer. “All right,” I said, growling. “Get out.” I flicked my hands at them.

They scampered off. I opened number two of my six-pack. The ‘Skins were down 16 and the first quarter was nearly over. Damn. “What happened?”

Right then I felt woozy. My stomach shifted. My eyesight blurred. I heard more giggling and turned in time to see Har-Bridge swinging a rolling pin at my head.

I awoke to chanting. My hands and feet were bound with extension cords. Gone were the little girl voices Har-Bridge had used to deceive me. They grunted and cracked their mouths on the awful sounds necessary to pronounce that which should never be spoken.

“Nyarlathotep! Nyarlathotep! We beseech thee!”

I edged up on my elbow. Stones from the front yard ringed my chair. The Har-Bridge things kneeled at the edge, palms up in supplication, eyes rolled into their heads.

Had I heard correctly? Nyarlathotep? Har-Bridge was calling to the Howler in the Darkness whose scream would shatter the world like an egg! Or, was it the Blind Crawling Eye? It had been a couple of decades since my Feminist Deities class in community college, and years since Janie had translated those passages from the *Necronomicon* for me. I struggled with the cords, then noticed the Cowboys were up by 22 points! Geez, the ‘Skins were falling apart. An overhead blimp shot of the stadium revealed a sea of waving blue and silver flags.

Har-Bridge dumped the contents of Janie’s vacuum cleaner on my head. The Crawling Chaos! I sneezed and coughed. That was it. Nyarlathotep was the Crawling Chaos, Opener of the Way. Once he split the membrane between our plane and that of the Elder Gods, Cthulhu, the World-Killer, would follow and destroy our world.

“Daddy?”

I wiped my face on the carpet and looked up. Alexa, Haley, and Kayleen kneeled next to me.

“Yes, girls?”

“May we have some hot chocolate?”

“Not now, honey. Daddy’s kind of busy.”

The chanting rattled inside my head. I scooted onto my other side, and yelled at Har-Bridge, “Who are you?”

They stopped chanting, their eyes rolled forward to pierce me again, and they spoke as one. “We are the Harbingers. We call forth Nyarlathotep who will open the Way for Cthulhu!”

“Well, stop. Stop right now or I’m giving you both a time out.”

They resumed chanting.

My daughters picked dustballs out of my hair. "Girls? Have you been playing with Mommy's books?"

They looked at my dirty polo shirt and not my eyes.

"Girls?"

"We wanted friends to play with," Haley said.

"Yeah," Kayleen nodded.

Alexa said, "May we have the hot chocolate or not?"

"Uh, sure. Just untie me."

She worked on the knots around my wrists while the twins untied my ankles.

The Harbingers ignored us. I guess I was no threat to them now that Nyarlathotep was about to appear.

I stood up, shook out the kinks in my muscles, and bent over, hands on hips, so I was eye-level with my daughters. "You understand that Mommy is going to be very angry when she finds out about this, right?"

Solemn nods.

"Get the *Necronomicon* and bring it here."

"Yes, Daddy." They trotted off toward Janie's bedroom.

The Harbingers quieted. The terrible sense of dislocation that preceded Nyarlathotep's presence assailed me. The air vibrated, heating like someone had opened an oven door. Smells curled from another plane of existence and they were enough to put me off barbecue for a year.

Had I shielded my eyes, I would've been fine, but I wanted to catch the game score. I accidentally glanced into the whirling void over my recliner, into the pulsing membrane that separated the Elders' plane from ours. I gaped. Hideous creatures slithered across its now-transparent surface. Waving, screaming stalks covered their bodies, their eyes grabbed, mouths blinked, row after row of living teeth gnashed and shivered. I turned away after noticing the last and most damning bit of insanity: the score read 32-0. How was that possible? The 'Skins were a four-point favorite!

By the time the girls returned with Janie's copy of *Necronomicon*, I was cowering against the living room wall.

Kayleen tugged on my pant leg. A cyclone stretched down from the membrane. Through it a hairy, warty, sinewy arm unwound the pigtails from the girls' hair. Nyarlathotep was coming through.

"Read it!" I yelled and swatted at the arm.

Alexa dragged her flying hair from her eyes and shook her head. "No, you do it!"

"I can't, sweetie! Only girls can read the words, remember?" This time the arm reached for me. I saw it had fingernails like a dirty mechanic.

She shrugged and opened the heavy, black, leather-bound book. She ran her finger down the table of contents and struggled to reach the required page. Like the girls' hair, the book's pages whipped and flapped.

I tried to stay upright and aimed a kick at Nyarlathotep's other dirty, warty hand as it snaked from the cyclone. Alexa read the first ancient verse. To me, of course, the words sounded like gibberish, but the Harbingers caught on right away. They screamed and counter-chanted. The cyclone heaved in and out of the membrane, like a drunk vomiting up too much tequila, then rewinding and swallowing it back.

I looked away this time – God only knew what the score was – but I could feel Nyarlathotep hurl himself repeatedly against the membrane, trying to force the rest of his body through.

“It’s not working, Daddy!” Alexa said.

She wanted to hand the book to me, but I reminded her that I couldn’t read it. “You’re going to have to call the Harbingers back! They belong to Soth!”

“Nuh uh,” Haley said.

“Yeah, nuh uh,” Kayleen agreed. “They belong to Azathoth!”

I slapped my forehead. “Right, you’re right. Alexa, invoke Azathoth!”

The cyclone threatened to explode the walls of the house. Lamps, vases, and more of Janie’s junk spun through the air. I protected my daughters as best I could while Alexa found the correct page.

All three girls invoked Azathoth, bringing the Harbingers into contact with their master. Theoretically, the connection would yank the whole mess back to the Elders’ plane.

The Harbingers screamed as if stabbed. Nyarlathotep attempted to anchor himself by seizing my shoulder, his ragged, grungy fingernails digging into my skin. Only my toes touched the carpet now. Another second and I would be sucked away. The girls grabbed me around the waist and knees. They screamed for me to stay and I screamed at them to let go. I couldn’t bear it if they were sucked in too.

Then, Nyarlathotep disappeared with a loud *pop*, the cyclone spun away into wispy tendrils, and the membrane vanished. Gravity returned. The four of us fell to the floor in a crying, groaning heap. Lamps, vases, and everything else crashed earthward too. After a minute, my ears rang in the silence. I checked the girls for cuts and bruises, gave them all huge, sloppy kisses, and surveyed the remains of the living room.

On the TV only four minutes remained in the game. The totally lame ‘Skins were down 35 to nothing.

I sighed. “Okay, young ladies.”

My three beautiful blondes looked up at me, and as usual, I went soft. “First, I want you to promise me that you won’t ever touch Mommy’s books after today. Promise?”

Earnest nods.

“Second, we will clean up this mess before Mommy gets home.”

More nods.

Alexa’s voice wavered, “Are you going to tell Mommy?” Her eyes were shiny. Haley and Kayleen glanced at their older sister, and tears slipped down their cheeks.

I thought about it. “Girls, what you did today upset the balance between the worlds.”

Three heads sank and I heard snuffles.

“But,” I touched each child under the chin to lift her gaze, “here’s what we’re going to do to make things right. If this works, then I think it will be safe to leave Mommy out of it. Okay?”

“Okay.” They brightened like three sunflowers.

I couldn’t help it, my heart brightened too even though I’d flushed \$600 down the toilet and my shoulder felt like it would never fit in its socket properly again. “Good. Alexa, open the book to the section on the Grazer in the Clouds.”

An hour later, Janie returned, clutching numerous shopping bags. She dropped them in the hallway and studied the living room, the hall, the girls, and me. I was lying on the sofa and the girls were playing with their dolls on the floor nearby and sipping cups of hot chocolate.

“Did everything go all right?” I heard a suspicious edge in the curt question.

I sat up and stretched. “Yeah, no problem. The girls were great.”

Alexa, Haley, and Kayleen turned as one and smiled at me. I winked back.

“Well, good.” Janie’s shoulders relaxed. “And did you girls have a good time?”

“Yup.” “Yeah.” “Yes, Mommy.”

“Where are your little friends?”

“They had to go home,” I said. I hugged my daughters, smelled the freshness of their hair, and kissed each one on the forehead. On the way out, I gave my ex’s arm a polite pat. “See you later.”

She blinked, but smiled. “Thanks again, Mike.”

“You’re welcome.”

In the driveway, I rubbed my shoulder and glanced at the white, red, and black magnetic sign on the door of my pickup:

*Mike Dupree  
Bane of the Elder Gods  
and  
Swimming Pool Serviceman*

## In the Company of My Equals

by

Micheal C. Planck

“Tell me again why I have to kill this poor village idiot?” My voice was the only sound in the huge, empty arena, but I think the idiot was far enough away that he couldn’t hear me.

I already knew the official answer – it was the annual Challenge, issued for the last seventeen-hundred years or so – but I still didn’t understand why I had to *kill* the guy.

“You are defending your caste’s position,” the Administrator answered. Her gray uniform was so severe it was hard to think of her as a woman. “If you don’t, then we will have to kill you and all of your brothers.”

You don’t talk back to Admin; they’re picked, after all, by the most discriminating exams, are educated for a decade, and wield complete control over the Republic. And any Admin was considered a superior officer, even above the generals we soldiers elected from our ranks every five years.

But I talked back to this one.

“You can’t be serious. They don’t kill off all the Admin when some prole manages to pass the exam.”

“Admin,” she explained patiently, “are not clones.”

I understood then. We’re not stupid. The proles like to think we’re mindless war-machines, and we encourage them to think that since it makes our lives easier, both on-duty and off-duty (plenty of girls can’t tell the difference between scary and sexy), but we were originally selected for brains as well as brawn, character as well as reflexes. We had plenty of those, even before the gene-techs did their tricks.

The Admin kept explaining, like they always do. “If this amateur can defeat a man genetically engineered and trained from birth for combat, then logically you would expect us to adopt his template as the new genetic basis for our soldiers.”

“But isn’t he five centimeters shorter than us?”

Space suits, combat armor, vehicle controls, even med dosages are optimized to our physical size. Switching to new gear would be horrendously expensive.

“Indeed,” said the Admin, anticipating my thoughts. They were creepy like that. “So the taxpayers of the Republic would appreciate it if you didn’t lose.”

The argument was academic; I wasn’t going to lose. None of us ever had. Even though the proles have competitions to select the best among themselves to send to this challenge, and we clones just pick a soldier at random to oppose him. Never in seventeen-hundred years had we lost. A perfect genetic template and training from birth are insurmountable advantages.

Still, the conversation made me uncomfortable. I’m as pro-rational as anybody,



but whatever they do to Admin at their special schools makes them more like robots than our military training ever does. Well, not robotic, really; just a cold disregard for people's feelings whenever they talk about ugly facts.

"What's the idiot even here for?" I grumbled. "The best he can do is raise the prole's taxes. How does that help them?"

"He's not here for them. He's here for himself. After all the lessons of history, we've finally understood that the most effective way to motivate a person to productivity is through self-determination. The capitalist spirit we encourage in the economy naturally carries over into other areas."

Like I said, it's a real turn-on for the ladies. This guy probably did all right in the lady department, but if he could somehow beat me he'd be drowning in starlets and supermodels.

"He has the desire to see his own face stamped across the centuries as the image of power and strength, regardless of the cost to society," added the Admin. "Proles' concept of collective good is necessarily compromised by their focus on self-achievement. That is why we let them run everything but the government."

I'd heard this before, of course. The history of chaos, and the cure called Admin, are drilled into Clones and proles from birth. Even their own kids get the same propaganda, which probably explains why they're such sour-pusses all the time. I say propaganda, but only because I wanted to show off my education. Really, I think of it as the truth. I've met plenty of people, proles *and* clones, who bitch about Admin policies, but I've never met anyone who had a better idea. I've never even met anyone who wanted their job. Admin is open to anyone who qualifies, but half the reason it's so hereditary is because no prole wants to work that hard for that little reward. Plenty of Admin kids turn down the responsibility, too, slipping away into prole society to enjoy a life of mindless holovision, mind-altering drugs, mind-blowing sex, and general decadence.

Not that I have anything against those things. But my training has taught me that they are best enjoyed in moderation, from a position of strength, duty, and discipline. Like all my brothers, I had at one point or another overindulged and discovered the law of diminishing returns. A few beers with the boys off-duty is great, but twice as many aren't anywhere near twice as great.

Of course, clones occasionally reject the heritage that had been won for them, too. One of the guys from my birth-company never made it through basic. He never really tried to pass the exams. And when we tried to help him, he told us to get lost. Then one day, he just wasn't there anymore.

No, they didn't do anything horrible to him. By ordinary standards, at least. They gave him cosmetic surgery so he wouldn't look like us and sent him to some job-training school. Now he's a prole, just like the rest of them, probably stoned silly every night with little prole brats running around screaming at his prole wife. I'd rather take a fusion grenade in the belly.

There are always a few failures. It's enough to make you think there really is something more to a man than his genes and his environment, but we keep that kind of talk to ourselves. If Admin heard it, they would start lecturing us about mysticism.

And I'd rather do a hundred laps than listen to an Admin lecture. Which, coincidentally, was exactly what was going to save me from this particular sermon. I

saluted and dismissed myself before the Admin could expound further on the politics of Planet Dullsylvania.

"It's not a race," the Sergeant told me while I stretched out my legs. I already knew this, of course, but he'd done the Challenge himself many years ago, so I tolerated his well-meant but unnecessary advice. I didn't know him personally – I mean, I didn't know the nickname his buddies had given him – but like all of us he wore his ID badge. We pretend it's an Admin rule, but we do all look alike, even to each other. Sure, you learn to recognize guys from your unit by shaving scars, a slightly crooked nose, a unique way of pronouncing a word, or a favorite joke, but even in a place as ordinary as the mess-hall it's easy to make a mistake.

"I know it's just an endurance drag," I answered. "Get us nice and tired before the competition starts, just to weed out the obvious losers."

"Don't underestimate him," cautioned the Sergeant. "When I was starting my comp, they told me the same thing. I didn't believe them, and I know you don't believe me. But I gotta say it, just like it was said to me."

"It's okay," I told him. We're pretty big on tradition. It's something we were originally selected for.

The prole was already at the starting line, waiting for me. I grinned inside because I knew this meant he must be nervous. This was my first close look at him. Sure, his face had been all over the hologrid, but like all my brothers, I hadn't deigned to actually pay attention. He was what the girls would call good-looking, I guess. Of course, the only face I was really comfortable around was my own. It was hard to tell how old he was. Proles tend to age quickly from all that debauchery, but at the same time they carry themselves like juveniles. But he didn't look used-up or untested.

The one thing I could tell was that he hated me. I didn't know why, and I didn't care. It was my job to defeat him, crush his spirit, beat him silly, and then kill him. The fact that he already hated me just made it easier.

"It's not a race," announced the Admin. "You have two hours to complete the course. Completing it early will not affect your score." Then she fired her flash-gun into the air.

I don't know why they started races like that. I used to think it was to acclimatize us to energy weapon discharges, but the prole didn't flinch. Obviously he'd been around enough of them. We set out at a leisurely pace, matching each other, egging each other to be the first one to start pushing. If you let the competitive spirit get to your head, you'd soon be running faster than you should.

On the other hand, running *behind* the prole was a lot harder than I had expected. It was one thing to let a brother take the lead, but this was a grav-bike of a different color, as I discovered when he pushed a few feet ahead of me. But I was a good soldier. Discipline comes first, and I stuck to my own best pace.

After a lap he dropped back beside me.

"You should be in front," he said.

I wasn't going to be baited into whatever head-game he was playing.

"Your legs are longer. Your optimum time is about two minutes less than mine."

You know I had to respond to that. Keeping quiet isn't in my nature. I earned the nickname "Mouth" for a reason.

“Then *you* should be *behind* me,” I said.

A grin flashed across his face, before he remembered he hated me. Then he looked straight ahead, and we spent the next two hours in silence, as he slowly fell behind me a few feet every lap.

It was a boring two hours, around a boring tarmac circle, with nothing and nobody to look at. For security reasons, the only people in the arena were me, him, the Sergeant, and the Admin. Even the medics were outside, watching us through the hundreds of floating holocams buzzing around the arena. But the holofeeds only led out, and none of my brothers would be watching them, so there was nothing there for me.

When it was over, the Sergeant brought me a cool, wet towel and a bottle of water. Technically, he was Security, but in reality he was my advocate, there to watch out for any cheating or unfairness. The Admin was the prole’s advocate, even though we soldiers were Admin’s servants. Admin was like that: capable of taking sides against their own.

Sarge had nothing to say to me, so we just watched the Admin holding the prole’s towel while he drank some water. It was a strange sight. But the prole seemed to take no notice of it. At first I thought he was unflappable, but after a while I decided he was spoiled. He was some kind of big-shot favorite in the prole world. He probably thought he was better than Admin.

We lined up for the next event.

“This is a race,” the Admin said. “The winner will earn one point towards the final event.”

One point wasn’t enough to buy you a pointed stick. I was prepared to let him win this one; he was smaller than me, after all, and could move faster for less energy. No point in exhausting myself this early.

We took off from the starting gun with alacrity this time. He tried to fool me by running a little slow, thinking that once I got a good distance ahead I would relax my guard. I fooled him back by playing along. If he wanted to turn this into a sprint battle at the very end, I was ready for it. I might be bigger, but I had bigger legs, too. We kept ratcheting up the effort as we got closer to the end. By the time we came around the final corner, we were both going hard. Some reflexive instinct warned me when he started his final sprint and so I started mine. He actually passed me, briefly, but then the same math must have caught up to him. It was too early to burn reserves for too small a gain.

We wound up crossing the line at the same time.

The Admin shrugged off the split-second difference. “A tie – no points.”

Fine by me. I preferred a zero-point challenge. The prole stared at me, and when he realized I wasn’t upset about the result, something changed in his face.

“He was trying to sting you,” Sarge said. “He thinks we’re so proud we have to win every single event.”

I shrugged. “The last one is the only one that matters.”

Sarge glowed with approval, and I admit that made me feel good inside.

The curtains around the inner track were coming down on their automatic lifts to reveal the obstacle course. We knew all about what would be in there: hurdles, ditches, walls, rough terrain, a rope, and a double-G incline. We just didn’t know how

many or in what order.

“For every thirty seconds you win this event by, you will earn one point.” Rules required her to repeat the rules. And for Admin, rules were everything

I’ll spare you the gritty details: all that matters is I stumbled across the final line twenty-nine seconds after he did.

“One point for the Challenger,” Admin said.

I could tell the prole was angry. He had expected at least three points from that. He had really put the burn on and was still panting from it when we walked to the next event.

This time it was my turn. Carrying around my extra height and ten kilos of muscle had been a handicap in those running events, but now that we were lifting weight, they would be an advantage.

But the little guy was made of more solid material than I expected. After flipping giant bars of iron, stacking huge stones, dead-lifting a grav-bike, and carrying a hundred kilos of potatoes (the traditional equivalent of a wounded soldier) four hundred meters, I only earned one point on him.

“This kid is good,” I admitted, while Sarge towed me off.

“Ya, well, it’s been his dream his whole life, since he first found out he couldn’t be a soldier when he was still in short pants. And his parents were rich enough to indulge him. He’s been in training since he was six.”

I had been in training since I was six, too, but only to make the grade, not to beat the odds.

The next event was shooting. I figured they scheduled this event early on purpose, before we had generated enough animosity to try and waste each other while we had a loaded flasher. We stood back-to-back while targets popped up in the arena. I knew he had more practice at this than I did – after all, the government has to pay for our ammunition – but I still figured I had an edge. Some of the targets represented civilians, and toasting one of them was as bad as missing three live ones. The hypno-therapy I had received meant I was very unlikely to fry a civvy.

And I didn’t. But I did miss three targets, including an unbelievable scenario involving a flying baby, a dog, and a combat-droid disguised as a beach ball. I wasn’t disappointed; it was a good score for a clone, and that should have been above any prole.

But the brat had made that beach ball, and now he was up two points on me.

“Just dumb luck,” Sarge assured me.

Consoles slid up from the floor in front of us, along with a command chair. Of all the events, this one made me the most nervous. I wasn’t weak in tac-com, but the first thing you learn in tactics class is that things can always go wrong in unexpected ways. Dumb luck really could pay off here.

Sarge’s arms were crossed in disapproval, too. “I hate this event. It doesn’t reflect the real situation where you’ve got to work with other soldiers.”

“But that would hardly be fair,” Admin said. “The Challenger can’t be expected to provide a team of brothers he’s trained with his entire life.”

“Isn’t that part of what makes us good soldiers?” I asked. “Camaraderie, teamwork, how well we play with others?”

“That part,” Admin said, “we can provide. As long as the gene template isn’t

warped toward the anti-social, and we've already tested him for that."

Meaning prole-boy was a regular guy with regular buddies out there in the real world. They were probably watching him right now, unlike my brothers. This irony almost made me think of him as a real person. Almost.

He hit me hard and fast, sending destroyers around my starboard flank. I didn't panic, just put two battlecruisers in their path. They would take a beating, sure, but they would hold the line while the rest of my fleet annihilated his center. Without those destroyers, his capital ships were going to be swarm-bait for my fighters.

Watching the little explosions on their hulls, I had to remind myself they were just simulations, not real clones fighting and dying for the victory of their brothers. His center was falling back, leaving his handful of dreadnaughts to take all the heat. This was not a clever delaying tactic like mine. I could afford to lose two cruisers, but he could not afford to lose those dreads. Without them he had virtually no chance. My fighters and small ships dove in for the kill while my capitals pounded them from afar. He had about thirty seconds left in this game. I could sense Sarge shaking his head in disbelief as the amateur threw away the battlefield.

When it happened, I wasn't sure what it was. His dreads all blew at once, filling the holo with a huge ball of white fire. Too huge. My fighters, which should have been pulling away to safety when they detected his anti-matter containment fields falling, were caught in the blast. So were my destroyers and missile-boats.

Sarge growled. "That can't be legal."

"Please don't interfere in the event," Admin chastised him.

It hit me like a punch to the stomach. The prole had self-destructed his dreads. He had left them out there as a trap, and when I had fallen for it, had blown them up on purpose, dropping their containment fields instantly on full loads of anti-matter. Ten thousand men on each dread, consigned to oblivion on a gamble. Had anything gone wrong, he would have lost the battle for certain. No sane commander could have taken such a risk, and at such an expense.

I fought on, but the cause was lost. Now his carriers came roiling in, and without my small ships or fighters, I fed the swarm. My dreads made him pay a fearful cost, smashing everything they touched, but eventually the thousand wasp stings broke apart their integrity and they collapsed into fireballs of chaos, consumed by their own fuel supplies. I did not have a chance to pull the same trick on him, even if I wanted to, since he never committed enough ships to point-blank attack. Of course, holding them back instead of going in for a quick kill cost him even more casualties in the long run, but it won him the battle.

I was sick and trembling by the end.

"It's not that bad," Sarge said. "He took so many casualties it's hardly any victory." But it wasn't the loss that made me ill; it was the cavalier sacrifice of good men. Yes, I know they were only simulations, but that was not the point.

I raised my objections to Admin. "It's not a valid tactic. The morale effects on the rest of his fleet would be debilitating."

"What rest of the fleet?" the prole said. "The parameters of this contest only included this battle and this fleet."

"It was a tactically unacceptable risk!"

"Which is why *you* did not take it," said the Admin. "The Challenger is gambling

only for advancement, and possibly his life; you are fighting for your brothers' lives."

This stark fact hung in the air. I realized then that I did not hate the prole. But I also knew that when it came time to kill him, I would do so without compunction.

"Three points for the Challenger." As Sarge had said, he had racked up so many casualties that his victory was cheapened. I wasn't worried; it took twenty points to buy a flasher for the final event.

"I must caution both of you that any illegal moves in the wrestling event will earn your opponent points. The goal is to pin your opponent, not secretly cripple him."

I had height and weight on him. Also, my loud mouth had earned me extra wrestling lessons while growing up in the barracks. He pulled off one arm-lock, but other than that I racked up three pins in short order, winning the match and a point.

The downside was if he had any sympathy for my cause, it had been drained out of him by the constant contact of his head against the mat. Not that I cared what he thought anymore.

The penultimate event was the one I hated the most. Blindfolded, we had to move across broken terrain full of pits and obstacles, assemble a plasma gun, program a security check-station, and fry a dozen-egg omelet. We accomplished this by orders fed into our ears from a computer. If you don't hate something like that, you aren't human.

I picked up another point in this one. There weren't a lot of points to be gained from it; they just wanted to make sure you could follow orders. I had a lot more practice at that than the prole, but he managed well enough.

Admin announced the final score. "Four points for the Champion, seven points for the Challenger." Not exactly the odds I had expected. Usually it was five or more points in our favor.

Admin addressed me. "Since you have the lowest score, you have the option. Will you let the scores stand before the final challenge, or would you like to subtract your score from his?"

This was a no-brainer. I had been looking forward to a zero-point challenge; the closer the better.

"Subtract," I said without hesitation.

The prole was not happy. Seven points would have bought him a sword against the mace my four would have bought. But three points only bought the proverbial pointed stick.

All I would have was my bare hands, but I wasn't afraid. With a spear, he had exactly one chance, one lunge, and then it was hand-to-hand. We already knew who would win that.

"At this time, the Challenger may choose to withdraw without prejudice. Do you wish to withdraw?" Admin was giving the kid every chance to walk out of here alive. It wasn't fair: he could quit, no matter how bad he was losing, but I had to carry the livelihood of my brothers on my back. But then, life wasn't fair. It was just life.

"For the good of the Republic, it is my duty to improve the quality of our military defenses. No, I do not wish to withdraw."

If I had any sympathy left for him, it would have been evaporated by that arrogance. *Improve this, prole*, I thought savagely, and we went into the hall for the final match.

I stretched out a bit, while the kid swung his spear around. He wasn't even trying to hide his training, just like I wasn't hiding my confidence. We were both out of deceptions.

"Just so you know – I ain't worried," Sarge told me. "They call me 'Rocky,' on account of my being too stupid to worry."

"They called me 'Mouth,'" I told him. "But after this, they better call me 'Sir.'"

It's an old joke. Something about how in the old days people who were better than everyone else were called "Sir." Now we only use it to put uppity brothers in their place.

It made us both smile.

Admin called us to the edges of the ring, a circle marked out in steel.

"Once again I offer you the chance to withdraw." Admin spoke the words because she had to. We both ignored them.

"As soon as you step inside the ring, the field will be activated. Stepping back across this line will result in an immediate and fatal discharge of energy to the offender." This was another kindness to the challengers. Throwing them through the field is more humane than choking them out or breaking their necks. "The field will not be lowered until one of you is dead. Other than that, there are no rules."

I stepped into the ring. Prole-boy looked at the cameras and had the ill manners to actually grin. Then he stepped casually into the ring, and I felt the field activate at my back.

We circled for a bit, me keeping my distance from his steel point. He was fast; my chances of intercepting a lunge were not exactly great. On the other hand, if I did he was in serious trouble. This was the math both of us understood.

He could have chosen to wait, to force me to charge, but he didn't have that much patience. Probably he was too busy thinking about all the women that would be waiting for him after he killed me.

But I had the patience of a sub-light freighter.

Every time he pushed at me, I circled. I wasn't going to walk backwards into the field. On the other hand, I stayed reasonably close to the line. If he ran at me and missed, he had to worry about running too far. So instead he did the only thing he could. He took a deep step and lunged.

I cross-stepped, circling the other way, and threw my hands into an X-block, seeking the deadly tip and the safe shaft of wood behind it. But he fooled me. Once it was real blood on the line, he wasn't quite so ready to throw everything away on a single cast. His thrust went low, below the danger-line, and the point sank into my thigh just above the knee.

The pain meant nothing to me except a signal guiding me to the location of the spear. I grabbed down, catching it, not retreating as he had expected. For a brief instant we wrestled with the spear, its point cutting and digging into my flesh, and then it was askew and I closed the gap.

The spear was now a hindrance, and we both released it at the same time. Hand-to-hand we grappled, until my wounded leg failed me and we went to the ground, sliding in my blood. Burning all of my reserves, for I had nothing left to save for, I crushed him like a bad pretzel. He fought with skill, strength, and spirit, but inch by inch he bent to my will. When I shifted my grip for the last time, choking up on his

arm, preparing to break his spine against my knee, we both knew it was over.

And then my hand slipped. His arm, coated in my blood, slid away. A quick reversal, the terrible sound of breaking bone, and I lay on the mat, my arm broken instead of his, my fate sealed instead of his. He staggered to his spear, picked it up in disbelief, raised it in triumph, and stared down at me.

In that final moment I saw no pity in his eyes. But then, there would have been none in mine. A blinding light passed before my eyes, and I marveled that death should be like this.

The smoking corpse of the prole fell over backward.

Stunned, I swung my head around to find the Sarge. But he was as open-mouthed as I, his flasher safely in its holster. No dishonor there.

It was the Admin who had her gun out.

The field whined and died. The holocams began to retreat.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you on a marvelous victory." Admin was talking, but for once the words made no sense to me. "Of course, irony had its part: if the Challenger had not slipped in your blood, you never could have thrown him into the field like that. Still, it was a brilliant feat. You should watch the slow-mo holos of it as soon as possible. As many times as necessary."

"You're faking it?" Sarge said, incredulous. "You're broadcasting digi-fixed video? And you think you can get away with it?"

"Why do you think there are no live spectators? This is the seventh time this century we have had to fix a fight."

"But...why?" I had lost. We had lost. The prole was better than me – than us. The random fluctuations of nature had outdone science's best efforts.

"If Admin announced that all current clones were to be terminated, what do you think the chances are that they would revolt and overthrow the government?"

"We are loyal to our vows." The fact that his flasher had not left its holster was not insignificant.

"No charge of disloyalty is intended, Sergeant, but the risk is unacceptably high. While individuals can be trusted to keep their word, it is simply too much to ask of an institution."

"So the Challenge – just a sham to keep the proles satisfied?" If my voice was bitter, it was because all of my cherished ideals of honor and place had just been flashed out of existence.

The Admin shrugged her shoulders. "One of the things they insist on." She lowered her flasher, but I already knew she wasn't going to kill us. She wouldn't have bothered talking to us otherwise.

I still had sour words to say, though. "And by letting us live, you buy our obeisance. A reminder that we owe our place to you. Not because destiny made us the best, but because the State raised us to power."

"Such is the truth of every warrior, for all of history, no matter what delusions they told themselves to the contrary." The Admin sounded sad, if you can believe that. "The needs of the State always trump the morals of the individual. A man called Machiavelli once recognized that, many eons ago, but I don't think the knowledge made him any happier than it has you."

"I – I don't know if I can lie," Sarge stammered.



“It’s only for a little while,” the Admin said. “We’ll arrange for a disability and early retirement for you. A cottage on an out-of-the-way moon – for health reasons.”

“And me?” Not that I really cared. The best part of me had already died in that brief flash of light.

“There’s really only one career left to a man without illusions,” she told me. “Let me be the first to welcome you to Admin.”

## Professor Corax' Memory Trade

By  
Lawrence Barker

*Wednesday, towards sunset*

Twelve-year-old Cyrus Wentworth licked his sweat-salt lips as he climbed atop Old Noah, his family's one-eared, one-eyed mule. Today would be Cyrus' last ride to pick up his nine-year-old brother, Jimmy, from Miss Eponna's school. Come the morrow, the Wentworths would pull up stakes and move to Cincinnati so Jimmy could get better schooling.

Cyrus shook his head. Who needed more learning than Miss Eponna provided here in Dryton? Why, she had even started Jimmy on something called "algebra" that struck Cyrus as pure old magic. What's more, Jimmy could already read books that nobody besides him and Miss Eponna saw beans nor bacon in.

A strange wagon was parked outside of town. Its blood-red walls and the black wings carved into its sides just felt wrong. Dusty gray words sprawled across the wagon read "Professor Corax' Traveling Medicine Show" and "See the Mysterious Thingwing." A black-feathered, child-sized maybe-bird crouched inside a square-framed cage that hung from the wagon. The critter sneered behind wings that ended in shriveled hands. Cyrus shook his head. Something with a beak couldn't have an expression like that. Only it did.

"I am Professor Sableton Augustus Corax," a voice from behind him croaked. "The outlay for admission to observe the Thingwing, the mysterious bird-man of the Andean peaks, is one nickel."

Cyrus turned. A humped-over man with a curved-beak nose studied him with coal-lump eyes. The stranger's scarred face look like he shaved with barbed wire. A carved bone of some huge beast replaced most of Corax' right leg. The Professor wore an undertaker's coat and a tall hat that stuck to his bald head like a hungry tick.

Cyrus frowned. Who would buy medicine from someone so sick-looking? "Ain't got no nickel."

Corax wrinkled his brow as though listening to something Cyrus couldn't hear. "No, this one won't do, but one near him might," Corax muttered. "Well, young sir," he said, his voice resuming its medicine show tone, "we will excuse, on this singular occasion, the lapse in protocol."

Confusion crept over Cyrus' face.

Professor Corax sighed. "No nickel necessary."

Tramping boots approached. It was Deputy Andaman. Professor Corax started to speak.

"Ain't no need for howdies," Deputy Andaman said, the setting sun reflecting

red on his badge. "Last medicine show came through, half a dozen folks got themselves poisoned. We don't want no repeat."

"My fine sir, I assure you that --" Corax began.

"Assure all you want." The Deputy's hand brushed his six-shooter; no threat, but the message was clear. "The town wants you gone ere sunup."

Corax sputtered another protest.

The Deputy stopped him with a gesture and cast an eye at Cyrus. "This ain't no place for younguns. Get gone while I lay down the law for . . . ." He paused as though searching for words. "This here *professor*."

Reluctantly, Cyrus rode off. He had gone a hundred yards when a crackling echoed from behind him. He turned. The Deputy looked stunned, like he had taken a drunken cowboy's gut-punch. Corax, beaming, held open the cage. The maybe-bird, a tiny new-churned-butter colored light in its beak, flew away. Corax didn't seem concerned about losing his bird. Who could understand grown-ups? Cyrus rode on.

When Cyrus reached the school, he dismounted and peered through the open door. Miss Eponna stood at her desk, hands on a leather-bound book. Jimmy sat before her.

"Young Master Wentworth," Miss Eponna told Jimmy, her horsey features barely moving as she talked. "I've known from the first that you must someday leave Dryton." She cast a sad smile. "Your intelligence marks you for a destiny greater than this town."

Jimmy's face flashed red. "I ain't nothing special."

"Oh, but you are." Miss Eponna handed Jimmy the book. "Someday, you will understand everything this book can teach."

Cyrus cleared his throat.

Miss Eponna looked up. "Come to get your brother?" She gently pushed Jimmy toward Cyrus. "Make sure he takes care of this book."

Cyrus nodded. An animal smell hung around the book, earthy but not unpleasant. Something between a rounded crow and a thin-bodied horse decorated the cover. The critter didn't look worth so much concern. But Jimmy didn't look exceptional, and he could beat both Cyrus and Pa at checkers without trying.

Cyrus helped Jimmy onto Old Noah and started the mule towards home. Cyrus blinked. Had the maybe-bird, holding something that glowed blue, flown over, back toward Corax' camp? Why would it return to a cage?

Cyrus saw Deputy Andaman. He would know what was going on with the medicine show.

"Evening," Cyrus called.

Deputy Andaman tipped his hat. "Cyrus, Jimmy."

"About that medicine show--" Cyrus said.

The Deputy shook his head. "Ain't been no snake oil men here since last May. If'n one came, I'd run the varmint off."

Cyrus' eyed widened. "But Professor Corax . . ." Cyrus stopped. Deputy Andaman's expression said that he didn't know what Cyrus was talking about. "Just forget it."

"Younguns," the Deputy mumbled, shaking his head.

"Did you understand what just happened?" Jimmy asked.

"No, but we will," Cyrus replied. He turned Old Noah toward Corax' camp.

The wagon hadn't moved an inch, and the maybe-bird was re-caged. But something felt different, and it wasn't a good different. Cyrus' tingling scalp reminded him of how old folks described waiting for warpathing Comanches to come. The wagon door opened. Corax emerged. His face was unscarred, new-leather smooth. He pointed at Cyrus and Jimmy, mouthing words that might have been, "this one will do."

An ice-house chill filled Cyrus. He turned Old Noah around and dashed away.

### *Wednesday, approaching midnight*

Cyrus, drenched in sweat, sat bolt upright from his pallet. Only pale moonlight slivers lit the attic where he and Jimmy slept. Distant coyotes wailed. Jimmy, Miss Eponna's book in his hands, breathed with clockwork regularity. What had Cyrus heard? Something moved inside the chimney. A snake? A roosting owl? A scrabble-clawed ringtail? It descended and then wriggled through the fireplace down below with a wet-dough sound. Cyrus slipped down the ladder from the attic.

As Ma and Pa slept, the maybe-bird stood over them with a pale white-yellow light in its worm-fingered hands. Only the light was as much bigger than what Cyrus had seen before. The maybe-bird's beak descended and rose, as if to peck Ma. A crackle, like what Cyrus had heard at Corax' camp, echoed from the walls. Ma stirred, but did not wake. On the beak's end glistened a point of light that then floated into the bigger ball that the maybe-bird carried.

Cyrus' hands clenched. The maybe-bird had taken something from Ma! He lunged and drove the maybe-bird to the floor. A metal-on-a-cold-morning sensation ran through him as something passed from the yellow light into him. He gripped the maybe-bird's neck. Ma could snap a chicken's throat that way, so maybe he could do something with this fowl. The maybe-bird writhed free. It snapped at him. A rattlesnake hiss shot from its black beak. It bounded for the fireplace and shot up the chimney.

Cyrus paused. Wake Ma and Pa? Pa groaned, as though he dreamed about Lookout Mountain. Those dreams made Pa touchy, and he would be double mad to get roused for nothing. But the maybe-bird wasn't nothing. Still ... Cyrus climbed the ladder. Jimmy would know what to do, come morning. Jimmy was good like that.

### *Thursday sunup*

"Come down here to finish packing the wagon." Pa's voice, as commanding as it must have been in the war, rose through the cracks in the floor. Cyrus opened his eyes. Jimmy was already dressed, still cradling his ugly critter book. Cyrus rubbed his eyes. Had last night been a dream? He scrambled into his clothes and he and Jimmy descended the ladder.

Both Ma and Pa stared at Jimmy with strange expressions. "Who's your young friend?" Pa asked, hands shaking so that he could scarce hold his morning coffee.

Cyrus' eyebrows rose in confusion. "Friend?"

Pa gestured at Jimmy. "The stranger you brought in."

"It ain't like we mind sharing what we have with strangers," Ma hastened to add. Jimmy blanched. "Don't you know me, Ma?"

"This is Jimmy," Cyrus said. "Jimmy, my younger brother."

At that, Ma's hands trembled like Pa's. A tear ran down her cheek.

"That ain't funny," Pa snapped at Jimmy. "I don't know what kind of foolishness you're pulling, but I won't see no more."

"Foolishness?" Jimmy's voice trembled.

Pa turned to Cyrus. "Son," he said, voice barely audible. "You know how thinking about how the Comanche served your younger brother upsets your Ma. Bringing in some stranger and calling him that name is just plain mean." He cleared his throat. "Especially when we're about to head east and leave your brother's grave."

The words hit Cyrus hard. "But .. but ... if there ain't no Jimmy to educate, why are we going?"

Pa frowned and held out his trembling hand. "Because Cincinnati doctors can do something about this." He fixed his eyes on Cyrus. "You need to finish loading the wagon so we can get traveling."

Cyrus swallowed hard. "I need to walk Jim ... er, Timmy ... here back home. Can I have a minute for that?"

Pa nodded.

Cyrus took Jimmy outside. "Hide in the woods behind the fire hall," he told Jimmy. "I'll bring you food later."

"But what then?" For all his book-study, Jimmy seemed even younger than his nine years.

"I don't know," Cyrus confessed. "We'll think of something."

Cyrus waited a bit and then went back. Pa and Cyrus began loading the wagon, filling it with all it could carry. As it neared capacity, Cyrus clutched his middle and fell, moaning. When a drink of cool water didn't help, Ma and Pa loaded Cyrus on Old Noah and took him to Doc Wellnot.

"I'll be well after a night's sleep," Cyrus told the Doc. "I know I will."

Doc sighed. "I'll be honest, Jake." Jake was Pa's given name. "I can't find nothing wrong with the boy. But rest cures many ills. If I were you, I'd wait a day before heading east."

Pa scratched his chin and nodded. "One day."

And so Cyrus found himself back at the Wentworth farm. After sundown, he told himself, he would act.

### *Thursday night*

Cyrus moved quieter than a Comanche. He filled a little rough-woven sack with corn pone and jerky. Then he took Pa's old single-shot pistol and headed for the woods behind the fire house. He found Jimmy under a mesquite, trying to sleep but not managing. "Anybody see you coming here?" Cyrus asked.

Jimmy nodded. "Lots of folks, but no one seemed to know me." He shivered. "Like they forgot that I ever lived."

Did no one remember Jimmy? Cyrus waited until Jimmy finished eating. "Let's go see Miss Eponna. She'll know what to do if anyone does."

In minutes, they reached Miss Eponna's. Cyrus hid the pistol behind a saltbush so Miss Eponna wouldn't think he had come to rob her or nothing. Cyrus knocked. Candles within glowed to life. Miss Eponna, wrapped in a loose gown, opened the door a hand's width.

"Why Cyrus," she asked, puzzlement on her face. "What are you doing here?" She glanced at Jimmy. "And who is this young man?"

Cyrus' heart sank. He tried to stay calm so Miss Eponna wouldn't think he had gone foolish. Only his words ran together with flood-swollen stream force. "He's-my-brother-Jimmy-and-the-best-pupil-you-ever-had-and-you-said-he-had-a-destiny-greater-than-this-town."

Miss Eponna frowned as though she remembered something, but not enough. "But Jimmy died," she muttered. "Or did he?" Her gaze fixed on the rising moon; or maybe something in the moon's general direction. "Tell me."

Cyrus grabbed the book that Jimmy carried. "You gave him this. Said he would someday understand everything in it."

Miss Eponna opened the door a bit wider. She took the book and flipped through the pages. "I did?"

"Surely."

Miss Eponna pursed her lips. She opened the door all the way. "Perhaps what is torn asunder can be repaired." She shook her head. "Or maybe it can't. Come in, Cyrus and ... Jimmy."

Jimmy beamed at even this slender recognition. He dashed inside.

"Cyrus?"

Cyrus shook his head. "No, ma'am," he said. "You patch your way, and I'll mend in mine."

Cyrus recovered Pa's pistol and strode off toward Professor Corax' camp.

He approached in silence, crouching behind a rock beyond Corax' firelight. Cyrus wasn't certain how, but Corax was to blame for Jimmy's woes. Cyrus hadn't decided what to do when he found Corax, but the Professor couldn't be too far-- leaving an unattended fire would be folly. And Corax had two overturned half-barrels beside the fire to make seats.

The Professor emerged from his wagon. A healthy limb had replaced Corax' peg leg. Corax turned toward Cyrus. The fire reflected from Corax' eyes as it might from a coyote's. "Come on in," Corax shouted, motioning Cyrus into his camp. "I had begun to doubt you would show."

Cyrus rose, feeling foolish. Pa's pistol dangling at his side, he stumbled forward. "How did you know I was there?"

Corax flashed a broken smile. "I know many things." He walked over to a barrel and sat down. "Have a seat."

Numbly, Cyrus complied. "How ... ?" Thoughts churned so that he couldn't finish the question. His bones felt as though he had ridden a buckboard over a stony trail from sunup to sundown. He could only describe the feeling as pain that slid into numbness that slid into plodding weariness. Had Corax done something to him?

The Professor's fingers ran over his jaw and leg. "How did I heal? What is Thingwing? Why did folks forget your little brother? And, most importantly, why didn't you?"

Cyrus could only nod.

Corax leaned back on his barrel. "Well, I suppose I owe some explanation." His eyes fixed on Cyrus, as though he looked through skin and muscle down to the bones. "It was a few days before the last Christmas of the war, near Hollow Tree Gap in Tennessee. We let down our guard because we thought the Rebs were done for. We were wrong." He licked his lips as though speaking left them dry. "We walked right into the Secessionists' grapeshot hornet-nest. My comrades left me for dead." He shook his head. "Not that I blame them. Mars had battered me so that I thought myself dead. I lay on that field a day and night, in frost and wind and without sustenance or fluid. I prayed to Jesus without result. Then I tried Jehovah, and nothing happened. I became so desperate I called on Satan, and still nothing happened. As I prepared to expire, the Red Man appeared."

"You mean Satan answered?" Cyrus gulped.

Corax laughed. "No, an Indian. Maybe he had been a Rebel soldier; the Secessionist army took redskin volunteers. Anyway, this Indian appeared from the darkness telling me that, if I must pray, call on something that would answer."

"Like what?" Despite the fire, a cold shiver ran down Cyrus' spine.

Corax shook his head. "I don't really know, only that the Indian called it the 'crow-angel'." Corax reached into his coat and pulled out a copper medal on a leather thong that he wore around his neck.

Cyrus studied the medal as best the flickering firelight allowed. On the medal's face, a bird-like figure sprawled across a seven-pointed star.

"The Indian," Corax continued, "gave me this. He said that the crow-angel would heal me, in payment for my promise of eternal service."

"And you promised?"

"I did. Never regretted it, since the bill has never come due. It wasn't as though my healing came free, though." Corax stirred the fire with a poker. Pinon and mesquite sparks rose and settled. "Thingwing simply appeared, from where I know not. Thingwing harvests the yellow light of folks' memories, sometimes leaving others in their place and sometimes not. Either way, he takes memories to God-knows-where and then comes back with the blue-white light that restores me."

"You harvested the whole town? I didn't forget because some of what your bird took flowed back into me when I grabbed it?"

Corax nodded. He coughed and spat. "I've wandered the land since 1864, making the trade that keeps me whole." A sad smile crossed Corax' face. "At least for a time. Then it fades, and I must start over again."

"But that's monstrous," Cyrus sputtered.

"Monstrousness is the world's way. Ask those who died in Chickamauga's burning forests, the darkies who suffered the southern lash, the settlers in the Salt Creek Massacre." Corax shrugged. "The more important the memory, the longer I remain whole. That's why I chose your brother. Whatever fate has in store for him is sufficiently grand to keep me fleshed a year or more." He rose to his feet. "I truly regret the pain that remembering after others have forgotten has caused you. That's why I waited for you. I decided that you, being as brave and motivated as you obviously are, deserve a choice that I gave no one else. If you choose, Thingwing can take your memories."

"How will that help Jimmy?"

Corax shook his head "It won't. But if you don't recall your brother, you won't care." He came so close that Corax' vitriol breath warmed Cyrus' face. "Should I call Thingwing?"

At those words, Cyrus fought off his weariness. He leapt to his feet, whipped Pa's pistol against Corax' middle, and squeezed the trigger. The pistol belched fire and smoke.

Corax stood pine-tree still and open-mouthed, staring at the gaping gut wound. He looked up at Cyrus. "Now that I must heal myself," he said. "I have no choice but to claim the memories."

The maybe-bird descended. Its wizened hands gripped Cyrus' head. Cyrus staggered as something vital flowed from him. "I won't forget," he whispered. "I won't." A crackling filled Cyrus' ears. Then there was darkness.

### *Friday morning*

The wagon rattled with Old Noah's every step. Cyrus, riding beside Pa, licked the trail dust from his dry lips. His head throbbed, as though his vague feeling of having forgotten something tried to gnaw free of his skull. Cyrus sighed. Whatever the Wentworths had forgotten would likely stay behind.

He glanced over his shoulder. Skinny Eponna came riding a gray-dappled horse, an unfamiliar boy clutching a heavy leather book behind her. In a heartbeat, she came up even with the wagon. "Mr. Wentworth! Stop!"

Pa shook the reins and Old Noah halted. "What is it, woman?" Pa's hands shook worse than usual.

The strange boy behind Miss Eponna opened his mouth. It looked like he tried to say, "Pa," but Miss Eponna stopped him.

"Before you leave, there's something you must see," Miss Eponna told Pa. "It's not far."

Pa shook his head. "Ain't no time."

"It will only take minutes," Miss Eponna insisted.

Pa snorted and shook the reins, as though to set the wagon moving. Ma stopped him. "A bit more won't matter," Ma said.

Pa grunted and turned the wagon in Miss Eponna's direction.

They came upon a strange sight. A battered red wagon with the words "Professor Corax' Traveling Medicine Show" written on black carved wings rattled out of town. Cyrus' brow wrinkled. How could he have missed hearing about a medicine show? He didn't remember one, and surely he wouldn't have forgotten. A bird-like man--Professor Corax, Cyrus guessed--drove the wagon, with a strange caged maybe-bird beside him.

The wagon pulled beside Corax. Cyrus stared at the Professor. Why did he keep thinking that Corax should be lying dead instead of driving a wagon from town?

"Corax, you stop there," Miss Eponna demanded. She jumped down from her horse. "I know your game, and I don't intend to let you get away with it," she said, driving every word home with a pointing finger.

"My good woman," Corax responded, separating each word as though he



addressed a crowd come to hear him sell medicine. "I fail to comprehend your accusations." He tapped his chest. "I am merely an humble sojourner, seeking to promote happiness and wellbeing."

"Feathers!" Miss Eponna snorted. "You promote your own self, and you don't care whose future you blight to do it." She advanced a step, gesturing at the boy on the horse's back. "His destiny is too important for you to take."

Corax' eyes widened. "I can't understand how you remembered," he said. His words sounded more like a normal person's, as if his medicine show voice had slipped from his grasp. "There is nothing you can do, though." He patted the maybe-bird's cage. "There's nothing anyone can do." He shook his reins and the wagon rattled forward.

"Don't be so certain," Miss Eponna replied. She stepped into the path of Corax' wagon. Her empty hands grabbed at the air, as though taking an invisible horse's reins.

Corax' wagon stopped. The professor's eyes narrowed. "There is more to you than I imagined."

"Much more," Miss Eponna replied. "The raven is but one form. The horse is another." Her face became hard. She withdrew from her blouse a small copper medal on a leather strap.

Cyrus could almost, but not quite, remember having seen a similar medal elsewhere.

"And what happens if a horse steps on a raven?" Miss Eponna demanded. She raised her hands and took one step toward the professor. As she did, a dust devil surrounded her.

For a heartbeat, the Professor looked angry. Then he raised his hands and another dust devil surrounded him. The dust devils expanded until they met in a raging spinning battle.

Cyrus slapped his hand over his nose and mouth, protecting himself from the gritty dust. Did the dust around the Professor really take on a bird's form and that around Miss Eponna take a horse's? Did the animals really bite and kick in a life-and-death struggle? And, if so, did the horse really trample the bird as badly as Cyrus thought?

After a moment, the dust devils settled. The professor, bedraggled and battered, sprawled across the wagon seat.

Strange half-memories, like a dream after waking, entered Cyrus' mind: dropping someone off with Miss Eponna; something about stealing memories; and the Professor getting shot.

Miss Eponna, untouched by the swirling dust, took a step back. "Give it back now. Don't deny that you can, because I know differently."

"Then you also know what would happen if I did," the Professor yelped. He looked like a whipped cur.

"Do it," Miss Eponna demanded. "Unless you want your service to come due this very moment."

The Professor turned pale. "Unless I take someone's memories to trade, I'll scarce be fit for buzzards," he bleated. "Please."

Cyrus blinked. Take memories? Could the thoughts that shimmered through

his head be real? "Take the war memories," Cyrus shouted, gesturing at Pa. "The ones that hurt him so."

Miss Eponna nodded.

The Professor's shaking hands released the maybe-bird. It flew toward Pa. A crackling sound filled the air. Something yellow streamed from Pa to the maybe-bird's claws. Fainter streams came from Cyrus and Ma. Then there was nothing.

*Thirty minutes later*

The wagon rattled with Old Noah's every step. Cyrus, riding beside Pa, licked the trail dust from his dry lips. Jimmy sat beside him on the wagon, studying Miss Eponna's odd old book. Pa held the reins, hands rock-steady. Somehow, the feeling that Pa used to be a nervous man nagged Cyrus. That didn't make any sense, though. Pa, as level-headed a man as you could want, had never had any problems that Cyrus could recall.

The wagon bounced on its way, leaving Dryton behind. Miss Eponna waved as it passed. She called out to Jimmy, telling him that she knew a great future awaited. He never looked up from his book.

Fifteen minutes from town, the wagon passed a traveling medicine show headed out of Dryton. The driver, a bony man with a beak-like nose, neither waved nor shouted. Cyrus figured the medicine show man probably just wasn't too friendly. It was no concern of his. The Wentworths--Ma, Pa, Cyrus, and Jimmy--were headed for a new life in Cincinnati.

## Me and the Devil Blues

By

Stuart Neville

The soupy Mississippi heat had given way to the slightest of chills as Robert Johnson took the Hohner Marine Band harp from his pocket. Dim stars blinked at him as he brought the metal and wood to his mouth and drew air across the reeds. The little harmonica moaned and sighed to the darkness, a churning railroad rhythm pumping as he inhaled and exhaled, forming shapes with his lips, blocking with his tongue, making implosive consonants at the back of his throat to twist the notes as he pleased.

He was handy with a harp, but he wasn't good - not real good. That didn't bother him so much. He was about as good at blowing harp as he wanted to be. The coffin at his feet bothered him more. He held the last note until his lungs were full, then took the harp away from his mouth. He dropped it back into his pocket as he let the air out of his chest. A dog howled way over at Dockery Farms, answering the harp's call.

The moon cast enough light on the crossroads where Dockery Road met Hwy 8 so he could see pretty well. Or as well as his poor eyesight would let him. He looked down to the coffin, three feet long, with a narrow waist, wide bottom and long neck. He hunkered down and popped the clasps. The moonlight caught the gloss of the Kalamazoo's finish and Robert ran his long fingers over its face. He drew his forefinger across the strings, letting each one ring out, sonorous in the night air. It was a little out of tune, but he needn't remedy that. Not tonight. That would be someone else's job.

He placed his hand flat on the strings to still them. This was all he wanted. To be the master of these six wires, this wooden box. To make it sing, to make it pull the sounds from his head and throw them into the air. He'd been practicing for years, playing every place they'd let him, but it was so slow. He'd be an old man before he'd tame this thing. He wanted it now. He wanted to go right up to Son House, take this guitar, and use it to wipe that shit-eating grin off his face.

He shivered as a breeze picked up, carrying the sound of hooves on dirt and a low smell. He stood upright, peering down Hwy 8. He stared at the blackness. His half-sister had bought him eyeglasses years ago, but he never wore them. Shit, he'd walk into walls before he'd go around with those things hanging off his face.

If he squinted he could just see two green-glowing eyes approaching from the south. At least he thought so. It was dark, and with vision as poor as his, he couldn't be certain. A shape formed around the distant eyes. What was it? The moonlight seemed to miss that spot on the highway, as if averting its gaze in shame.

A goat. Yes, a goat, great horns twisting around its long face. Wanderlust must have taken it, and it had jumped a fence somewhere down the highway. It was exploring the roads around Clarksdale, and being a wanderer also, Robert knew its plight. As if aware it had been recognized by a fellow traveller, it stopped. It shivered, its horned

head throwing off dust.

In one smooth movement, it raised itself onto its hind legs and stood upright.

"God a'mighty," whispered Robert, his breath misting before him. He brought his fingertips to his eyes and rubbed them. He'd had some whisky to warm him as he waited and it was dark, at least on that part of the flat landscape. He was mistaken, surely.

He took his hands away and cried out.

"Good evening," said the broad-shouldered man.

"Shit!" Robert took a step back.

The man smiled. He was handsome, with large teeth and inky skin. His finely cut suit caressed his thick body. "I'm sorry, brother," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm just out enjoying the moonlight. And what are you doing here at this late hour?"

Robert smoothed his jacket and studied the stranger. "I'm s'posed to meet somebody here. Where'd you come from?"

The stranger looked over his shoulder, then back to Robert.

Robert blinked at him. "I thought I saw a..."

"A what, brother?"

"Nothing. Must've been you, I guess. My eyes ain't so good."

The stranger smiled, then looked to the ground. "Mmm-mmm. That's a fine looking guitar you got there. Can you play it?"

"Yes, sir," said Robert.

"Let's hear you." The stranger grinned, his white teeth glowing in the moonlight.

"Is it you?" asked Robert.

"Is what me?" His smile never faltered.

"Is it you I'm s'posed to meet?"

The stranger turned in a slow circle. "Ain't nobody else out here, now, is there?"

"No," said Robert. He kneeled down and took the guitar from its case. Still squatting, he placed its waist across his right thigh. "What'll I play?"

"Whatever you please."

Robert thought for a moment, then decided. He began a tune Ike Zinnerman had been teaching him. He knew all the chords and all the movements of his right hand. His thumb knew when to strike down, his fingers knew when to pluck. He'd practiced for hours. He'd practiced until he bled. Still, the notes were blunt and graceless. None were wrong; they all arrived at the correct pitch at the correct time, but all were disjointed and clumsy. He stopped before the end of the second verse, embarrassed at over-reaching himself.

The stranger's smile was kind and warm. "Not bad. You're trying real hard."

"Yes sir," said Robert. "I try as hard as I can but it don't get no better."

"Maybe if I tuned that fine guitar for you it might help you along."

Robert felt a cold film of sweat on his brow as he stood up, letting the guitar hang by his side. "Maybe."

"The question is," said the stranger, his grin dimming slightly, "are you willing to pay me my price?"

Robert swallowed. "My soul?"

The stranger clutched his belly as he laughed. "Boy, I don't need your soul. Besides, you can't sell what don't belong to you. Who made you? Aside from your mama."

"God?"

"That's right. And He made your soul. Your soul belongs to Him. You go on the way you are, He's going to send your sorry ass my way anyhow." The stranger's face became black stone. "That ain't the price."

Robert tightened his grip on the guitar neck, feeling the fret-ends bite his palm. "Then what is?"

"Your moment," said the stranger.

Robert shook his head. "I don't understand."

The man took a step closer. "Everyone has a moment in their lifetime, just one, when they have everything they ever wanted, whether they know it or not. The moment when they reach the point He intended for them."

The stranger placed his thumbs over Robert's eyes, wiped them, then took his hands away. "My price is that moment," he said as he flicked a milky fluid onto the dirt road.

Robert blinked, his vision seeming to dance in his head. A bright burning was replaced by a smooth coolness. He looked up at the sky, startled by thousands upon thousands of brilliant pinpricks in the great, black blanket. He looked back to the stranger, his every pore hard and clear in the moonlight.

"What did you do to my eyes?" asked Robert.

"My price is that moment," repeated the stranger. "Are you willing to pay it?"

Robert could only stare.

"Are you willing to pay it?"

"Yes," said Robert.

The stranger smiled. "Now, that is a fine guitar. Your wife bought it for you, didn't she? Before she left you. A Kalamazoo. It ain't a Gibson, but it ain't far off. May I see it?"

He'd barely had enough time to get the Kalamazoo into its case and throw it out the window before the door came splintering in. He turned to see her husband, all jowls and wide eyes, advancing across the room as she squealed on the bed. Robert was running through the morning dew, the case in one hand, his suit bundled up in the other, before he heard the smacking of hard hand against soft cheek from the window he'd just leapt through. He was well practiced.

But now, at the other end of the day, he was without a slide. He preferred the sound of a brass tube, thick walled, like a tractor bearing, but they were shouting for him and there was no time to get what he wanted. He sucked down the last of the whisky, grimacing at the burn, before gripping the bottle by its neck and swinging it against the step. He was left holding a glass cylinder that fit snugly over his little finger.

He walked back inside the juke joint, lifted the Kalamazoo from its place at the wall, and sat down on the chair. He turned the pegs so the guitar was in windmill tuning. He could do it in seconds, going only by the resonance of the guitar's body against his.

He swept the bottleneck up the fingerboard, striking the strings just as it passed the seventh fret. He halted at the twelfth, letting his left hand waver, a glassy vibrato swelling to fill the room.

They became quiet, the people gathered here, pierced by the spidery tones. He held the chord until the guitar was almost out of breath, then let the silver notes fall. He

caught them at the lower octave, turning them to face the subdominant chord, then the dominant.

He was unaware of those labels, just as he was unaware he was carving lines guitar players would trace for a century to come. When he found the rhythm, pinning it to the floor with his muddied boots, he had no inkling he was drawing a map millions would follow decades after his passing. He was just playing guitar, happy and drunk.

Still, this was not the moment. This was not the price.

It was not the moment, or the price, when Robert went home to Robinsonville and watched Son House's jaw drop at the impossibility of his playing. When House and Willie Brown each stood aghast, unable to follow or even comprehend what the boy they'd laughed off was doing with his guitar, Robert's heart was fit to burst with pride. As the whoops and hollers rose over the slamming together of hands, Robert scanned the crowd for that handsome, broad-shouldered, inky-skinned stranger's face. He did not see a flash of white teeth through a knowing smile. He just saw the jealousy in the men, the desire in the women, and he drank his fill.

Even when Ernie Oertle brought him to San Antonio and sat him in the corner of a hotel room, a can ready to catch lightning and hold it in a great whirring machine, it was not the moment. When he stepped out into the Texas evening, his voice raw, seventy-five dollars in his pocket, he looked up and down the street searching for a man whose suit fitted like skin. He saw nothing but a scrawny dog sniffing at a lamppost.

Or, when he first heard his own voice, high and pure, like a ghost mourning its own death. Soaring over the crackles of the seventy-eight, straddling the guitar's wiry lattice, his words rang clear and loud. As the phonograph played, he looked to the doorway, then the window, to see if the stranger had come to collect.

But this was not the moment. This was not the price.

He awoke from the same nightmare, sweat licking at his back, and sat upright. That dream again. That dog, that hellhound, slobbering, blackened tongue lolling. Robert wiped sleep away from his eyes and breathed deep. He could see dawn creeping up the walls and knew he should be gone. Betty-Mae was still asleep beside him; her scent filled the room. Earl would be home from the Three Forks as soon as he shoved the last of the drunks out into the early rising heat. If he caught his wife in bed with his star attraction there'd be hell to pay.

Robert looked down to Betty-Mae and found a strange ache inside of him. What caused this new feeling? He considered it for a while. He felt the skin on his forearms and the back of his neck tingle when it came to him. It was the thought of leaving her that caused this odd pang in his heart.

It was August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1938. A Saturday. The last day of Robert Johnson's short life.

The Three Forks was empty except for Robert Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Betty Mae and her husband, Earl. Robert marked out a slow, steady rhythm while Sonny Boy made wavering, breathy lines with his harp. Earl stacked glasses behind a long, low table that served as the bar. Betty-Mae moved between the barrels that were set on end to make tables, sweeping the floor, spreading sawdust around and under the benches. The Three Forks was a grocery store by day, but at weekends its storeroom became the

hottest juke joint in Greenwood. Men and women would come from miles around to drink and dance and fight until dusk became dawn. The bleary eyes and hoarse voices that shamed the county's churches on Sunday morning were earned here on Saturday night.

Robert watched Betty-Mae as she swayed to the music, letting her hips mark the beat. The twitch this sight caused in his loins was familiar, but not the fluttering in his chest. He had been married twice, both times for the comfort of being kept, and both women were dead - one from childbirth, the other from a broken heart. He never looked at either of those women and felt this strange stirring inside. That troubled him.

When Betty-Mae showed up this evening with another grazed cheek and puffy lip he had to fight the urge to break a bottle over Earl's flat head.

"Man, where you at?"

Robert looked up to Sonny Boy. He hadn't noticed the harp had left the tall man's mouth twelve bars ago.

"You keep your eyes to yourself," said Sonny Boy. "That Earl ain't as stupid as he looks."

"What you talking about?" Robert stood up and leaned the Kalamazoo against the wall. "I'll look where I want and you don't have a thing to say about it."

Sonny Boy held his hands up and walked away.

Robert stood for a moment, feeling anger burn his heart, before turning to head out the back door and into the night air. He lit a cigarette and blew a long, blue plume into the warm darkness. He scolded himself for mouthing off to his old friend. Sonny Boy was right. He was playing with fire. Earl was a big man with a foul temper, and Robert was small, slim and not built for fighting. His right mind told him to get the hell away from Betty-Mae before he bought himself a bed in the infirmary.

But she was something. What was it? He couldn't fix it in his head. Was it her wide, smoky eyes? Her light brown skin? Her round hips? Or maybe it was her bubbling laugh, or the way she said what she meant, and what she meant was always right.

He thought of that swelling on her lip and kicked a stone across the dirt track that ran behind the Three Forks. Betty-Mae's father had been a drunk who gave his only daughter to Earl in hopes of a lifetime supply of free whisky. That lifetime only lasted the few months it took to drink himself to death and Betty-Mae was left with a husband who used her as a punch bag and cheap labor.

"Goddamn it," said Robert as he ground the cigarette butt into the dirt with his heel. He turned and went back inside the Three Forks to apologize to Sonny Boy.

He didn't see the green eyes watching from the darkness.

"That's whisky talking," said Betty-Mae, her head to one side, her eyes serious.

"No, I mean it," said Robert. He held the door to the open closet so it shielded them from the rest of the packed room. "We can go to Chicago, Detroit, wherever you want. I even know some folks up in Canada."

"Canada?" She threw her head back and laughed. "I ain't going to no Canada! I ain't freezing my ass off for no man."

She smiled, then, and it almost broke his heart.

"I love you, Betty-Mae," he said. "I never said that to a woman and meant it

before now. I want to marry you."

Her smile fell away, her puffy lip trembled and her eyes made small, quick movements. She was leaning in to kiss him when the door was pulled from his grip.

"Betty-Mae?" Earl looked down at them both, his face slack and confused. "What you doing back here?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just putting the broom away."

Earl gripped her upper arm and guided her towards the makeshift bar, a scowl darkening his face as he glanced back over his shoulder.

Robert turned to go back to his guitar, but his way was blocked by a tall, broad man. A handsome man. A man with large white teeth and inky skin.

"Now is the moment," said the stranger. "This is the price."

Robert took two steps back, suddenly cold amidst the heat of a hundred warm bodies.

"Don't look at me like that, boy." The stranger grinned. "You knew I'd be back to collect one day. You owe me and it's time to settle up. But I think I'll listen to you play a little while. You and Sonny Boy together, now that's a sound I'd like to hear."

Robert looked around him, searching for a way out.

The stranger stepped in close. "Now, don't be thinking of running, boy. I'll catch you. And if you make me come after you, I might not be satisfied with just you, you understand?"

Robert turned to see what the stranger's eyes had focussed on: Betty-Mae washing glasses in a bucket of soapy water. He turned back to the stranger and felt the hot, sulphurous breath on his face.

"Now get that guitar and play. I want to hear what you bought with your one moment."

On shaking legs, Robert walked back to where his Kalamazoo leaned against the wall. Sonny Boy leaned alongside it, finishing a cigarette.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"No-one," said Robert as he tried to hide the tremor in his voice. "Just someone I used to know."

"He looked serious."

"Yep, he's serious all right. Let's play."

Sonny Boy plucked a harp from the belt at his waist. "Me and the Devil Blues?"

Robert took his seat. "All right."

He played the best he ever played because he knew he would never hold a guitar again. And because he was the greatest bluesman who ever lived, those hundred or so people heard the best blues ever played on this Earth, before or since, that hot August night. None of them knew it, except one man who wasn't really a man at all.

Robert looked up now and then, just for a second, and saw the stranger whispering in Earl's ear. He saw Earl's face go grey, saw the muscles in his jaw clench. He saw the stranger pass Earl a small bottle.

As the last notes died, the crowd roared and stamped their feet. Robert waved away the calls for more and Sonny Boy holstered his harp. Robert laid his cheek on the guitar's shoulder and ran his thumb across the strings, feeling the them resonate in his skull. When they died away, he kissed the Kalamazoo's neck and leaned it against the wall.



"Man, are you all right?" asked Sonny Boy.

"Yeah, I'm good," said Robert. "I just need a drink."

"Well, don't be tying one on tonight, boy. I smell trouble. Earl and that friend of yours been cooking something up."

"Don't worry." Robert patted his friend's shoulder. "Ain't nothing I can't handle."

Cassie, one of Earl's bar girls approached. She carried a half pint bottle of whisky. "On the house," she said, and put it in Robert's outstretched hand.

"Watch that," said Sonny Boy. "The seal's broke."

"I know." Robert unscrewed the already loosened cap.

"Don't put that near your mouth, man. You crazy?"

"Mind your business, Sonny Boy. You ain't my nursemaid." Robert raised the bottle to his lips.

Sonny Boy slapped it from his hand and the shattering of glass silenced the room for just a second. "Man, don't never take a drink from an open bottle. You don't know what could be in it."

Robert looked to the bar where the stranger kept a steady eye on him. Betty-Mae slipped past the stranger, and he reached out. He pulled her close to him and whispered in her ear. Her eyes grew wide and she pulled away. He grinned as he looked back to Robert.

Robert turned back to Sonny Boy. "Man, don't never knock a bottle of whisky outta my hand. Cassie, bring me another one."

"All right," said Sonny Boy as he walked away. "You said it. I ain't your nursemaid."

Cassie headed for the bar and Robert breathed deep, trying to ease the hammering in his chest. His eyes were hot and wet.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

Robert jumped, frightened by the soft hand on his shoulder.

"Nothing, Betty-Mae," he lied. "I'm just tired, that's all."

She looked into his eyes. "Robert, I been thinking. About what you said. I want to go. I don't want to be around here no more. Let's go someplace."

He felt the hot, salty tears run down his cheeks.

"Oh baby," she said, reaching out to touch him. "Don't cry."

He pulled her close and kissed her. She resisted for a moment, then gave in. He wrapped his arms around her warm, full body.

"Are you two crazy?" Cassie pulled them apart. "Earl's right over there. He'll whup both your asses. Here."

She handed Robert another half pint bottle. Again, the seal was broken. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand then unscrewed the cap.

"I love you, Betty-Mae," he said, raising the bottle in a toast. "You remember that."

"I love you, too," she said, her eyes glistening. She touched his cheek.

He smiled and brought his hand up to hers, pressing its warmth against his skin.

"Now is the moment," he said. "This is the price."

He lifted the bottle to his lips and swallowed.

A note from the author:

*This is a fictionalised account of the life and death of Robert Johnson. The crossroads myth was one he actively encouraged during his lifetime, and I've always found it a fascinating story. The circumstances of Johnson's death are shrouded in mystery and hearsay, but it's generally accepted that he was poisoned by the man who ran the Three Forks juke joint on August 13th, 1938, for being overly familiar with his wife. That Sonny Boy Williamson II was in attendance and slapped the first poisoned bottle out of Johnson's hand is well documented - the words used here are the ones they are reported to have spoken. The name Betty-Mae is taken from the song Honeymoon Blues. Although this story states that August 13th was the last day of Johnson's life, it actually took him a further three days to die. The cause given on his death certificate was 'No Doctor'.*