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“The Axeman”
by BRIAN LARSON

—JQ—

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C o n t e n t s

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The Axeman

BRIAN LARSON

*He comes bearing death in his hand
...and justice in his soul.*

THE AXE DREW HIM TOWARD A TOWN IN THE midst of California's Central Valley. To get there he crossed the wild Sierra Nevada Mountains, braving some of the worst shift-storms that the western region of the Americas had to offer. The storms were the purest of the form of the chaos that engulfed the Earth. Curtains of shimmering light decorated the skies even in day here, like aurora borealis gone mad. During the nights the storms came down, liquefied the air, transformed the landscape into colorful hot running wax, twisted the living things into grotesque shapes. The Axeman descended from the Sierras in relief on the sixteenth day, leaving the insane colors, the slick hard lakes and the flopping damned things behind.

The town itself was a hot, dusty little place without much personality; only the miracle of irrigation kept it green in the July heat. The Axeman walked on a sidewalk, an old sidewalk, with many sections that were cracked and lifted up by tree roots. The large sycamore trees responsible for the damage marched along both sides of the street, leafy stalwart warriors wearing their summer colors of vivid green and mottled brown. The Axeman moved through their ranks, a sergeant reviewing his platoon. Despite the heat he wore a long weather-stained cloak, its original color a matter of conjecture, now a deep brown. The cloak hid most of his clothing within its shadowy interior, but visible below the hem were a heavy pair of well-worn boots. Tucked under his left arm was a Bible; slung across his shoulder was a small rucksack. Around his neck he wore a stiff white collar.

The street and the marching sycamores ended abruptly in a ravaged area that marked the passage of a shift-storm through the town. He paused to mop his brow with a dirt-smear bandana. The pavement continued after a fashion, presently entering into a devastated region, where it became a dark, twisting flow, and the asphalt had shifted to a river of black glass. The trees had all been slashed and burned down... for safety's sake, of course. Their grasping wooden fingers were twisted and charred, frozen in a death that had come just as suddenly and brutally as had sentient life. The houses were dead monsters, their roving windows and snapping doors destroyed by teams of bulldozers and axes.

"This used to be my street."

The Axeman whirled, knees bent. An old man sat upon the stump of one of the murdered trees. He waved vaguely

down the twisted strip of glassy asphalt. "My house was just at the corner there, before the shifting came through. Fourteen-Sixteen Myrtle it was."

"I'm sorry you lost your home," said the Axeman. His dry throat made his voice rattle thinly.

"I'm Ben, Ben Carson," said the old man. He extended his hand. The Axeman shook it, careful not to stare at the magenta spurs that topped all seven of the man's knuckles. The double-bladed axe that rode in his rucksack twitched, however, lacking manners.

"I got too close to it, as you can see," remarked Ben, placing his deformed hand behind him on the stump. "Tried to save the wife. A foolish thing, really."

"A natural thing to do," said the Axeman gently.

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"You're a traveler?" asked Ben suddenly.

The Axeman nodded. The Axe twitched again and the handle slid unobtrusively from underneath the flap. With a slight frown of annoyance, he rolled his shoulders to quiet it. Packed away in darkness, he sensed the Axe's curved black blades cloud over for a moment, then return to their normal glass-like sheen.

"You're very lucky then, and very gutsy," said Ben with a shake of his old head. "I never left town, but got touched by the chaos anyway. You look like the most normal traveler I've ever set eyes on."

A distant smile played across the Axeman's weather-seamed face. "Tell me, Ben, how long ago did the last storm hit this town?"

Ben shrugged. "Must've been May since the north end of highway 99 was cut off. Whole thing turned into a huge serpent, only with no head and no tail. Took four days to stop thrashing and coiling. This area was hit way back in November—notice the trees have no leaves? A blessing, that. They say the leaves tend to come loose and fly around with little mouths like bats," said Ben. Despite heat in the high nineties, a shiver ran through him.

Taking his leave of the old man, the Axeman passed through the devastation and entered a more picturesque part of the town. His long legs strode at a steady, rapid pace. After a time he came to an intersection and paused before crossing. Here, the homes that lined the streets were larger and nicer, with greater individuality and superior aspect. Even the sycamores seemed to stand straighter and more proudly, tree-soldiers at attention, rather than drooping from an endless march. The sidewalk beneath his feet was in better repair, as though the great trees hadn't quite dared to lift up the slabs of concrete with their powerful roots. He was left with the feeling that such horseplay was simply not allowed in this neighborhood. Directly before him, on the opposite corner of the street he was about to cross, stood a stately manse with green ivy-like creepers working their way up walls of dark brick. The growth wreathed every pane of the windows on the highest turrets of the third floor, stopping only at the barricade of the rain gutters that encircled the steep slate roof.

A Corvette with a growling engine stalked up the street in front of the manse. With a negligence that was impossible to fathom, the car drove up and simply ran over two of the three children that were playing in a pile of hedge-cuttings to one side of the street. The car's molded front bumper scooped up a boy, almost gently, and rolled him over the heavily waxed black hood to the windshield. From the windshield he was bounced up into the air and neatly deposited in the hedge-clippings, a small splash of dry leaves and cut twigs shooting up like a whale's plume from where he landed. The child, no more than four years old, gave only a single yelp when the car scooped him up, and afterward simply laid in the rubbish heap, dazed. The second child, a girl, was if anything even smaller and younger than her playmate. She was more fortunate, as she simply laid down in the clippings, letting the heavy car pass over her with its hot oily engine and whirring fan inches above her surprised face. The third child was another girl, the youngest of the three, showing the bulky padding around her hips that indicated she still wore diapers beneath her red cotton pants. She simply watched, absently sucking her left hand, while her playmates were knocked about like bowling pins by the slow-moving car.

The Axeman's jaw sagged. The sheer nonchalance of the driver! To simply drive through a group of playing children, traveling at no more than five miles an hour! It was incomprehensible. Was she intoxicated? He could see even through the heavily tinted glass that it was a lone woman at the wheel. Had she experienced a stroke? He simply stood for a moment on the curb, his lips forming a bloodless O. Then the third child, the uninjured one,

began crying and ran to him with the jerky, alarming gait of a panicked toddler. He shoved his Bible into his pack, where it rested easily against the Axe. She raised up her hands to him and he stepped forward, sweeping her high into the protective wall of his arms. In his pack, the sleeping Axe twitched.

Awakened into action, the Axeman took a step toward the other two children. Neither appeared to be seriously hurt; the little girl cried wildly while the boy rubbed his arm and tugged at the twigs caught in his hair. He then turned his attention to the car and its driver. Transferring the weight of the little girl to his left arm and hip, he stepped forward onto the street, striding toward the car, which slowed almost to a stop. The little girl in his arms sniffled and rubbed her eyes. The wispy golden hair on her head floated up in the slightest breeze, as fine as cobwebs.

The driver sent her tinted window down a third of the way with a touch of her finger to the power switch. Wild, annoying music floated out of the vehicle, drowning out the steady thrum of the engine with foul rasping and banging.

"Are you demented?" he asked. His right arm was free now, and the Axe stirred hungrily in his pack, the handle emerging unobtrusively from under the flap, well within easy reach.

The driver was an unappetizing woman in her thirties with false brown curls and long fingernails painted a brilliant hue of lavender. With a look of incomprehension and a slight shake of her head, as though she did not understand what it was he was asking, she made as if to roll up the window again.

"What about the children?" he shouted at her. The cords suddenly stood out on his neck as real anger finally took him. "How can you be so uncaring, so callous to injured little ones?"

She spread her long lavender fingernails over her breasts, showing concern for the first time. He could tell however, that her concern wasn't for the children, but rather for the safety of her miserable skin. With a flick of inch-long nails and a tiny shrug her eyes asked, what can be done?

Then their eyes met for the first time. The visage of the Axeman in anger had once given even a sphinx cause to ponder. In his presence there was an undeniable sense of the accountability of one for his or her actions. It was a sense of brute justice, of violent revenge. He did in fact ponder pulling free the Axe from his pack. He restrained himself, as he had nothing upon which to base formal judgement. Besides, there was the innocent child riding contentedly now on his left arm. She did not deserve further trauma.

And so the woman drove away slowly, the tinted glass sliding up smoothly to complete the black shell in which she was ensconced. Only she and the Axeman knew that she had experienced a thrill of fear after looking into his dangerous, electric eyes, that her armor of unconcern had been punctured despite all pretense to the contrary.

As the Corvette slid away down the street, he noticed that the license plate that should have been on the rear bumper was absent. Still feeling a hot bubble of anger inside he turned, striding back toward the other two children.

To his surprise, the children were not in the hedge-clippings any longer. Instead, they had been taken up by two older women. Even as the Axeman approached, the two women headed back into the open front gate of the ivy-covered manse. They crooned to the children who cried steadily. He reached the hedge-clippings with several long strides and raised up his hand.

“Wait, I saw what happened!” he cried.

Without a reply the two women entered the gate and closed it behind them, the taller and older of the two giving him a sudden quick frown before vanishing into the courtyard beyond. He paused at the gate and touched his chin. Perhaps these local people should be left now to handle their own affairs; perhaps they needed no further interference from him.

Still, he could not be sure. He had a feeling—a hunch, perhaps—that here something dark moved beneath placid waters. He was always one to follow his feelings, second only to Justice. He followed them at a trot, catching the gate before it swung closed and latched.

Still carrying the little blonde girl in her red cotton pants, he entered the grounds of the manse. Within the growth-covered brick walls, the courtyard was a fairy book affair, being more of a garden than a courtyard. Handsome rose bushes in full bloom stood in proud ranks around the path that led to the house, and the roses were walled in by a veritable hedgerow of lush marigolds. They vaguely reminded the Axeman of the neat rows of sycamore tree-soldiers that lined the roads outside. Bees hummed busily around the garden, working most happily among the lilacs and African pansies that grew up hugging the bricks of the house itself. Nowhere, the Axeman noted with appreciation, was there a weed to be seen. The gravel path he stood upon led straight to the porch of the house itself, a grand affair with much scrolled woodwork and high gables overhead. Off to one side the path joined with a gravel drive that led from the quaint carriage house to another gate which presumably let onto the street again. Another, smaller side-path led to an eight-sided gazebo with a high pointed roof

that stood amidst the great ranks of red rosebushes, a lone tower besieged by a thorn-bearing army of flowering plants.

Of the two women and the children they were carrying, there was no sign.

Taking only a moment to drink in the beauty of the place, he strode purposefully up the gravel path and the steps of the porch to the kitchen door. He rapped on the old glass panes, peering in through the wavering distortions to examine the kitchen. There was a pot boiling on a stove and a set of half-washed dishes in the sink, but no sign of the children. He twisted the rattling handle immediately, opening the door and taking a deep breath to shout for the old women to show themselves, but a sound he heard caused the shout to die in his throat. Out in the garden, over the twittering birds and the buzzing insects he heard the distinct noise of a wooden door slamming shut. Wheeling with grace on the heel of his right boot, he drew back from the kitchen and stood

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on the porch, his eyes focusing just in time to see a black scrap of cloth being yanked back into the door of the gazebo. Someone had gotten their skirts caught as they slipped inside. Now that his keen senses were aligned to the gazebo, he heard the further sounds of the door being latched tight, and the guttural sound of an old woman’s voice.

“Fool!” she hissed, followed by what could only have been a hard slap to the face, and a whimper of submission.

Shifting the blonde child’s weight to his left hip, that his right hand would be free for action, the Axeman set on the path again, his boots crunching rhythmically on the gravel. His mind was whirling, and a strange image grew there behind his brow. The image was of two old women, huddling down in the vast sea of rosebushes, their hands most likely clamped over the mouths of two squirming children, or had they simply told them it was a game, a contest of quietness? Then further images came of these two mysterious fugitives, jumping up as he had strode past, taking hasty refuge in the gazebo. He frowned upon all mysteries, being a man who preferred the straightforward truth, the simple clarity of above-board

dealings. Could these women be so frightened of him? Was all of this simply a misunderstanding?

To be sure, the Axe which rode his shoulder was certain. It twitched and throbbed and all but begged to be drawn. It was sure that there was great evil afoot, but this was nothing new. The Axe loved fulfilling its purpose; it sought and found evil in everything, oftentimes whether it was there or not. Nay, it was not up to the Axe the job of judgement; that belonged to the Axeman himself. The Axe was only to be drawn when guilt had been proven.

In twenty long strides the Axeman reached the gazebo. He grabbed the door handle and pulled, muscles bunching up as it resisted beyond what one would expect from ancient wood and a thin rusty latch. And while he stood there, pulling, a strange sensation came to him, emanating from within the walls of the tiny building before him, a sensation of terror and woe. He heard no sounds, but even so felt that something odd was happening inside. Something foul.

Then the door gave way, and he all but fell forward into the dim interior of the gazebo. Inside it was hot and stuffy, and within sat two women, huddled on the bench that ran around the building along seven of its eight walls, the other being occupied by the door itself. Of the children there was no sign.

“What do you want?” cried the shorter and fatter of the women, her lower lip trembling. Both of them wore knit sweaters wrapped over their shoulders like shawls. The Axeman peered at them in the green gloom of the gazebo, realizing that these women were younger, straighter of spine and smoother of face than what he had expected. For some reason, he had thought them quite old, perhaps in their seventies at least, now however he could see that neither of them were much over sixty. The younger one’s hair was only partially gray, in fact. He disregarded this, all his thoughts being upon discovering the whereabouts of the children.

“Where are the other children?” he demanded.

The first woman shook her head and made as if to reply, but the older one shushed her with a touch of her fingers to the other’s lips.

“We aren’t saying,” said the taller, older one. Around her neck hung a small mass of crooked sticks and feathers. It was a talisman. Many people wore them these days in the vague hope of warding off the shift-storms. In her fingers she twisted and fretted with the talisman nervously. Her expression was that of great concern, but wasn’t there—just a glint, mind you—of a mocking smile in her eyes? The Axeman could not be sure.

“You are a stranger here, and we don’t like strangers. These children belong in this neighborhood and you

don’t. Now give me Amanda and clear out. Kids around her know not to talk with strange men, and you’re scaring her out of her wits.”

The Axeman glanced down at the little blonde girl that still rode in the crook of his left arm. She still sucked her hand, gazing at the two women with mild curiosity, but there was no sign of fear in her face, nor of any particular desire to go to them. She did in fact, seem quite happy to continue riding on his tireless arm. He came to a sudden, irreversible decision: he would not allow Amanda out of his reach.

“I repeat: Where are the other children?”

“What do you care?” replied the dominant one, standing and approaching him slowly, her eyes on Amanda, clearly wishing to gain possession of her. “You scared us good, so we hid the children, not knowing, and still not knowing I might add, what kind of man you might be. Amanda, come here right now,” this last she directed to Amanda, opening her arms.

“You must understand sir,” said the plump one, still sitting on the bench with her hands in her lap. “Even if you are a preacher, you do have the look of a vagrant.”

This last rang true in the Axeman’s ears. His shoulders heaved, sighing and relaxing at the same time.

“I am a fool,” he said. And indeed, he felt the fool to the core of his being. He was ashamed, mortified. He had suspected great mischief and had followed the overzealous instincts of the Black Axe into folly. All was suddenly clear; the old women had rushed forward, eager to save the children from danger, then he had arrived, frightening them out of their wits even as all their protective instincts were in full force. He had been an idiot not to see it. The children had only been victims of a negligent driver, no more. It was not the first time that the Black Axe had led him into embarrassment with its constant and eager paranoia.

He nodded his head to them, and they saw in his face that he believed them now. Smiling, the older woman reached out delicately to take Amanda from his arms. The Axeman made as if to give her up, but found that he could not uncrook his arm. Not just yet. He was not one to easily reverse a decision. The old cold fingers lightly brushed his arm, then pulled back, the old eyes glaring, when he did not release the girl.

“I am truly sorry,” he said, apologizing to them both. “The only dangerous person involved has fled. The driver is gone, but we are all ready to find threats around every bend. Please excuse my trespassing and my crude manners, I only wished to save the children from harm.”

“We understand,” replied the smaller woman, beaming.

“Perhaps you could join us for tea? I have a pot boiling in the kitchen.”

The dominant woman shot her a venomous glance that almost made the Axeman snort with amusement. As it was he touched his face to hide a grin. “I would be glad to join you, ladies. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Reverend James Thomas.”

“Nice to meet you, Reverend,” replied the taller, regaining her composure. “I am Carmen, and this is my niece, Nadine.”

He thought of hunting up Amanda’s parents, but decided that perhaps it was best if he stayed and waited for the other two children to turn up. Better to be certain than to be left wondering about them, the Axe would never let him rest easy again. As they all stepped out, the women leading the way. He stepped upon an old wooden grate in the floor, which had escaped his attention previously. It gave way slightly, indicating that there was an open space beneath. The grate covered an opening in the precise center of the gazebo.

“Ah, so this is the escape route that the children took?”

“Ah, yes,” replied Nadine, looking uncomfortable at his discovery. Her flabby cheeks pinked a little.

Nodding, he let them proceed him into the kitchen. For some few minutes they sat and discussed the strange event that had occurred, and sipped their tea. As was his custom, the Axeman took only the tiniest sip of their brew, then set the cup aside. Carmen brought in a glass ball with a snow scene inside that snowed when you shook it. She allowed Amanda to look at and touch it, but not to remove it from the kitchen table. Even so, Amanda was delighted. After a few minutes of polite conversation—during which he learned that both of the women’s husbands had been lost years since, and that the house was too big and more of a bother every year to keep up and heat—he took the now cool tea to the sink and quietly dumped it. As he did so, he noted what could only have been the other two children, playing quietly along the gravel path outside the kitchen window.

With a smile, he stepped outside and knelt down beside the children on the dusty path. Both of them had garden trowels, and were digging at the stones with them.

“How are you children? Are you hurt?” he asked them.

“I don’t know,” replied the boy, shrugging.

“My arm hurts a lot,” said the girl, presenting a long red scrape and a purpling bruise as evidence.

“Did the car hit your arm?”

“No, the monster did it,” she replied, watching him intently as he examined the injury.

He laughed. “You mean the Corvette. The only monster was the woman driving it.”

“The monster is called Or-vet?” she asked with frightened eyes.

“No, stupid,” said the boy.

“No, uh...” said the Axeman, frowning.

“She’s not talkin’ about the car, mister,” said the boy. “The car is over there in the garage.”

“What?” he asked, rising up. He turned toward the carriage house, and noted that the door was indeed half-open, but he could have sworn he had seen it all the way shut.

“Come on, I’ll show ya. That’s where we got these shovels.”

He followed the boy to the carriage house, where the Corvette indeed sat, engine ticking away the heat from a

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recent roadtrip. The Axeman patted the boy’s head. He had placed the first piece in the puzzle.

“You children stick close to me, now, I—” here he broke off as Lucifer’s hot claws squeezed his heart. There was gray in the boy’s hair. It wasn’t all gray, it wasn’t even all that noticeable from a distance, but up close you could see it. He lifted his patting hand, and saw that the boy’s blonde hair was shot through with silvery streaks. He whirled and crouched in front of the little girl then, finding more steel-colored threads. Then he rose and dashed out of the carriage house, cloak swirling around him, making the astonished children think of Batman.

Even as his boots pounded the gravel, he wanted to pound his own head. It had been right there, right in front of him all along. And worse, he had gone back on his pledge, he had left Amanda with them. He thought of the toddler’s fine wispy hair shot through with gray and sickened inside. Then he ran faster.

In bare seconds he reached the point in the gravel path where the side path to the gazebo began, but to his dismay the path had vanished. He almost flew headlong into the roses, barely managing to check himself. All he could see was a solid wall of rosebushes, at least ten yards deep, between him and the little eight-sided building. It was as if an army had closed ranks, sealing the hole as if it had never been there.

He had in truth been an idiot, and idiot not to trust his own instincts. He had sensed the evil and he had doubted himself. One witch had nudged the children with her car so as to give the old witches a chance to run out and grab them. Perhaps their parents were watching; perhaps they were afraid to simply coax the children into the walls of the garden without an excuse. The plan seemed so elaborate, to go to all the trouble, all the risk, of running the car into the children just to get them down here into the cellar, it seemed so bizarre. But the plan, insane or not, had almost succeeded. He had almost been deceived.

“Amanda!” he shouted. He paused for a moment, but heard only the blowing of his own breath and the pounding of his heart. The birds and insects had fallen silent. There was no sign of life in the gazebo, nor in the house. Only the children watched him from the dark mouth of the carriage house.

“So be it,” he said.

Then he drew the Axe. The double-edged weapon pushed its handle into his waiting hand and leapt free of the pack. A great feeling of relief and freedom awoke in the Axeman’s heart, the feeling of release from boredom and imprisonment. He held it aloft and admired it for a moment in the fading afternoon light, as it was a thing of great beauty. The blades were a liquid black, the black of a cellar on a starless night, the black of a buried cave at the bottom of an ocean. Unlike the surface of the blade, which sucked light, the edges flashed brightly, reflecting the orange afternoon sun. He swung the Axe once, experimentally, and the cutting edges cast off gleams that dazzled the eyes and numbed the senses.

Lifting the Axe up high again, he set to work, swinging low so as to chop each of the bushes off at the thickest point of their trunks. The first three went down with a single, wide sweep, making a delightful triple-thumping sound. He could feel and almost hear the evil plants grieve as they sensed their distance from the fruitful earth and realized their deaths. They had of course been touched by the shifting, molded into forms of evil by the storms of chaos.

He took a half-step forward and swung again, setting to his work with gusto. He began to hum, then soon broke into full song, singing of Gabriel and the other angels, singing of flaming swords, of battle and righteous revenge. Inch-long thorns stabbed savagely at him, fallen soldiers wielding their daggers as the conquering army marched over their bodies. They caught and tore at his cloak, but could not penetrate the thick leather of his boots, which crushed their flowers as he passed, sending up a most pleasant perfume.

Halfway through to the gazebo, he realized vaguely

that the ranks of the rosebushes had closed behind him, but this did not matter to him now. He had worked up quite a sweat, perspiration popping out of his pores even as his eyes were popping from his head with the light of fanaticism. They were going down faster now, four or five at a clip. He couldn’t tell if they were getting denser, or if his swings were becoming wider, nor did he care. Words poured from his mouth now, indistinguishable syllables from John and Matthew, parables mixing with hymns in a feverish chanting. With a final sweep he cleared the last of them, and won through to the gazebo doorstep. He paused only to glance back over a shuffling sea of thorny plants to where the children still stood near the carriage house. The roses were moving openly behind him now, rattling their thorns together, lusting to avenge their dead. Their blossoms were swollen and uniformly the color of fresh blood. Their exhalations were no longer sweet, but rather fouled the air, creating the stink of a week-old summertime battlefield.

Without further ceremony the Axeman cut through the door, destroying the latch and doorjamb with one stroke, exploding the hinges and with the second. Shattered, the door fell in splinters. Stepping forward, sides heaving, the Axeman discovered that the tiny room was empty, but the wooden grate covering the floor was gone. Keeping his Axe upraised, he climbed down into the darkness.

There he found the imp, just as he knew it must be there. Born of the shifting, even as the Black Axe had been, the vile, frog-like beast with bat’s wings should never have lived—but it did. It was chained by the neck to the wall of the root cellar, and it reached for Amanda even as the Axeman dropped down into the chamber and regained his feet. The creature’s eyes shone like molten gold nuggets in the dim light of the cellar.

“He comes too soon!” hissed the woman who had driven the Corvette.

“We didn’t mean to hurt ’em,” wept Nadine, falling to her fatty knees. “She said it wouldn’t hurt the children.”

“Shut up,” Carmen told her. “Stop him, Tricia.”

The driver of the Corvette, Tricia, stepped close and threw a green bottle full of dirty-looking fluid at him, which she had pulled from a rack on the wall. With a deft flick of the wrist, the Axeman diverted the bottle, smashing it with the flat of his Axe. The liquid showered away from him, only landing a few drops on his long cloak, but doused Tricia as she stood only a few feet away.

Tricia made only a strangled, gargling sound, then seemed to stiffen, eyes wide, mouth open in an eternal scream. Then she toppled forward and cracked into three

pieces, and the Axeman looked down on nothing but a broken statue. At this, Nadine screamed and burst into tears of terror, now, rather than shame. Carmen grabbed hold of the chain that bound the monster to the wall. With a twist of a key she unlocked it.

The shift-creature leapt at the Axeman, teeth and tiny scaly hands seeking his throat. Its glowing fish-like eyes locked with his, and he could see in them the horrors that it had lived through in the cold void beyond the shift-lines. Perhaps it had been human once, but the shifting had touched its body, twisting and withering, and had touched its soul as well. Its form had mutated and flowed like hot running wax, solidifying into something horrible to see. As a moth's wings that brush open flame, its soul had been seared, transformed into something shriveled and burnt.

For a moment they struggled, the shift-creature hissing and ripping his clothing and flesh, the Axeman holding it off with one shredded, bleeding arm, his hand flat against the monster's bony chest. And then he managed to get in a stroke, and the Axe sheared the thing in half, spraying him with a shower of hot fetid blood.

Carmen had in the meantime grabbed up Amanda and run for the rear exit that presumably led back up into the house, or perhaps the garden. The Axeman gave chase, catching her at the top of the stairs as she struggled with a trapdoor. She turned and hurled Amanda at him, and he caught the child, grateful to have the little girl back into the crook of his arm, where she should have never been allowed to leave in the first place. He was not expecting the attack that came next however, as Carmen whirled on him, her face suddenly changed to that of a ghoul, long of fang and claw. She engaged him in a desperately strong hug, snapping jaws and hot breath at his throat. He could not use his Axe, as she was too close, he could not keep her back, as Amanda was clinging to one arm. His neck tingled with the closeness of her sharp teeth.

And then, also unexpected, there was aid from behind him. A garden rake was thrust past his ear, taking Carmen in the face. She was rudely forced back, screeching, and the Axe was lifted.

“‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’,” he quoted, and so saying he did slay her with a single clean stroke. The severed head bounced down the stairs and came

to rest beside the broken statue that was Tricia. The Axeman's only regret was that Amanda had not been protected completely, that despite all his careful steps, she had witnessed the wrath of the Axe in addition to the evil of this house.

Back down in the cellar, he found Nadine, her sweater fallen from her shoulders. In her hands she held the rake with which she had helped him.

“She said it would not hurt them. She lied.”

He nodded, putting Amanda down and sending her up the steps to into the gazebo. There still might be work to be done. He turned and his arm raised up of its own accord, holding aloft the Axe.

Nadine trembled, expecting the blow. She eyed the silvery edge of the blade and raised the rake before her

**Still, he could not be sure.
He had a feeling—a hunch, perhaps—
that here something dark
moved beneath placid waters.**

in a futile gesture. “Spare me!”

“You have drunk the lives of children,” said the Axeman in a terrible voice that was not entirely his own, in a voice that was more than that of Reverend James Thomas.

“I know,” she wept.

“You have taken years from their lives, and this you can't return,” he went on, in the tone of one passing judgement, meting out sentence. For the Axe's part there was but one clear verdict: guilty, and but one possible sentence: death.

The Axe trembled in his hand, the desire, the wanting to strike was almost too great to control. His hand and wrist trembled. Then he lowered the Axe.

Nadine looked up in surprise.

“The Axe is the executioner,” he explained. “But to me still falls the task of judgement, and mercy.”

He gathered up the children and left the manse, discovering on the way out that the rose garden, although much of it now lay in ruins, again smelled quite sweet.

BRIAN LARSON

Has won awards for his short fiction and is an active member of SFWA. In addition to writing and designing Web pages, he teaches college and works as a factory automation consultant. As a free service to fellow authors, he maintains a categorized list of online publishers on his homepage: <http://www.sff.net/people/brian-larson/Links_Page.htm>.

Bobby Walks

EVAN PALMER

*This is a walk through Bobby's life.
It's the only way to go.*

IT'S SUNDAY.

Bobby walks fast: leaning to the left, then to the right, a bit of a hip-hop every third or fourth step, a jitter. Bobby always walks fast. He chews that noisy grape bubble gum. He's walking and chewing, gum snapping in his half-open mouth with crooked bottom teeth, blowing bubbles, looking around, checking on things. He runs his slight hand with ridged nails through his hair: it's thick and wavy; he combs it fifty times a day; he keeps his small black comb in his back right pocket, next to his small army knife.

"Bobby," she yells. He looks up and right at her, no hesitation. He smiles and flashes a brilliant toothy smile.

"Jessica!" he yells back to her. There is something a little off about his voice, not quite all there. She settles back, a satisfied smile on her face. Bobby waves as he turns the corner and out of her sight.

His white running shoes with the blue racing stripes are worn out on the outer front corner from the way he walks. He kinda floats on his toes when he walks, pushing off and up as soon as his heel touches. Bouncy.

"Where you going, Bobby?" the cop Steckham calls to him as he rounds the corner.

"Nowhere, officer," says Bobby.

Steckman laughs and flaps his hand in disbelief. *That's Bobby for ya*, he indicates with his gesture.

There's not much traffic on Sunday. The fruit market is open. Bobby walks in and picks out an apple.

"An apple a day?" asks the clerk, Maggie, as Bobby stands at the counter to pay for it.

Bobby smiles and nods. "An apple, a sandwich, a drink of milk..." he pauses. She isn't listening; she's attending to another customer.

He puts his nickel and penny change into his right jean pocket and leaves. He shines his small green apple on his loose t-shirt; the green looks good against the brown cotton. He picks up speed as he bounces along the cracked concrete sidewalk, the pant legs of his jeans swishing as he strides. He avoids the sticky patches of gum on the ground. With his free hand, he pulls out his gum wrapper and plunks the purple mass from his mouth into it and puts that into his t-shirt pocket, over and to the left of his heart. He bites into the hard surface of the apple as he waits at the corner for the traffic to open up.

An old big shiny car slows down as it passes. A thin pimply guy with slicked black hair leans out of the open window. "Hey, retard. Stay back from the curb." The pimply guy smiles.

Bobby steps back and waits. He knows that pimply guy. The streetlights change and a path opens for him. He crosses the street. The car is a long way down the street. It's a narrow city street with cars parked on both sides, old half-repaired cars, most rusted a bit.

**He shines his small green apple on
his loose t-shirt; the green looks good
against the brown cotton.**

Bobby walks up to the old man's club. It used to be Portuguese but now it's anyone. Jaime is sitting on the worn white bench in front of the club. The club's window drapes are half-drawn, the front door is propped open. Jaime pulls on his smelly dark-tobacco cigarette, puffs out. Bobby sits down beside him. "Bobby," he says. "Mister Jaime," he replies. Jorge is on the other side of Jaime. Jorge is eighty-something. They chit-chat, Jaime and Bobby, for a couple of minutes and then Bobby goes. After a minute or so, Jorge asks Jaime what color Bobby is.

IT'S MONDAY.

There's a drizzle and it's cold for July. It's nine-fifteen and Bobby's at the fruit market buying an apple. He picks out a Red Delicious. He's short two pennies. "Tomorrow," says Maggie. He nods.

Bobby goes slow now, biting his apple carefully. He doesn't want to bite his tongue again. The woman he calls mother told him to be careful chewing: not to talk and chew or run and chew, things like that. It's still swollen a little and hurts.

There's more traffic today. He goes into the fish market. He walks up and down the aisles. He looks at the mackerel and the salmon and the tuna and the swordfish. He stops and stares at the lobsters. The seafood manager comes by.

"Makes you think," he says to Bobby as Bobby stares at the lobsters. Bobby looks at him.

"They're alive, he says with amazement." The manager smiles. "Not for long, he replies." Bobby frowns.

He goes back out. It's sunny and he covers his eyes. He walks a few blocks and then sits down at a wooden bench at a bus stop. There's no one at the stop. He rubs his legs, kneading the faded jeans, whitened at the knees.

IT'S TUESDAY AND BOBBY'S AT THE CURB ALONG Elmside, waiting for the streetlight. A old black Buick glides by; the pimply guy leans out the window when he sees Bobby. "Hey retard," he calls. Bobby smiles. It's almost a hello.

Bobby walks fast with a weaving falling-down kind of gait. He chews that noisy grape bubble gum, blowing bubbles, looking around, checking on things. He runs his hand through his hair.

"Bobby," she yells. He looks up at her and smiles; "Jessica!" he yells back to her with enthusiasm. She settles back smiling and turns to her sewing. Bobby waves as he turns the corner and out of her sight.

"Where you going, Bobby?" the newspaper delivery guy calls to him as he rounds the corner.

"Nowhere," says Bobby.

The radio forecaster says it's going to be a hot one. The temperature is over eighty and it's only ten in the morning. Bobby wipes the back of his hand over his forehead to dry it. The fruit market is open. Bobby walks in and picks out an apple.

"An apple a day?" asks Maggie as he stands at the counter to pay for it.

Bobby smiles and nods. "An apple and a walk," he says. She looks at his slight figure, body at all angles.

"You okay, Bobby?" she asks. "You look thinner."

"I'm okay," he says insistently. "I'm real okay."

He shines the apple on his t-shirt. He bought a Golden Delicious. The yellow looks nice against the red cotton of his shirt.

He rushes past the fish market. He looks in the dusty windows but can't see much. He doesn't like the smell today. He holds his breath as he hurries away.

Bobby walks up to the old man's club. Jaime is sitting on the worn white bench in front of the club. The club's front door is propped open. Jaime is drinking coffee. Bobby sits down beside him. "Mister Jaime," he says.

Jorge is not there this morning. They chit-chat, Jaime and Bobby, for a couple of minutes, and then Bobby asks, "Where's the old guy?"

Jaime likes that, Bobby calling Jorge the old guy. "He's in the hospital," says Jaime.

IT'S WEDNESDAY AND BOBBY FEELS TIRED AND under the weather. It's raining, not hard but not a drizzle. He carries an old black umbrella, three of its ribs bent. He chews gum from yesterday; he likes

the extra hardness.

He looks for Jessica but her window's closed. The street is crowded with cars, but the sidewalks are almost empty.

Bobby walks slow today. He steps more carefully and has one hand out for balance and to catch himself if he falls.

He buys a McIntosh apple. Maggie's off. He pays the two cents he owes from Monday. The apple is very shiny so he doesn't shine it. He spits his gum into a waste basket. It's too hard to chew.

No one is in front of the men's club. Bobby walks by. He's picking up speed now as his feet get accustomed to the slickness. He chews his apple.

The florist delivery guy sees Bobby and says hello. "Where you going, Bobby?" he asks.

BOBBY STAYS IN BED ALL DAY TODAY, SICK WITH A fever and the sniffles. The woman he calls mother goes to work so he's alone. He doesn't mind. He likes being alone. He sings most of the day, humming really. A cat named Thaddeus lives there too. Sometimes Thaddeus scares him but it's okay today.

IT'S FRIDAY.

Bobby stands in the sunny patch and lifts his face to the warmth. The park clock chimes ten times. There's less traffic on Friday at this time: long weekends, people sick at the end of the week.

He looks for Jessica. She waves to him but doesn't call out. Bobby coughs; his throat is still sore. He just waves.

Bobby walks fast, that hip-hop every third or fourth step. He chews his noisy grape bubble gum. It makes his throat feel better. He runs his slight hand with ridged nails through his thick and wavy hair; he combed it ten times already.

"Where you going, Bobby?" the cop Steckham calls to him as Bobby rounds the corner.

Bobby walks past the fruit market. "No apple today," he mutters to himself. He keeps walking.

Two people on the sidewalk watch Bobby for a while. They look at each other; one raises his eyebrows and rolls his eyes.

Bobby keeps going. He goes into the fish market. He walks up and down the aisles. He looks at the mackerel and the salmon and the tuna and the swordfish. He stops and stares at the lobsters. The seafood manager comes by. "You like looking at those lobsters," he says to Bobby. Bobby nods. The manager smiles and says, "You know those ones are different ones from the last time." Bobby asks him if the lobsters are retards.

Bobby glides so fast and smooth; it's almost as if he's sailing. He walks up to the old man's club. It's still mostly Portuguese. Jaime is sitting on the worn white bench in front of the club. The club's window drapes and the front door are open. Jaime stares straight ahead, almost asleep. Bobby sits down beside him. "Bobby," he says, waking up. Jorge is on the other side of Jaime. Jorge is back from the hospital. They chit-chat, Jaime and Bobby, for a couple of minutes.

"How's the old man feeling?" asks Bobby. Jaime looks over at Jorge: How you feeling? No answer. Jaime says to Bobby, "He's as good as can be expected at his age."

Bobby frowns and then says, "My mother's in the hospital." Jaime nods, not looking at Bobby. "I know, Bobby."

Bobby gets up and goes. After a minute or so, Jorge asks Jaime, "What hospital?"

IT'S VERY BUSY TODAY. IT'S SATURDAY. BOBBY WALKS fast, that jitter, that precarious jumble of limbs that is his walk. He's not chewing that noisy grape bubble gum. He's just walking. He doesn't run his hand through his hair. He keeps his small black comb in his back right pocket. He hasn't used it today.

"Bobby," she yells. He looks up and she's on the sidewalk, beside him. He smiles and flashes a brilliant toothy smile. "Jessica!" he yells. There is a startled something in his faint blue eyes. She steps toward him. "How are you?" she asks him. Bobby smiles, some blush in his cheek: okay, he says. "My mother was wondering about you," she says. He sneaks a caress of her flowing brown hair. Smiling, she pats his cheek. They turn the corner. His white running shoes with the blue racing stripes are worn out on the outer front corner from the way he walks. He pushes off and up as soon as his heel touches. "I'm okay, real okay." They walk side by side for a block. Bobby steals glances at her as they walk together. "Are you still trying to visit her?" she asks. "No," he responds glumly,

"I just walk by. Walking by isn't wrong. I know that much." He's stuttering.

They're at the curb near Elmside, waiting for the streetlight. The black Buick glides by; the pimply guy leans out the window when he sees Bobby, then he sees Jessica and says, "Hey Bobby." Bobby smiles. It's almost a hello. Jessica smiles and looks at the pimply guy. The fruit market is open. Bobby stops and hesitates. "Go in, Bobby. Don't let me stop you," she says gaily. He looks into her wide brown eyes. "You want me to go in with you?" He nods. They walk in together and he picks out an apple.

"Let me guess, an apple?" asks Maggie as he waits at the counter to pay for it. Jessica stands behind him and smiles at Maggie.

Bobby nods. "An apple and a walk," he explains.

Maggie gives him his change and Bobby and Jessica walk out of the store.

He shines the apple on his t-shirt. He bought a Northern Spy. The red looks nice against the brown cotton of his shirt.

"It's your favorite," he half-chirps. Jessica laughs and says he has a good memory.

They walk further down Elmside. The florist delivery guy sees Bobby and says hello, then he asks: "Where you going, Bobby?"

Bobby frowns and then says, "My mother's in the hospital." Jaime nods, not looking at Bobby. "I know, Bobby."

"Nowhere," says Bobby.

The florist guy cackles: "You're always going there," he says.

Bobby and Jessica approach the residence, as it's called. He slows down. Her too. He stops and stares at the third window on the left side of the second floor. The blinds are up and he can see in a bit but no one's at the sill. "It's not your fault, Bobby," says Jessica.

She pats his arm. He's quiet. There's a trace of a tear in his right eye. They're quiet. "It is so," he answers.

IT'S SUNDAY.

Bobby walks his fast, controlled stagger of a walk. He makes people nervous. They give way. He chews that noisy grape bubble gum; the gum snapping in his half-open mouth. He runs his slight hand with ridged nails through his hair.

"Bobby," she yells. He looks up and right at her. He flashes a brilliant toothy smile. "Jessica!" he yells back to her. There is something about his voice. She settles back. Bobby waves as he turns the corner and out of her sight. His white running shoes are worn out. He kinda floats on his toes when he walks.

"Where you going, Bobby?" the cop Steckham calls to him as he rounds the corner.

"Nowhere, officer," says Bobby.

There's not much traffic on Sunday. The fruit market is open and Bobby walks in and picks out an apple.

"Don't you get tired of apples?" asks Maggie as Bobby stands at the narrow counter to pay for it.

He pauses to think. "I never get tired of something that's good," he replies.

She's attending to another customer.

He puts his dime and two pennies change into his right jean pocket and leaves. He shines his big yellow apple on his loose t-shirt; the yellow looks good against the black cotton. He picks up speed as he bounces along the cracked concrete sidewalk, the legs of his jeans swishing as he strides. He avoids the sticky patches of gum on the ground. With his free hand, he pulls out his gum wrapper and plunks the purple mass from his mouth into it and puts that into his t-shirt pocket, over on the left. He bites into the hard surface of the apple as he waits at the corner for the traffic to open up.

The old big Buick slows down as it passes. The thin pimply guy with slicked black hair leans out of the open window. "Hey, retard. Stay back from the curb." The pimply guy smirks.

Bobby reaches for his knife and pulls it out of his back pocket but doesn't open it. He steps back and waits, the unopened knife in his hand. He knows that pimply guy. The streetlights change and a path opens for him. He crosses the street. The shiny car is a long way down the street. It's a narrow beat-up street lined with crusty poor-man's cars.

Bobby walks up to the old man's club. Jaime is sitting on the worn white bench in front. The club's window drapes and the front door are closed. Jaime pulls on his smelly dark-tobacco cigarette. Bobby sits down beside him. Jorge is on the other side of Jaime. Jorge is

mumbling. Jaime and Bobby chit-chat for a couple of minutes. "Do people hate me?" he asks Jaime. Jaime doesn't say anything at first. He's very serious. He turns to Bobby. "Some," he says. "Very few, Bobby. You're a good guy. *I like you.*" They sit quietly and then Bobby gets up and walks away. After a minute or so, Jorge asks Jaime what's wrong with Bobby.

IT'S MONDAY AND BOBBY'S BEEN AT THE DOCTOR'S about thirty minutes. The woman he calls mother told him to go. The doctor pats Bobby on the elbow and asks him, how he feels. Bobby shrugs.

"Do you know what day it is, Bobby?" asks the doctor.

Bobby laughs: "Sure," he says, "It's today."

The doctor smiles back at him. "You're doing real okay," he says.

They walk to the door.

"The nurse will call your stepmother for your next visit, Bobby."

They face each other at the door way. Bobby looks up into the doctor's eyes.

"Have a good day, Bobby," the doctor says.

Bobby exhales and thanks the doctor and says, "It's already a good day."

The doctor nods and squeezes Bobby's thin arm again. He asks: "Can you get back alright, yourself?"

"Sure," says Bobby.

IT'S TODAY.

EVAN PALMER

Lives in Ontario, Canada. His stories have appeared, or are upcoming, in Wings Online, The Paumanok Review, Jack, The Woolly Mammoth, Carve, A Writer's Choice, Alicubi Journal, Stirring, and Melange. He has written an as-yet-unpublished novel, Oaklane Woods, and is currently working on a second long work.

Before the Gravity Stopped

JASON YOUNG

THE LAST GREEN CHOPPER IS DRAGGING IN ANOTHER survivor as I float in silence, Girl at my side. She hasn't spoken to me since I told her about my cousin and how I'd watched him drift into the pull of a giant refrigeration fan outside of Saskatoon. Pieces of Benny, littering the evening sky, coating the clouds blood-red. Leaving me, safe. Me, a survivor.

Drifting sideways over the sand, Girl can't form a word. But her eyes speak volumes; she paints the void with looks. Not looking at me, but not looking away, she cuts her gaze right through me. Between the hanging ribs, the feet dangling loosely beneath.

"When?" she finally asks.

I don't want to talk about Benny anymore. I want to forget him, it, everything. I want to start again.

"Yesterday."

She's crying now. And it's funny, it really is. Ever since gravity stopped I've been accepting it—coping with the change. But as her tears break free, bend the lashes, lift off and swirl around her eyes, I realize how truly bizarre this is. Such a pretty girl, such a pretty sky. We should be parked above the cliffs, counting the pinhole stars, holding each other close. Not wondering whether the last chopper will save us or not.

I steady her; the extension cord I tied between us grows limp. It was the only thing I had time to grab as my feet left the lawn seven days ago. Benny and I were mowing the lawn at my auntie's place before the gravity stopped. As we drifted up over the rooftops, Benny hollered: "Tie it around me—it'll keep us together!"

That was a week ago. The end of the extension cord tied through Girl's belt loop is now frayed where it got sucked into the fan with Benny. I just finished telling her about him; she just started to cry. Probably not for Benny, though. Probably for the ones she knew.

I turn around so she can be alone.

I CATCH A FLOATING CHOCOLATE BAR AND UNWRAP it. Above me, the helicopter retrieves a baby from an airborne crib. Girl has stopped crying; maybe she'll tell me her name now.

The other day, when I managed to grab onto her right foot, she seemed alarmed that a stranger would do something like that. Then I explained it to her, said we'd have a better chance of surviving if we both held on together. I told her my name. She said she was scared, angry, cold. Thirsty. I gave her a sip from the water bottle I found floating in a stack of low clouds.

*Certain things we quite rightly take for granted.
And yet, there's no such thing as a sure thing.*

After she'd wiped her lips dry, she told me about her mother, her father, her sister, her boyfriend. Her car, her job, her tennis awards, her books.

But I didn't get her name.

IT'S NIGHTTIME NOW; WE'RE ALL ALONE. THE CHOPPER took off a couple of hours ago, its belly full of people. People who will live. I wonder where they're being taken. Hopefully somewhere with a roof.

**Such a pretty girl, such a pretty sky.
We should be parked above the cliffs,
counting the pinhole stars, holding each
other close. Not wondering whether the
last chopper will save us or not.**

Girl told me her name—it's Ashley. I caught hold of a floating soda machine (its cord frayed just like ours) and managed to pull a can out for her. She finished off the warm Sprite as though it were her last, sipping it slowly, gratefully.

That was a couple of hours ago. The chopper pulled away just after she finished.

We haven't said too much since.

"Ashley," I say, nudging her awake. "Look!"

It must have something to do with the earth's rotation, causing us to float not just upward but a bit to the side as well. We must have floated over a lake during the night. The air around us has turned to water: tiny, turning circles of not-rain.

My hair is wet and so is Ashley's as she says:

"I don't think we're going to make it."

"We won't drown up here," I say quickly, fanning my arms to show her how much air there still is. "It's just a little damp, that's all. Look—it's gonna help us keep cool!"

Ashley looks down at my arms, sees the moisture coating my sunburned flesh.

"Apollo 13 in frame-by-frame rewind," she says softly. "That's what we're gonna be. Apollo 13 in frame-by-frame rewind."

I grab her arms and yell, "We're not gonna burn up, Ashley! We're not gonna die!"

I think she hears me—maybe she even believes

me. But if we die tomorrow, then I'm a liar twice. Once because I promised Benny he'd be okay, twice because I told Ashley the same. But it's not all that important anyway. Even if the gravity hadn't failed, we still would have died.

Just not together.

As her tears begin floating again, joining the circling

droplets of ground-water, I slowly reach down and untie my end of the cord—putting things back to where they were before the gravity stopped.

“Goodbye, Girl,” I say, “I should never have grabbed on.”

She begins to say something, but by then there's so much water between us.

JASON YOUNG

Is a 21-year-old graphic designer at a newspaper in Saskatoon, Canada. He has been writing fiction for a couple of years.

The Accordion Man

K.S. MOFFAT

Your appreciation for music isn't just about sound.

It's about the emotion behind the sound.

A YEAR AGO TODAY, I FOUND IT AT A YARD SALE IN a cheap trailer park in North Fort Worth behind the old Swift packing plant.

It wasn't a fine black concert accordion, like a Polina, with a dozen sparkling treble voices and lots of pipe organ bass like the ones you might see up on stage with Frankie Yankovic, the Polka King, as he and His Yanks played the Blue Skirt Waltz to a hundred geriatrics lurching into the night under a mirrored ball in a mildewed hall somewhere out on Long Island. But on the other hand, it wasn't a plain-jane Wurlitzer, with tobacco-stained keys and frayed bellows, all the finish worn off and an old tin cup screwed crooked on the front case, most likely played by a blind beggar or disabled vet on a busy street corner.

As accordions go, it wasn't a bad one. Not all beat up. I could tell it was a player. Well used and worn off in all the right places with just the faintest smell of long-gone after shave on the case where a serious man who loved the sound would rest his chin and with his eyes closed, pull the music out into the night. It was more than both. So I paid the man and set the instrument back in its battered case, lined with scraps of crushed velvet that smelled like a hundred stuffy closets and wondered when, or if, the obsession would ever end.

I don't come from a musical family. None of my brothers or sisters or cousins ever played music. Momma sang all right in church, but my father was a source of deep embarrassment to us every Sunday when he

turned the Doxology into something that just made your head hurt. At some point, momma became aware of the musical void surrounding her and began telling the neighbors I was musically inclined because I liked to lie in front of the mahogany Victrola with my head stuck in the speaker and listen to the music. Then she signed me up for guitar lessons. Since I was only ten, I didn't have much say about it.

**The faintest smell of long-gone
aftershave, where he would rest
his chin and with his eyes closed,
pull the music out into the night.**

My lessons were at a music store in downtown Ft. Worth, on Houston Street, next to the court house. It was the summer of 1957 and we lived about three miles west in a flat brick subdivision with all the other hillbillies who funneled out of Kentucky and Tennessee and Arkansas, chasing defense work west down Highway 70 into Texas after World War Two. My dad always worked overtime on Saturdays so the only way I could get to my lessons was by taking the bus.

It dropped me off three blocks south of Kahn's House O'Music, in front of a big granite bank and

that's where I first saw him. I nearly stepped on him when I got off the bus. That's where I first saw the Accordion Man.

I was short, I thought, but he was even shorter. Like someone sawed him in half and set him on a square of wood with roller skates nailed under it. I'd never seen anything like him. He was like some strange creature I discovered in the pages of *National Geographic*. A member of a lost tribe of legless men. I was horrified and fascinated by this grizzled and bewhiskered little man-without-legs who scooted back and forth along a busy downtown sidewalk, playing the prettiest music I'd ever heard.

His legs disappeared just below the zipper of his faded trousers and the pant legs collapsed and folded neatly back to make a cushion against the hard wood of the platform. His stumps slid under a heavy canvas belt, like an old piece of fire hose that was nailed down to each side. On his back, over a grimy soldier jacket and a gray, almost transparent T-shirt hung a faded army pack and on each side, tied to the straps with shoe string and kite string and every-kind-of-string were blue Folgers cans full of bright yellow pencils with powdery pink tips. And across his chest, mostly hiding an old war medal and a few frayed, faded ribbons, was an accordion. An Accordiola.

When a bus pulled up, the Accordion Man would scoot up front where people were getting off and start playing a song. Sometimes he'd sing and sway and make the little platform twitch back and forth in time with the music. He put on a real show. After he played, he'd make his pitch in a high voice.

"Be kind to a vet. Buy a pencil? Everyone needs a pencil. Buy a pencil. Only a nickel. Buy a pencil and be kind to a vet, will ya? Buy a pencil!"

Except he didn't say it like that. He didn't have any teeth that I could see, and *pencil* came out "pinshul." *Vet* sounded like "wet." Be kind to a wet, will ya?

I'd never seen an incomplete person before. No crippled people lived in our neighborhood or went to our church. No legless kids went to my school. Everyone had all their arms and legs. I'd ripped my finger open on a tack the year before and had to get stitches and I knew how much that hurt. I couldn't imagine how much hurt it would take to get your legs cut off.

The Accordion Man and I struck up an odd friendship there on that street corner. Me with my guitar case longer than I was. Him with his accordion and his pencils. After my lesson I had over an hour to wait before the bus home, and not knowing what to do with the time, I went back to the bank and sat on the wide stone steps to watch the Accordion Man and listen to him play.

The songs were old. I recognized a few from the radio shows my momma listened to when she'd sing along. And he played good. Played right along as they say. But most people just ignored him. They just looked past him when they went by. I kept thinking, if he could just stand up so people could see him, then maybe they'd stop and listen because he played so good.

And some people did stop, mostly older women in expensive coats. Some men my father's age, but they never looked him in the eye or shook his hand like the old ladies did. Most people that walked in front of the bank looked at him but they didn't see him. I knew this because I was a kid and it was the same way.

One Saturday he just scooted up to where I was sitting and started playing a song, just playing it to me. When he finished, I didn't know what to do so I clapped and he offered me a pencil. I tried to give him a nickel but he wouldn't take it and I told him it wouldn't be fair. I couldn't take the pencil. He gave his little platform a twitch and winked at me, stuck out a rough hand and I offered a soft one. I guess since he and I were both short we could see each other, so we introduced ourselves and became friends. His name was Tommy.

He said the music was always in him. It just couldn't find a way to get out until a night in 1943 when he heard an accordion playing outside a field hospital in France. They'd taken his legs that morning but he could still feel them down there, under the empty sheets. He was crying for his legs when the music put an arm around his shoulder and led him away like an angel. Ever since that night, he'd never wanted to do much except make the music. Said it kept the angel with him. Kept him happy.

That summer, with Tommy as my angel, we explored the city looking for people who needed his music. A ten-year-old boy and a legless man, easy on the streets and invisible to everyone who couldn't see.

I was a little uneasy, walking around with a crippled man I barely knew. Everything so different from where I lived. But the more I walked with Tommy, the more I saw that my other life, the one lived within the confines of six square blocks, that's what was becoming unreal. Home, church, grocery, school. Church, home, school, grocery. Only so many combinations before it all folded back in on itself like a Möbius strip of boredom and sameness. Out in the world with Tommy, my eyes couldn't be stopped.

But more than tall buildings and long limousines, the jukebox hustle and rattle and snap of the city, I was captured by the discovery of a nation of people I never knew existed outside the pasteurized, flat topped-laced-up-khaki-colored square of my existence. A nation of

people like Tommy. People who'd lost a part of their bodies, lost a part of their hearts or their minds or their dignity. People who'd lost their place in time. People who had little chance of ever being found. It was Tommy's job to look for them.

We went to the jail that sat down the hill from the courthouse and there behind a barbed-wire fence, men in stripped shirts tended a small garden in the hot Texas sun. He played "The Yellow Rose of Texas" and the prisoners began to smile. One pulled a harmonica from his prison pants and began to play along. Others began to sing softly. A giant, a monster of a man with tattooed arms and a crooked face came to the fence and gave me a bright red tomato, warm from the sun, while Tommy played away their troubles and erased their crimes.

And every Saturday we met someone new. Behind the public library, I met a man who lived in a wooden crate with a three legged dog named Snap. In a dead end alley off Seventh Avenue I met Annalise, a beautiful blind girl who lived on the fire escape of a tumbled down building. In the old wooden section of town down by the train station, I met a man without a nose. Nothing but a hole in his face covered loosely with a dirty kerchief. I met a beggar who used a piece of rope for a belt and safety pins for buttons. And I met people asleep on benches and in doorways who didn't wake up when Tommy played for them. He said it didn't matter they were asleep. What mattered was that he played a song just for them.

"Might be all they get ya know, just a song. Maybe all they really need."

When the fall from grace is so stunning and complete and there's nothing left to subtract from your life but life itself, maybe a song was about the only thing you could give a man without hurting him in some small but terrible way.

At first, I thought the music itself transformed the people he played for, like he played magic on that instrument. But as the summer wore on, I began to realize it wasn't the music. It was the player. And what Tommy played was aimed at their souls. He said a man could steal food and beg money if he was hungry. But if a man was hurting in his heart because no one cared about him, well, there's no place he could go to steal that. No place to beg for it either.

On July Fourth weekend we went to a small unkempt park behind the Western Union office and there, I met other men like him. Men who went to war and left pieces of themselves behind, the pieces they left replaced with clumsy imitations. Legs that sounded hollow and looked swollen and pink like my sisters dolls. Feet that looked like the old wooden shoe trees my father put inside his Sunday shoes. Arms that stopped short and ended in

shinny mechanical hooks. Arms and legs that creaked and clicked when they moved. But the men didn't seem to mind. At least they didn't show it.

Tommy played for them too. Old war songs, songs I never heard before. Like the prisoners behind the jail, some of the men sang softly and some just stared off in the distance. Others got very quiet and looked down at the bristly grass as the music swelled and floated out over that weedy little park. He played each of them an angel that led them away, it seemed, to a place they wanted to be.

**As the summer wore on,
I began to realize it wasn't the music.
It was the player.**

I began to wonder about my own music and the effect it had on people who heard it. Momma dragged me all over the neighborhood that summer for uninvited concerts with members of her bridge club.

I hated it. Traipsing up someone's driveways lugging that long case and the little electric amplifier. Momma's friends would greet us with startled looks and when the awkwardness was over, they'd invite us in. Momma would announce in a breathless voice how I'd just learned a new song that I was dying to play for them. I was dying all right, but she never noticed. The startled neighbor would have to move a lamp or a magazine table out of the way so I could plug in the amplifier.

"Sorry, that's okay, I think the cord will reach now. Sorry, thank you."

Then I'd play Steel Guitar Rag which was the only song I knew without messing up. The notes would roar out of the little amp, screaming around the living room, bouncing off slip-covered furniture, crashing into family portraits and banging against wall clocks; blasting dogs and cats out of sleepy dreams so they'd run off and hide behind the couch. My angel was a tortured, electrified monster. Bent on destruction.

Through it all, momma would smile knowingly at her startled friend as if to say, "I know, you wish your child could do this."

Afterward, in the thank-God-it's-over silence, grateful for the absence of my amplified howling, I was offered a sugar cookie and blue Kool-Aid.

"Well! That was certainly nice! How long have you been taking lessons?"

Before I could ever answer, momma would take the floor and I'd drag everything out of the poor woman's

house as quiet as I could, sometimes wishing I could just crawl in the case with that guitar and close the lid forever.

Toward the end of the summer, the week before my birthday, Tommy was gone from his usual spot by the bank. I looked for him after my lesson but he was nowhere to be found. The only evidence that he'd ever been there was a few broken pencils in the gutter by the bus stop. The following Saturday I looked for him again, going to all the places he'd taken me, looking for the people we'd met, hoping they might tell me where he'd gone. But like Tommy, they seemed to have vanished too. Even the old soldier's park was empty. I missed the bus and began to walk toward home, the guitar case banging a familiar sore spot on my knee, tangled up in my thoughts about him and the music.

Thinking and daydreaming like kids do, I paid no attention to where I was going until I heard a siren several blocks away. It was then I noticed I was on Seventh Avenue, standing just in front of the dead end alley where Tommy played for Annalise. And up there on the fire escape in a little patch of light, I saw her. Beautiful sightless eyes looked down and past me. Smiled a little.

"You seen Tommy?"

"Come up. We can talk if you want."

So I climbed the rusted steps to her and in a small piece of August sun, high above the alley, Annalise told me the music was gone.

It happened in front of the bank where I'd first met him. Crushed under the wheels of the same bus that took me out of my world and into his. Maybe he got too close to the curb and rolled off. Maybe someone

in a crowd of people trying to get on hadn't noticed and accidentally pushed him. No one knew. No one had seen him.

"He played so good," she said. "Like an angel. He was, you know. A real one."

Not long after, I quit going to lessons. It was a great disappointment to momma and ended in one of those long discussions at the supper table kids all hate about didn't I appreciate the opportunity that other kids didn't have and she'd talked with my teacher and he said I played better than the other students and what was wrong with me not wanting to play anymore? I tried to tell her it wasn't the guitar or the lessons or anything else she was thinking, but I couldn't. I was still too short and couldn't figure a way to say any of it right. I couldn't figure how to say that I loved the music and maybe it was enough right now just to love it. That I knew the power of music to help and maybe heal just a little and that I wasn't tall enough to hold that power and might never be. That it was enough right now just to know these things.

I TAKE THE ACCORDIOLA OUT OF ITS BEAT-UP CASE and run the scales. Pull a few major chords out long and loud. Hold them out until the sound gets so soft it just disappears.

It has a beautiful voice. High and sweet like a young girl singing in church. The straps are frayed and C-Major wants to stick a little, but other than that, it's a fine instrument. I place it carefully, high up on the fifth shelf, in the center. I climb down, put the rickety ladder away and turn back to look at them, smiling.

A wall of accordions. Row after row. Like a chorus of angels.

K.S. MOFFAT

Grew up in the shadow of a Texas defense plant and as a teenager, gained a measure of notoriety as a porpoise trainer and monkey handler at the Ft. Worth Zoological Park until a vicious encounter with one of his primate charges resulted in its untimely death. Following a string of educational failures, he subsequently moved as far north as citizenship would allow and currently resides in a heavily mortgaged home outside Detroit, where he maintains a healthy distance from monkeys and most people. When not obsessing about middle-age, he practices architecture.

At the Ocean's Edge

LISA NICHOLS

*There's usually no way of knowing any time is
the last time until it's much too late.*

*Full fathom five thy father lies
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
—The Tempest, Act I, Scene 2*

TONIGHT I GO DOWN TO THE SEA, WHERE IT ALL began. Not this sea, true, but there seems an odd sort of symmetry to it, that what began on one shore should end on the other. I'll take my daughters with me, walking between them and holding their hands. From where I sit I can see them: Elen, the faerie child I adopted so long ago, and Aislinn, my baby.

"Push me higher, Elen!" Aislinn giggles, trying to reach the oak limb above her head.

Elen, ever the dutiful big sister, stretches up on her tiptoes, standing at the base of the tallest tree in Cill Dara. "Don't go too high, Aislinn, or I'll have to climb up and get you." Nearly nineteen, Elen is a young woman now. Although she doesn't know it, she's ready to step into my shoes as the ruler of Cill Dara. One of the brownie-folk, short and round and stubborn with dark eyes and dark hair, she has grown into a strong and beautiful woman. I can hear her laugh as she helps Aislinn grab one of the oak's lowest branches.

Aislinn. She looks so much like her father that it hurts to see her at times. She has his golden hair and his azure eyes, set into features that could almost be my own. I've done what I can to prepare her for this night. She knows as much of my tale as I felt she could understand, as much as I could bear to tell her while looking into those eyes. She knows about the Fair Folk, raised here in Cill Dara, in the space just beyond the mortal world. She knows who her father was, and how he died saving Cill Dara. What she doesn't know is that she was my salvation during that wild, grieving time. When Elathan died, I thought about passing on my sealskin to another then and there, surrendering my life as a selkie in exchange for a chance to leave everything behind, to forget. Before I could, I learned that I was carrying Aislinn. Knowing she was with me, part of me and part of my love, gave me the hope, the purpose I needed to continue on. Aislinn is eleven now, a mixture of all the good and bad of her father and me. Most people see only him in her, but I know differently. While Aislinn bears the blood of the sidhe, the

blood of her father, she comes from a long line of selkies as well, and the sea calls to her as it always did to me. In a way, that makes this so much easier.

"Momma!" Aislinn cries from her perch in the tree. "Look! Look at me! I did it!" "I see," I smile, giving a wink to Elen, who stands beneath the tree, ready to catch Aislinn if she falls. They're so different from each other, and yet both so much a part of me. I'm wondering if I'll truly be able to leave them tonight. The sun is low in the sky. It's time for us to go.

"I MET YOUR FATHER HERE, AISLINN. DID I TELL YOU that story?" My eyes go to the blue of the water as we reach the shore, as they always have, drawn there by

While Aislinn bears the blood of the sidhe, the blood of her father, she comes from a long line of selkies as well.

instinct. An ordinary beach in the mortal world, on the shore of the Pacific Ocean, it is empty except for Aislinn, Elen and me. Nearly sunset. Almost time.

"Yes, momma. You said he was like an angel." Unlike most children, Aislinn never seems to get tired of my stories. Not the ones about her father, at least. Skipping at my side her feet toss up little puffs of sand, forming a pattern like the tracings of feathers wherever she passes.

Elen chuckles and chimes in, "I thought he was too, the first time I saw him. He seemed so tall and beautiful, I thought Cill Dara was heaven, and he was there to greet me. In fact, I think I asked him that. He smiled and said that Cill Dara was the closest he'd ever been to heaven and that he was very happy to welcome me there."

Aislinn grins up at Elen, each of them on either side of me, as I wished. "But he didn't have his wings back when you met him, right?"

I close my eyes and listen to these two, our daughters. Elen's always made such a good big sister. I know I can leave Aislinn and Cill Dara in her hands. I hear her reply, "Well no, he didn't... but he still looked like an angel, even without his wings."

"Why did he ever lose them?" Aislinn asks. She knows the answer, but asks anyway.

I can feel Elen glancing at me, as if waiting for me to answer. When I don't, she sighs, "Well... once he and Momma were very upset with each other, and he went away for a while, on a quest. While he was gone, he started to believe that Momma didn't love him anymore, and his wings went away."

Breathless, Aislinn nods, "And how did he get them back?" Her favorite part of the story.

My eyes remain on the darkening water, listening to the girls, but focusing my thoughts on what I came here to do. I can hear a smile in Elen's voice as she answers, "When he came back from his quest, he realized that Momma had never stopped loving him, and when they made their oaths to each other, his wings came back."

My eyes lift to follow the path of a gull, winging its way over the mythical ninth wave, the one Elathan always seemed to be seeking. I think back to that night, letting the memory of it, the awe and the wonder and the pure blinding joy, warm me for the last time.

Aislinn claps her hands, as she always does, "And then he looked like the stained glass window at St. Brigid's again!"

How many hours did I spend praying beneath that stained glass window after he was gone? Past and present almost seem to blur slowly, like thick oil paints swirling together. The weight of memory presses down on me, making it hard to breathe. To protect our home from an invasion of the Fomhiore, dark creatures older than the Fair Folk themselves, Elathan led a small band of warriors down into the abyss that held the gate to the Sunless Sea, where the Fomhiore had been imprisoned for millennia. I waited with my own small company in Cill Dara, ready to protect our home from a surprise attack. I knew the battle had ended when Elathan appeared to me in a vision. I stood still and silent as my oathbound love spoke to me in a voice only I could hear. Activity bustled around me, but I saw only him. Sad-eyed and distant, he told me the sacrifice he had made. The gateway was closed, locked from the far side and resealed with my love's blood. I felt the link between us fray and then snap not long afterward, and with it went the last of my hope that he still lived. Elathan was gone.

Surrounded by life, by the present, my attention is drawn back to it: my daughters on either side, the rich smell of the sea surrounding us all. In the deepening twilight, a seal barks from the shadows, a sharp sound in the soft evening. The sun slips below the horizon. I look over at Elen and say quietly, "Remember what you promised me." No matter what happens, once everything is over, she is to take Aislinn immediately back to Cill Dara, with no looking back. Elen nods at me, a short

sharp motion of discontent. She looks afraid. Aislinn knows something important is going to happen tonight, but not what. She looks excited.

The darkening sky is like burnt orange and spilt wine, purple and sienna melting into wonder at the edge of my eyes. The sea smells so sharp, so pure. One last breath of it, and then it is time.

I release their hands, and kneel in the sand in front of Aislinn. My baby. "Aislinn, love. You've always known you were special. And I've always told you one day I would give you what was mine, what my mother gave to me." Aislinn nods, her eyes shining. I rest my hands on her shoulders. Now comes the hard part. "But love, this gift comes at a price. You remember what I told you about us: as we grow older, we forget, and eventually we have to leave the ones we love behind..." I think, *How can I stay when I won't remember you anymore?* "...and the ones we leave behind have to move on." She nods again, a trace of worry in her blue eyes now. So like his. I take a deep breath and move my hands to my sealskin, unfastening it.

Aislinn's eyes go wide, "Momma, no!" I look to Elen, my hands starting to shake. Rock that she is, she nods, and moves to stand behind Aislinn, her hands resting where mine just were. "Aislinn." How is it that my voice sounds so calm? "It's time for me. I love you. I will always love you, but the longer I stay, the more harm I do to this sealskin. There are some who say I've stayed too long as it is. One way or the other, it's time for me to go. Please... let me go knowing that my daughter is carrying on the tradition?" I sound calm, but I feel the tears threatening to fall. I don't want to frighten her any worse, so I keep them back. Instead, my hands extend, holding my sealskin, my faerie soul. Offering it. "Aislinn, please. Take it."

She reaches up. Our hands meet, then separate. I hear myself cry out. Gods, why did no one tell me it would feel this way? This burning like cold iron. Letting go. I'm letting it all go. I want to tell them that, but I cannot form the words. The burning changes. I see Aislinn change. The sky itself changes, colors washed out and fading, the sharp, dreamlike smell of the sea fading to the mortal, mundane odor of dying kelp and fish. I see Elen pull Aislinn away as if in slow motion. Aislinn is crying, they both are crying. Then I see the sand coming up to meet me. Burned clean. I am burned clean. I dream for a while.

IT'S DARK. THE SAND IS COLD. HOW LONG HAVE I been out here? I sit up and look around. Nothing looks familiar. Nothing feels familiar, either. How did I get here? For a long, long moment, I sit and listen to the

surf crashing, and realize that I can recall nothing at all. Fear rises up, threatening to overtake me. "Take it easy," I hear myself say, followed by laughter bubbling up, edged with hysteria. I'm talking to myself, and I don't even know who I am.

A man's soft voice sounds behind me. "I thought I would find you here." I stumble to my feet and turn, trying to see owner of that voice. All I can see is a tall shadow.

"Do I know you?" I ask cautiously.

With a soft, lingering laugh, the shadow nods. "You did once." He pauses. "You do not remember me, do you? You might not. It has been a while."

Fear threatens again. The beach is empty except for the two of us. Alone and confused, I wonder if I can trust him, this shadowy figure who claims to know me. "I don't remember anything," I confess. "You know me? Honestly?" Perhaps he will be honest. There seems little else for me to do but trust, for now.

The answering voice is gentle. "I do know you. Perhaps in time things will come back to you. Perhaps not, but either way..." He pauses, sounding somehow sad when he asks, "You do not remember anything at all?"

For a moment, I get a glimpse of golden hair in the starlight and I feel an impending memory. Almost, almost... Then the epiphany falls flat, leaving nothing. I sigh and shake my head. "No... not really."

"In time," he repeats. "There is always time, it is the one thing we can never run out of." He leans over, giving me a brief glimpse of pale skin and bright eyes, before he scoops something up from the sand. "I think you dropped this." He extends it to me, the shape hidden in the shadow of his hand. Unthinking, I reach for it. My hand closes over a ring of white gold, and I blink as the world doubles. I feel the magic washing over me, seeping into my skin. The sea smells sharp again, the colors brilliant in my eyes, dazzling me and blinding me with memory. I remember it all. And then I look at him again.

Wings. White and silver traced, sweeping down about him.

Oh God, I see wings. I see *wings*. His hand remains extended. "Come with me, Joanna. Please." So many years and I still can feel that voice. How could I ever have forgotten? "Trust me." How could I not? This might be dream, I don't know for certain. It doesn't matter. It feels real though, as I take Elathan's pale hand, smiling through tears. Quietly I answer, "Always."

AISLINN PLEADED WITH ELEN ALL THE WAY BACK TO Cill Dara. "Elen, we have to go back! I have to make sure Momma's okay!"

Elen replied with a tired, troubled sigh, "I swore to her, Aislinn. We can't go back."

As they took the blurring step through the stained glass window, stepping from the mortal world to the one just beside it, Aislinn was still protesting, "But what if she tries to go swimming? She's used to... being able to swim better than she can now. We have to watch her..." Elen shook her head wearily. Like it or not, she had made a promise, and she was determined to stick to it. Elen took Aislinn to her room, and as she turned to go she stopped in the doorway, her voice very sad, "I promised, Aislinn. It was the last thing she asked of me."

For a long time, or what seemed like it, Aislinn lay still in the darkness. The room should have been comforting,

**"You do not remember me,
do you? You might not.
It has been a while."**

familiar, but she kept hearing a voice calling to her. Everywhere she looked, white wings framed her vision, just beyond her line of sight. Tears stung at her eyes, her father had wings like that. Wings she had never seen, never been able to touch so much as a feather. "I didn't promise anything," she mouthed to herself. She sat up, slipped out of the room and out of Cill Dara.

Aislinn ran all the way back to the beach, panting as she stumbled onto the sand once again. She knew, she remembered, that often selkies who'd given up their skins had to be watched, lest they overestimate their non-magical abilities in the water and drown. The beach was empty. Aislinn soon found the place where her mother had fallen to the sand, the scuffs and indentation there. Leading away from it, toward the water, were a single pair of footprints, slender and feminine, with a hint of webbing to the toes.

"Oh no, Momma, no," Aislinn prayed, already slipping her sealskin over her shoulders as she followed the lone footsteps to the water. She reached the water's edge, where the prints disappeared into the sea. Bright eyes scanning the waters for any disturbance, she suddenly came up short, her eyes going wide. There, in the foam near the shore a silver-white guard feather floated, its brightness shimmering against the darkened water. Aislinn leaned down and pulled it from the water, rolling the stem between her fingers as she sat down at the water's edge. She looked at it for a long time, drifting.

Elen found her there, hours later, nearly at dawn. Aislinn's eyes were on the sea, watching the light change

from darkness to day, that single feather cradled in her hands in her lap. Elen touched the girl's shoulder, struck by how seamless a mixture she was of both her parents. She didn't look up at all, nor did she respond. "Aislinn?" Elen asked quietly.

The girl still didn't move, save to shift her eyes from sea to feather and back again. In a distant dreaming

voice she answered the unspoken question: "They're together now."

*"The soul takes flight to the world that is invisible.
But there arriving she is sure of bliss, and forever
dwells in paradise."*

—Socrates

LISA NICHOLS

Lives with her cat in largely landlocked Michigan—at least she's never seen a seal there. When she's not writing, she works for an accounting software company. A long time fan of role-playing games, she has written a book for Dream Pod 9 due out in February 2001.

From a Whisper to a Roar

RUPERT GOODWINS

*Loneliness is a condition that's hard to understand
unless you're in it. So is being human.*

IT WAS GETTING HARDER, AS THE NIGHTS LENGTHENED and the air cooled, to hold in mind things still to do. October slowed and settled; the engine of the seasons ran down; the coming winter the absence of autumn as autumn had been the absence of summer. Spring was distant as the start of time, hopeless to imagine. I sat alone in the broken zoo at Regent's Park, London around me an empty cinema, my memories too weak to light its screen.

4 p.m., 5 p.m.... evening. I waited as usual for the plane, and there it was in the dark blue of the southern sky, distant lights, distant drone, slipping down its memory of the glide path to Heathrow. The great trees on the edge of the park had long shed their leaves; the automatic xenon of the aircraft's strobes sparking through empty branches on the way to earth. A clear night, I thought as I stared into the sky at the early stars left in the plane's wake. Frost later. Cold enough now. I stuck my hands in my jacket pockets, asked it for just a little more warmth up to my face. I hate a cold nose.

I walked down toward Baker Street and the hotel, wondering how alone I wanted to be. A quick check: a couple of hundred people within half an hour. Most on do not disturb, of course. A small group in Marylebone with the welcome mat out, but that was Sandra's lot. I'd rather go for a swim in raw sewage. They were probably trying to raise ghosts through television again, sitting around in a fug of dull, drugged bonhomie telling each

other how special they were. No.

Further out, some friends. Some asleep, some working, but... no, no reason to make the journey. I would have to do a tour soon, I supposed, but there were weeks left yet. And if I didn't, I didn't.

And then a voice, warm as a West Country sun. "Roland? Orrrrrrlando? You around, or is that just your machine down there in Babylon?"

"Sally?" Sally. Out in Dagenham, the old football ground. No more information. But Sally was data enough. "Sally!"

I walked down toward Baker Street and the hotel, wondering how alone I wanted to be. A quick check: a couple of hundred people within half an hour.

"That's right. Hello, stranger. Didn't expect to see you, but there's a nice surprise."

"You're really here! When did you get back? What are you doing? Are you staying?"

There was a pause, and for a second or two I was alone again in the park, in the night. Which was, I found, more alone than I wanted to be, this evening.

“If you want to know more, you’ll just have to come and visit. If you’re free this evening. Don’t want to mess up your social life.”

“But what are you doing back here? I thought I’d seen the last of you.”

“You never listen, do you?”

“Sorr...”

“Never listening, always apologizing. Coming? I haven’t got all night!”

Dagenham was a long way away. Wouldn’t make it before tomorrow. I wanted to see her... of course I wanted to see her.

She knew me. “You could drive out,” she said. “Wouldn’t take you more than half an hour. Go on, go and get a car and call me when you’re on your way. OK?”

And that was that.

A car wasn’t a problem. The roads behind Baker Street tube were full of them, carefully parked up, clustered around the dispatch point. Many of them were full of stuff. Relics. Notes. Photographs. Some had their windscreens painted in ornate scripts, letters glowing pale blue or green or, the horror, swirling, moving, day-glo rainbows. “From this point on July 5th, 2120, the family Graham slipped the surly bonds and joined the next life. We give thanks for this release, and we will see you among the stars.” Not me, chums. Not you and your charming children, grinning at me from behind the glass. You’re welcome to it. If I ever do join up, I’m taking my taste filters with me.

It took me ten minutes to find something suitable: a black Ford Fusion Bhopal, on the edge of the parking zone, clean and empty and not more than five years abandoned. I touched the door, said yes, I was prepared to register my ownership, waived my protection rights, agreed to recompense the last owner should they return. *Ego te absolve, ego te absolve* of your sins of insurance and possession. The car opened, I sat inside it, and we slipped away.

I’d forgotten how comfortable a car could be. It was a good model, this one; I turned out the windows and ran through the environmental. Whoever the owner had been, he—no doubt of his gender—was no relative of the Grahams. There was no hint of his name, no personals, but the way he’d casually left his presets open to browsing... he was top dog, and he knew it. Smug, yes, but enthrallingly so.

The journey took close to an hour. I didn’t know what was going on outside, but from the pauses, turns and occasional bursts of speed I doubted I wanted to get involved. And I was having a great time: I sat in the stalls of the Al’Dharbi opera watching “The Rape

of New York;” I replayed the world finals of the last Scent Chess league from fifty years ago; I went flying over Berlin during the Volksschuld, and then during the last days of the second great war of the 20th. All those people.

And, finally, I got to the Park. The car apologized for not getting closer to the football ground, but the feeder road was overgrown. I checked: outside seemed safe enough, but I didn’t know the area, not these days. I turned the windows back on, but I was under a canopy of trees, dark sky filtering through black pines, a star or two distant above.

“Sally?”

Silence. Nothing. Oh, come on.

“Thanks for telling me you were on your way, Mr. Reliable. No, don’t bother saying sorry. I’ll take it as read.”

“I... well, I’m here now. And it was a lovely drive, thanks.”

“Yeah. Stay where you are, we’ll come and get you. Five minutes.”

And there she was, and a kiss on the cheek, that childhood touch of summer sun again, enough to lift a frozen season of nights.

We walked away from the car, years unwinding with each step. I had forgotten how small she was, how she smelled, how her eyes brought that serious face alive. She was in her winter suit, turned right down, the faintest purple glow outlining her shape against the darkness of the woods. “Not like you to be so... unflamboyant,” I said.

“Doesn’t pay to advertise around here. It’s not a bad place, but you learn to keep yourself to yourself.” She looked up at me and smiled. “Same everywhere, I suppose. You’re good enough at it.”

“Why are you here? Why didn’t you say hello before?”

“I’ll show you when we get in. We’re about there anyway, I’m afraid you’ll have to register to get in.”

“Doesn’t bother me. I did it for the car. Nobody plays those games these days.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I wouldn’t be so sure, you know. You’re OK here, still. But there’s always more going on than we’d like to think. Ah, here we are.”

We’d reached a concrete wall in the forest, and a smooth metal door. I touched it, assented, stood back as Sally did the same. She pushed, and it swung open.

“Come in.”

We were in a bright metal room. “Two seconds,” said Sally, touching the clasp of her suit so it fell open. And there she was, soft in her microchain tunic, soft and glittering and a thousand reasons for being there all at

once. “Flamboyant enough?”

“I hope you didn’t get dressed up just for me,” I said, hoping nothing of the sort.

“Silly,” she said.

I unbuckled, a bit ashamed of my charcoal gray sloppy. She angled one brushstroke eyebrow, and we laughed. Easy as that.

And then the far end of the room opened as the building decided we were probably OK, all in all, and we walked through into the old stadium.

Which was a silent land of monsters. In the center, arcing into the sky, a metal pylon with spreading webs of wires, around and underneath it huge and unfamiliar machines. I couldn’t see a roof; the sky above was still dark but the air down here was warm and the light was morning.

“Sally! This is... I don’t know what it is. All your own work?”

“Not really, there’s someone over in old L.A. and a group of weirdniks across Asia. You up for a walk through the grounds, or do you want to eat, or what?”

I thought for a second, and rediscovered some lost appetites. But I knew a private viewing when I saw one.

“Show me this lot. It’s been a quiet week for London’s cultural life.”

“Nothing to write about, huh?”

We wandered into the stadium, through severely geometric green and purple bushes at chest height, along a sparkling path that crunched underfoot. “Safety glass,” she said. “We found tons of it out in Docklands, near the New City. Must’ve been there for years, all fallen out of the towers and heaped on the ground. You can’t get near some of them for drifts of the stuff and nothing grows through it, of course. Shame to waste it.”

I recognized some of the great metal boxes that rose out of the vegetation. “Menhirs?” I asked

“You’re the only one...” she said, deadpan. “Er, well, sort of menhirs. Standing stones, I suppose. Not deliberate, but I liked it when it happened. I don’t think it’s deliberate. Whatever. Oh, this is our newest piece. Freshly arrived.”

We stood in front of a golden cone, twenty feet tall, a foot wide at the top and thirty at the base. Convoluted slots, a finger wide, coiling and twisting, Mayan, covered the sides.

“That’s the last of the comsats. Got it out of orbit last week.”

“What’s it like up there? I didn’t know you could still go...”

“You can’t. Well, you probably can, but that’s serious work. But you can ask the belt, and if it’s in a good mood it

will deliver. This turned up in the garden, together with a note saying not to worry about the propellants.”

“I thought all the big stuff had gone.”

“Nearly all of them, used up when the belt got going. But if you go looking, you find all sorts up there. I don’t know what the belt’s thinking, but it seems to like history as much as we do. It even has a sense of humor. It knows that there’s not a molecule of propellant left in this, and it knows we know.”

“Very dry.”

“Very.”

Silence. In the distance, an electrical hum started, grew louder, cut out.

“What’s that?” I asked

“When the city goes dark, you build a bonfire on the beach”, Sally said. “And we’re dark, now. Everything’s gone.”

“Don’t know. Something fixing itself.”

We walked on through the formal garden, meandering past television transmitters, optical transceiver racks, network meshes. A gallery of a lost age.

“Is that it?” I asked. “The British Museum of the Empire of Technology?”

“Would I be that literal?” she asked. “There’s no point in that. Why don’t you ask it?”

So I did. A beacon, it said. Thanks for asking.

“When the city goes dark, you build a bonfire on the beach”, Sally said. “And we’re dark, now. Everything’s gone. You want to know something, you think it. Tiny signals. The belt hears and answers. Tells you where you are, who’s nearby, who’s far away, sends your thoughts, sends theirs back. We’re all reverting to apehood... no, beyond that. Sea creatures. Naked. Beyond tools.”

“Those who are left...” I said. “People like us. We’re not naked. I’m not ready to take off my clothes and leap back into the sea.”

“You and me, we’re the last. How many of us are there? Go on, ask.” She stared up at the tower in the centre of the stadium.

I asked. Three million, said the belt. Three million, down from five last year. Come on in, the water’s lovely. “Not many.” I said. “But I’m not going anytime soon. I like it here.”

Sally looked back at me. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Me too. But it’s getting very lonely. Look, come over here. This is my favorite installation. It was the first. I found it, and it gave me the idea for all this.”

We walked over to an anonymous piece of racking. Hundred years old? Something like that. Mostly electronic. Scientific, I guessed.

"It's part of Serendip NG, dear," she said. "The last serious attempt to find signals from space. Ran for twenty years all over the planet, with outriders in solar orbit." She reached out and touched the case. "This listened to the cosmos for two decades. We mapped the lot. Heard nothing. Twenty anomalies outstanding when we stopped bothering, but nothing you could do anything with."

"So there really is nobody out there?" I hadn't thought about that for years.

"How can we tell? We always thought civilization is radio. Once you learn how, you build transmitters and announce your presence to the listening hoards whether you want to or not. But look around you."

"Plenty of transmitters here. I've got one in my earring, one on my belt. There must have been thirty on that car I got here."

"Nothing impolite, though. We had a hundred years of television, radar, shouting our heads off. Now we know better. We whisper at each other, tiny clouds of radio just enough to get to their destinations and no further. All the

big stuff's turned off, the frequencies dead. Beyond the belt, you'd never know anyone was home."

"And you're going to light the bonfire again?"

"That I am. All this stuff... just enough to recreate the noise of a bustling, shouting, mid-tech planet in the prime of life."

"What does the belt think of this?"

"It doesn't seem to mind. But I wonder what it knows; it's evasive if I ask. Oh, enough of the bloody belt. I'm having a grand opening next week, with a ceremonial throwing of the switch and quite possibly a ceremonial explosion of misconfigured equipment shortly afterward. Be nice if you could stay. Could use the publicity, and a firefighter."

It would be good, at that. "I'm hungry now," I said. "It's been a journey and a half, and noble, futile gestures always make me puckish."

She laughed. "As per usual. Come on, let me show you the Head of Broadcasting's office."

We walked off, under the spreading cables of the aerial, and back into the night at the edge.

And distant minds swept past, sifting space, finding noise, moving on.

RUPERT GOODWINS

Writes about computers by day and behaves oddly at night. He lives in London and is a frequent contributor to InterText.

The report of my death is an exaggeration.—Mark Twain