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"Mahogany"
by ALAN SAN JUAN

NEW STORIES BY

CERI JORDAN
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Savannah

CERI JORDAN

Life is precious—especially when you realize you haven't even begun to understand it.

THE AFRICAN SAVANNAH, TINDER IN THE AFTERmath of the dry season. The watering hole, churned and muddy from pre-dawn visitors, who had also left their intermingled spoor all across the painstakingly tended lawns, contemptuous. Meri and I, taking tea on the terrace under the shade of her genetically altered palms, all awkwardness and shy exasperation.

Nine days to the end of the world.

Sighing, I drained my cup and leaned back in the cane chair to study her face. She was tanned now, of course, the lined leathery tan of the nomad, pale sun-dazzled eyes perpetually squinting. A little older, no wiser, and just as beautiful.

"Ghada," she said gently, smiling at me across the tea table, "you must have known I wouldn't go back with you."

I shrugged. In deference to the heat, I'd abandoned my normal unisex company overalls for a cotton dress and sandals, and I felt uncomfortable in them. Vulnerable.

Out beyond the low brushwood hedges, no more than bare twigs in this season and chewed raw by thirsty antelope, a pair of giraffes loped past, sparing the house and its bare stony grounds brief curious glances.

"You should get a proper fence," I said to break the silence.

Meri shrugged, undeceived. "They only injure themselves on it. They're not used to obstructions. Going 'round something just never occurs to them." She began fanning herself lazily with the Bubble brochure I had brought her. "Better just to let them have their way. It's their country, after all."

"And yours."

She smiled. "For a while."

Meri had come here just after the Fuel Wars, raw-nerved and perpetually tearful from years of nursing napalmed teenagers in military clinics, simply for a rest. And she'd never come home.

Things hadn't been right between us anyway. Nothing spectacular, even definable; just the slow listless drift that sets in when the first flush of passion dies and you discover your irreconcilable differences are all still there. I hadn't really expected her to come back to Saudi Arabia, to the medical service, or to me.

But then I hadn't expected her to build an estate in the middle of East Africa and live by painting sunsets for tourists, either.

"Look. Meri." I caught her gaze, held it. "You've seen the evidence. A couple of weeks, a month at most, and everything outside the Bubbles will be dead. I know you love it here. You appreciate your freedom. And I know you don't want to spend years cooped up in a glorified greenhouse with me—"

She smothered a weak laugh and looked up at the overhanging palms, vivid lime green in the peculiar afternoon light.

"But if you stay in the open, you're going to die."

I swallowed to ease my raw throat, wishing I'd left myself some tea, too embarrassed to pour more. Now that I'd said it, it didn't seem urgent, important, any more. As if just saying the words had made it better.

Or as if I'd at least done my duty.

The palms shivered apprehensively in a momentary flicker of wind. Meri slapped the brochure down on the table, and sat up, smoothing the front of her dress in an absent fashion. It reminded me of long afternoons in Tamrah, half-asleep on the big cool bed, listening to piped muzak from the open market and the thin mournful cries of children playing war games in the adjacent yards.

"Look. Meri." I caught her gaze, held it. "You've seen the evidence. A couple of weeks, a month at most, and everything outside the Bubbles will be dead.

"Possibly." she conceded. "But possibly not. Come on. I have things to show you."

On the other side of the house, bolted to a wall peeling scabs of paint in the sun, she'd set up a miniature atmospheric monitoring station. Thrown together from government surplus and contamination monitors abandoned by unnamed feuding militias back when such things abruptly ceased to matter, it was a poor excuse for a scientific project, all improvisation and rust. I crouched to watch as she coaxed the monitors back into intermittent life.

"The thing is—"

The dials jerked and danced, stabilized. Sparks exploded from the solar panels on the veranda roof, and I squinted at the bone-dry turf where they'd fallen, waiting for potential a brush fire that, mercifully, never started.

"I don't think the official figures are accurate."

I bit back laughter. "And yours are? This thing is more accurate than government monitoring stations all over the world? Every scientist on the planet says the percent-

age of atmospheric oxygen is decreasing to a lethal level, but you disagree, and therefore—"

Meri raised tired, angry eyes to mine. "Not every scientist."

"Every competent scientist, then."

"That's nowhere near correct, Ghada, and you know it."

I leaned back on the wooden railing fencing the balcony, and sighed. "All right. There is disagreement, but the general consensus is we will all be far safer inside—"

Meri snorted. "And when it's time to come out? What then?"

"I don't understand."

"You're going to be breathing doctored air. Higher oxygen levels, lower pressure. Anyone born in those domes will find it hard work breathing real air. Perhaps impossible. And if you're in there a decade, two decades?" She shrugged expansively, reprimanding a thoughtless student. "Maybe no one will ever come out."

The heat made my head ache, and I was too tired to argue.

"So what is it, Meri?" I asked her, trying to keep the exasperation out of my voice, only managing to sound petulant and childish. "You don't want to spend any more time with nasty old human beings? Feel safer in your own company? Or is it that… I mean, do you *want* to die?"

She glanced up suddenly, past me, hissed: "Hush. Turn 'round very slowly, or you'll frighten them."

Shifting my weight gradually on the creaking floorboards, I turned to look out across the lawns.

There were three of them, pale ethereal shapes: two upright, watching the other rolling among the grass, worming its shoulders into the turf like a boar at a mudhole. I wondered whether they found its behavior amusing or embarrassing, but their featureless humanoid torsos gave no clue.

I thought at first they were composed of flame, cold flame, white and sterile, but that wasn't right. That wasn't right at all. More like heat haze made solid. There, but not quite.

In some indefinable way, they reminded me of Meri.

"What the hell…?"

"They appeared once the oxygen level had started going down. The locals think they're ghosts, or demons, but who's to say?" Meri moved slowly past me, lifting her arms in a broad gesture, like a conductor calling the orchestra to readiness for the first note. "Whatever they are, they're beautiful."

The upright flame-creatures lifted their arms in perfect mimicry, and Meri laughed in childish delight.

"No." she said. "I don't want to die. I'm working on adapting a rebreather to gather additional oxygen from the air. And the house is sealed. I'll be all right."

Shivering into thin angular columns, the three creatures lifted slowly off the turf and began to ascend, swirling like luminous smoke, blending with the heat haze. Shielding my eyes, I followed them as high as I could, until the glare of the sun swallowed them completely.

"And I want to find out what these are. It's important. To me, anyway."

"I know," I lied. "I… really should go. I need to be back before dark, the roads…"

Inside the house, as I collected my sunhat and long gloves from among the trophies and cheap forged native artifacts, Meri touched my arm lightly, tenderly, looking at me as if for the first time. Her eyes were hollow and perfectly empty, drinking me in, and I suppressed a shudder at her mechanical come-to-bed smile. "Ghada, love… One last time?"

I shook my head. "I think… we're better leaving things as they are. Aren't we?"

She bowed her head.

I drove for over twenty miles, to be certain that she couldn't see me somehow across the empty plains and understand, before stopping the jeep and stumbling out into its limited shade to weep.

Blind to everything except my sense of loss, I'd pulled up perhaps a thousand yards from a deserted settlement, a cluster of whitewashed buildings baking in the afternoon sun. When the tears had passed, weak on shaky legs and embarrassed even out here alone, unready to face the few remaining hotel staff in this state, I left the jeep and strolled over to explore.

The town was three or four centuries old, and hadn't changed much since the first misguided Europeans traipsed in to claim it in the name of civilization. The clock tower in the central square, delicately carved in marble, was crumbling, the hands of the clock rusting steadily away, time destroying time. But the alleys of beaten earth were bare and clean still, and wandering about, lifting the sand-scoured shutters or curtains to stare into vacant dust-filled rooms, I half-expected to discover a gaggle of Victorian colonists 'round any corner.

Eventually I came across the courthouse, surrounded by ominous anthills, one wall neatly excised by energy beams, leaving a high open-fronted space exposed to the afternoon sun. And inside, the bodies.

There must have been at least a hundred dead, though jumbled together in the shadow of the courthouse roof, it was impossible to tell. All bones now, each skeleton still immaculately dressed in faded work clothes, corduroys and pop star T-shirts splashed with dried blood. Each skull bearing the mute testimony of a neat round bullet hole. Adults, children. Babies, bleached skulls shattered into fragments.

The Fuel Wars had cast their shadow here as well.

Backing off slowly, cautious, thinking of plague and booby-traps, I wondered if Meri knew. Surely not. She would have buried them; sorted the bones in her respectful, obsessive fashion and scraped out dozens of neat graves in the thick red earth. Driven here every day to water the flowers. Whatever else you said about Meri, she respected death.

I presume that was why the ghosts were appearing to her.

Trudging back toward the jeep, I looked back only once. In the slanting light of late afternoon, the flame-creatures were dancing nebulous obituaries over the bones, shifting hues in a mad outburst of psychedelia. I wondered if they resented my presence, or celebrated it.

As with Meri, I could no longer tell.

The sun was low on the endless horizon now, and the breeze was cool. A few antelope straggled past at a safe distance; others rose awkwardly from the dry grass to join the procession. I shuddered and checked the oxygen mask in the back of the jeep. Three tanks. Several weeks.

Well. I wasn't ready to go back to Meri, not yet. Maybe not ever. And I had no intention of staying here with the dead.

But the fuel tank was full, and the solar panels would kick in when it failed, and I had the best part of a month to possess the world that mankind was turning its back upon, perhaps forever.

Revving the engine, I turned the jeep east and headed off into the gathering night.

CERI JORDAN

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Mahogany

ALAN SAN JUAN

Sometimes the most important help is the kind we don't even know we need.

I FIRST SAW THE MAN AS A SWIRL OF DUST IN THE distance. It was the third year of Famine in my sun-drenched speck of a village, and my thin, malnourished face, grown prematurely old with hunger, lit up at the prospect of the coming of a visitor. News from the sprinkling of other villages that ringed the long-abandoned derelict city of Sydney had dried up as quickly as the village crops that now lay despondently under the hot sun. It was a time of quiet dying, both for Man and for those creatures and plants that were under his sway.

The man noticed me by the side of the road, and veered sharply to stand silently over this gaunt girl-child. Crouching swiftly, he offered me a strip of dried fruit, and as I tore hungrily into the fruit, removed the wide-brimmed hat that had covered his face in shadows. Dark eyes peered out of surfaces like polished mahogany, and the stranger's hands reached out from within the dark cloak that enfolded him to grasp me firmly by the shoulders.

The man smiled, and with that quickly took my hand in his, and together we strolled casually towards the waiting village. From afar, I could barely make out the inhabitants as they stood in disordered ranks to greet the arrival of this newcomer, this foreigner from some distant land. I was jealous of losing him. He was my find and they had no right to take him away, but he smiled at me again as if he understood.

Dark eyes peered out of surfaces like polished mahogany, and the stranger's hands reached out from within the dark cloak.

His smile withered as we passed by the meager plot of land that held the village's crop plants, whose desiccated bodies were strewn over the hard-packed earth, promising certain death for everyone in the starving village. The stranger sat on his heels and gazed solemnly around him, and then with surprising nonchalance plucked some shriveled leaves from a nearby toppled corn plant and proceeded to devour them with barely concealed gusto.

"There is nothing left to work with," he said to me after chewing awhile. Pulling me close he whispered, *"Jangan*

kuatir, little one, there is nothing to be worried about. But be sure to plant the seed with the lurid red stripes away from the village, where it cannot easily be discovered."

With those mysterious words he was pulled away from me, and into the arms of the waiting Elders, who ushered him hastily into the village meeting hall. I was left outside in the deepening twilight, along with the other children. Rising voices came from the house, the excited babble of the adults as they questioned the stranger. I jostled through the throng of children that had quickly coated the two open windows to catch a glimpse of our visitor. In the center of the room stood the stranger, his sinewy arms tracing odd figures in the air as he answered their questions in a soft, melodious voice that easily reached our straining ears. He frequently lapsed into his native tongue, a curiously soothing language that fit incongruously with the harsher sounds of our own jargon, but he spoke enough English for us to understand what he had to say.

He had come in search of villages like ours, pockets of humanity that escaped the swath of death that had laid waste to human civilization. In lilting speech he gave us news from the far north: countless empty villages, silent and forbidding; mass graves filled with tangled skeletons, hunger etched in their contortions; highways clogged with the metal carcasses of rotting automobiles and trucks, mute testimony to the final desperate rush to escape the dying cities; and everywhere, the silence of the desert, the absence of life. He had traveled even farther north than anyone had thought possible, and in the growing lines and shadows of his face we saw reflected glimpses of the Hell that he had witnessed: the impenetrable icy wastes of Mongolia and the Russian far east, whose inhabitants now lay preserved within vast snow catacombs; the desolation of eastern China, and the beggar armies that swarmed amidst the radioactive rubble in search of food; the surging ocean where once had basked the islands of Japan. When the stranger spoke of his homeland, deep in the rain forests of Irian Jaya, a growing restlessness seemed to fill the crowd, and they edged closer. With tears in his dark eyes, he cried for the teeming multitudes in crowded Java and Sumatra, as the radioactive winds edged ever closer from devastated Taiwan and Guangzhou; with a hoarseness in his voice, he sketched the final desperate plan of their besieged leaders and innovators, a mass migration of unprecedented proportions away from the radioactive inferno that raged in the North and into the vast and empty spaces of Southern Australia.

"I am the way," the stranger told them calmly, as growls of anger and resentment bubbled from the assembled crowd, their age-old fears of northern invasion confirmed. "Within me are the seeds of a future prosperity: retroviruses to tailor your crops and ensure bountiful harvests; micro-organisms to rapidly decay and remove the toxic wastes and harmful legacies of times past; nanomachines that will turn your desert world into a paradise for your people and mine."

"I am a library," he cried, as the enraged crowd surged forward and back again—laser lights reflected from a wavy-edged keris that the stranger had swiftly drawn from nowhere, pools of blood forming around the still forms of two of the villagers—then forward one last time to tear the cloaked invader apart.

Silence.

They buried him in the corn patch, away from the communal burial plot. Guilt bent them at the waist, and they cast frequent furtive glances at the mound of earth that marked his passing.

In a week they found a small sprout where only heaped dirt used to be, its unfurled green leaves solemnly tracking the sun. In two weeks, the plant had transformed itself into a man-high tree, and around it tiny blades of grass poked out shyly as if reluctant to mar the desert scenery. In three weeks, the tree had given rise to a towering colossus, and from its flowers had borne sweet, delicious, life-giving red fruits.

The village rejoiced, and planted the glossy black seeds that riddled the red fruits, and watched as new trees grew to encircle the tiny village. The memory of the stranger slowly faded in these bountiful and heady times, and I sometimes wondered as I sat beneath the shadow of a fruit-laden tree whether I had simply imagined his coming. I became content and settled into the daily routines of village life, until I found a marble-sized seed tucked away securely within the fleshy confines of a fruit that I had been eating— a seed whose glossy black coat was interrupted by fiery streaks of red.

I carefully planted this one seed far away from the growing village, on the banks of one of the many streams that had suddenly and mysteriously sprung up from the desert soil. I tended to its needs and watched as it germinated and produced a beautiful and vigorous sapling, its smooth and rounded trunk ebony dark and polished as the seed from which it had come. I took long afternoon naps under its canopy of silver-tinged leaves, and climbed the highest branches to spy on the other village children as they played in the distance.

It was while clambering toward the upper reaches of the tree one sunny afternoon that I felt a slight tremor. I quickly dropped to the ground and watched in amazement as a widening vertical crack wound its way from the ground and up the side of the now-massive trunk. Hollow knocking sounds grew in volume from deep within the tree, and a series of agonized shudders wracked the ailing plant as its trunk was neatly split in half. Whereas a normal tree would contain solid heartwood, this plant of

mine had none, and from the dimly lit recesses of its interior emerged a pair of dark eyes set in surfaces of polished mahogany.

The stranger stepped out into the sunlight, a faint smile lighting the shadowed contours of a face hidden beneath a wide-brimmed hat. Hands reached out from within the dark cloak that enfolded him to grasp me firmly by the shoulders. Lips moved in the canyons of his face and a slight breeze carried his whisperings and told me of things to come.

"I am finished here," he sang to me, and I wept silently that something which I had lost, then found, was soon to leave me behind once again. *"Jangan kuatir,* little one. My people will soon come. I have other villages to visit, other miracles to perform."

"I will give you a gift," he said, and kissed me softly, his tongue lingering on mine, nanoware bridging the chasm and infiltrating me. A last murmur and he turned his back to me, his cloak a refuge from prying eyes, his hat shelter from the sweltering desert sun. I saw him last as a swirl of dust in the distance. *"Sampai bertemu lagi,"* he had murmured in his native tongue, and I had understood.

I tell this to you now, my daughter, just as my mother had told me then, and *her* mother before that. The exact history of Man's Second Flowering has been lost forever in the dim corridors of time, but our family's sacred duty as Mediators between the natives of this region and the people from the archipelago has survived the passing decades. We cannot fail in our mission if we hope to avoid a second—and final—nuclear holocaust.

I remember him clearly, my daughter, just as my mother did, and *her* mother before that. He is encrypted in our genetic code, a resident in the neural nets of our brains. I look in a mirror, and see glimmers of his dark eyes. I see you, and glimpse cut surfaces of polished mahogany.

ALAN SAN JUAN

Is currently finishing his MBA at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. He puts his previous training in molecular biology to good use by wantonly splicing together genetic material from his geranium and various brands of yogurt in the hope of someday creating the world's first slimmed-down potted plant.

Cumberland Dreams

J.W. KURILEC

There are a number of ways to end a distinguished career.
One of them is not to end it.

I SLEPT.

For four hundred and ninety-two days, I had explored the worlds I spent my whole life to discover. Such vast riches of culture, worlds of vibrancy, furry, and divine serenity. Oh, to lose oneself to the symphony of the galaxy, vast and complex, yet simple and wonderful.

Then it was gone, pierced by a high-pitched squeal and catalytic gases being pumped into my capsule by the navigation computers. After the air inside the capsule matched the air outside, it opened, and I slid my stiffened legs over the edge. I would've been annoyed by the rude intrusion into my new-found worlds if my head were clear.

Thirty four years of deep space service and I still suffer from hibernation hangovers.

I slowly walked the length of my cabin. Spacious the Captain's quarters are not, but compared to my junior officer days, they were most welcome. In front of my observation window was a large wooden ship's wheel. A present when I first took command, it was the wheel of my ship's namesake, the *Cumberland*. Many were the days I just stood, my hands holding on with determination, wondering if my *Cumberland* would fare better when it met the future, or if it would join its predecessor at the bottom.

As my mind readjusted I quickly traded my bright orange hibernation suit for the light blue jump suit that was the day uniform. Even in the 2090s, extensive space travel has a way of sapping your strength, the human body slowly deteriorating with each pseudo-gravitational minute. Yet even after thirty-four years, everything I did seemed a step faster. With just one month left on my final tour of duty, I, Captain William Carney, received the orders I had waited for my whole career.

My immediate duties were to revive the crew. After checking for anomalies in the ship's three main comput-

ers and finding none, I began the deactivation process for the remaining sixteen capsules. As captain, I'm the first to wake and the last to sleep. And I've often felt responsible when a crew member is lost in their capsule. While the activation/deactivation process is foolproof, and capsule failures are only at one percent, I'm still the one who must actually initiate the procedure.

When the computer showed sixteen nominal deactivations, I made my way to the ships dining-and-briefing area. Every square foot was a commodity in space.

I sat at the head of the small table and watched my officers as they staggered in. Each of their faces dropped when they found a table setting of datascreens instead of the five-course meal (even if it was only rations) that traditionally accompanied awakening from hibernation.

Dr. Orlowski was the first to speak.

"Just what I ordered — a nice square meal of superconductors and liquid crystals." The ship's medical officer was not fond of hibernation and even less of briefings. "I had a feeling," he said, pulling a ration out of his pocket. "If you don't mind."

"No, and that goes for everyone. As you are all aware, it's been an extremely long hibernation and we're not following usual procedures. To start with, let me answer the question you're all wondering about: Where are we, and why was our destination concealed from you before hibernation?

"Our destination and our present position have been classified."

My navigation officer, Lieutenant Holt, was the first person to respond.

"Sir, to what extent will this information be classified?"

"Only the main computer and I will know our position and destination. You will chart off of a stationary beacon I will launch."

"What the hell's going on, Will?" Dr. Orlowski asked with concern.

"We've been sent to investigate a series of peculiar Earthbound radio signals. Since the *Cumberland* has now traveled deeper into space then any human has ever been, congratulations to everyone. We're in the record books. Though the signal is still inbound, it *has* been determined to be alien in origin."

"Was there a message?" asked Lieutenant Lee. "Can we decipher it? What form of language did they use?"

"The signal was at best extremely choppy. Only a very few intervals were distinguishable, not enough to make out a message. It's definitely binary, and a lot like the ones we sent out a hundred years ago."

The briefing lasted the better part of the hour. Most of it dealt with routine system questions that follow hibernation. Here and there, mention was made of the possibilities of our mission. The meeting could have lasted days if we explored the questions we all had. But I have been blessed with a fine crew, a professional collection of men and women who realize the answers to their questions lay ahead, with a ship that is ready to meet them.

Within a day, Lee picked up a bogey on the ship's long-range sensor. I was standing in the middle of the hub that was the *Cumberland*'s bridge. I had long since given up the captain's work station situated along the circular wall. Perhaps it's the romantic in me, perhaps it's hubris, but I have always felt a need to be at the center of the bridge. As if I had my hand on the tiller as the crew trimmed the mainsail on my word.

"Was there a message?" asked Lieutenant Lee. "Can we decipher it? What form of language did they use?"

"Its bearing?"

"It appears to be on a direct intercept with us, sir."

"Distance and speed Lieutenant?"

"Bogey matching us at .4 light, 12 AUs."

I peered over the Lieutenant's shoulder, watching the pixel of light that represented the alien vessel. I watched with such intensity that I nearly blocked out Lieutenant Holt.

"Captain, I'm reading a small planetoid directly between ourselves and the inbound."

"Very good."

"Sir?"

"I wonder what shape the table will be?"

"Sir?"

"Lieutenant, it can't be a coincidence that the planetoid's there. Our two species, our two peoples must meet somewhere for the first time. You can't expect them to invite us directly to their homeworld. That would be quite a risk. This is a logical first step.

"What do you think, Lee? If it's rectangular, well, that's somewhat adversarial. A round table—now that has more of a sense of unity."

"Perhaps it will be hexagonal," Lee said, deadpan.

"Indeed." I laughed.

"Sir, what if the bogey's an echo, a reflection?" said Holt, deflating a little of our elation.

"A reflection?"

"Aye, sir. The bogey is matching us perfectly in speed and in distance from the planetoid. The planetoid could be the reflection point."

I clenched my fist, but it wasn't Holt I was angry with—it was myself. I have always expected my officers to present all possibilities. To lose my objectivity so quickly was unforgivable.

"Well, let's test Mr. Holt's theory. Change course five degrees true starboard."

"Changing course," Lee said. Then, a moment later: "The bogey is matching five degrees."

"Damn." Of course, I thought, they might match us so as not to appear aggressive. It's what I might do.

"Holt, bring up a full spectral survey on the planetoid."

"The spectral readings are very confusing," Holt said after a few moments of analysis. "The planetoid is made up of entirely of an unknown substance. The computer is designating it unknown 4296, no matches on any properties in the geodatabase."

In two hours it would or would not be visible. Our bogey would be an alien vessel unlocking an entire new realm to the universe, or it would be a reflection unlocking an entire new realm of exotic rock. Those two hours would stretch out like a childhood Christmas Eve.

Silence fell over the bridge in the final minutes. Each crewman had his eyes affixed to the various video monitors. The screen was dominated by the small planetoid we now called Echo. I'm not sure who spotted the vessel first. I heard a crewman yell out "There!" and then I saw it. It was a small craft no larger then our own, and it grew closer and larger every second.

Then, as if it was his mission to break my fondest moments, I heard Holt's voice.

"Sir, I'm reading a ship identification code."

"How's that possible?"

"It reads..." he hesitated. "It reads *Cumberland,* sir."

"*Cumberland*?"

"Sir, it could be a another sensor reflection," Holt said, stating the obvious.

"Mr. Holt, is there or isn't there another ship within a few million klicks of us?"

"Sir, It's possible we're picking up a reflection on the video monitors. We don't understand the makeup of Echo. It could be..."

"It could be a reflection! I know."

I don't ever remember interrupting a member of my crew that way. "Somebody go up to the observation port, get on a damn telescope and tell me if there is a ship out there."

Lt. Lee quickly made her way to the rarely-used telescope. Within minutes she shouted down, "Sir, there *is* a vessel out there. But it's us, sir. It's the *Cumberland*."

"Are you sure?"

"I can read the markings on her hull, right down to our missing 'd.'"

"That damned planetoid! Lee, Holt were going down there." I brought the ship three hundred and sixty degrees around Echo, and of course our shadow did exactly the same.

The *Cumberland* assumed a polar orbit around Echo. As I guided the landing craft out of the *Cumberland*'s bay I could see it. There, set against the panoramic backdrop of space, was another *Cumberland*. Coming out of its bay was a landing craft, following the same speed and course as I did.

My landing craft came to a rest twenty meters off of from Echo's northern pole. Our readings showed no atmosphere, but a peculiarly strong gravitational pull. Holt and I would go out, while Lee would remain in the landing craft, per standard procedure. We donned our pressure suits and made our way through the air locks. I was the first to set foot on the soft gray powder of Echo.

The landscape was almost featureless. It consisted entirely of soft rolling mounds, none higher than a meter.

Forty meters from our position was a sight that chilled both of us. There was no mirror and no a calm pond, yet we still saw our reflections.

I ordered Holt to take samples of Echo's surface, and made my way toward the one person I have known for all my life.

I walked up to the aging face that bore the lines of the too many years of space. I looked into his eyes, searching for what he was doing here. His eyes told me he had to come. He had to try one last time to find what he always dreamed he might. But now it was time to leave, to leave his career, his dream, and this bizarre place.

Not knowing quite why, I stretched my hand out to this weary traveler.

He shook it.

My stomach fell. My blood pressure rose. I could *feel* the pressure of his grip. My first impulse was to turn back to Holt, and to the ship. But Holt was busy with his samples — he hadn't even noticed what I was doing.

My mind raced. I looked back into his eyes, eyes that were so real. Was I losing my mind? I had to be.

All my career I have been able to deal with the most complicated situations. But in this, I was lost.

When I returned to the landing craft, Holt asked me about the reflection. I lied. Why didn't I tell him? I don't know.

The three of us returned to the *Cumberland*. It was routine procedure after a landing party returned to hold a briefing.

"Preliminary samples of Echo's soil have revealed very little," reported Holt. "My first impression was that it resembles quartz, but once I had finished the simplest analysis, I could tell that it's vastly different. I'm not quite sure what it is, but it's certainly the most logical explanation for the reflection phenomena we are experiencing."

Holt looked at me. I suppose he expected me to oppose his theory again.

I said nothing.

"What's the next step, sir?" Lee asked.

"Holt informs me we are closing in on a return window. Our time here has been brief, but that was to be expected, considering the distance we've traveled. We've retrieved an ample supply of soil samples and compiled an extensive visual record of the reflection. Though we are capable of staying another eight hours, I see no compelling reason to delay our departure.

"Each one of you has performed your duties exceptionally. You have been a fine crew and I have been proud to serve with each you."

The next two hours were filled with pre-hibernation activities. I saw little of the crew at this time, since my primary task was to program the navigation computers to fly us home myself.

Our location's classification would surely be dropped on our return. After all, there's no need to hide the knowledge of a reflection.

Of course, this wasn't a reflection. It had dimension, mass, and... it had life. I was sure of it.

But they wouldn't know that. It wouldn't be in any report.

I suppose there was no logical reason to hide what I had seen. So what if they thought me crazy? Twenty-four hours after arrival, I would be a civilian either way. But still, something stopped me, and I don't know what.

By early evening we were ready to begin the five-hundred-day journey that would end in Earth orbit. I made a final tour of the ship, stopping by my senior officers' hibernation capsules. Orlowski was in one of his moods. "Well, Leopold," I said, "this is the last one. Chances are, it's yours, too."

"If we get back in one piece. Just imagine — slowing our bodies down to the edge of death, and hurling them through the void of space. It's a wonder we've lasted long enough to retire."

"Sleep well, friend."

Holt was next. "We had our differences this time around, Henry. But you kept perspective. You're going to make a fine captain. I hope you get the *Cumberland* — she deserves a man like you."

"Thank you, sir."

And finally I saw Lee.

"Disappointing," she said. "I thought for a moment, just maybe..."

"So did I."

"It *is* out there, sir. I know it. We'll find it someday, whatever it may be."

As she spoke I looked into her soft brown eyes. So much like me, with the single exception of time.

At 17:39 hours I activated the hibernation sequence for the crew. By 17:43 the computers read all nominal, all capsules in full hibernation, and I was alone. I returned to my quarters. All that was left to do was enter my capsule. I slipped out of my day uniform and into the bright orange hibernation suit.

Then I knew. For the first time since I felt the pressure of his hand, I knew what I should do.

For some reason, I walked over to the old ship's wheel by the porthole and placed my hands upon her once more. I looked out across space at the strange ship I knew so well.

Then I knew. For the first time since I felt the pressure of his hand I knew what I should do.

Within five minutes I had the landing craft fired up and was leaving the *Cumberland*'s bay. I flew directly toward my sister ship above Echo. At the halfway point, I passed my counterpart doing the same.

"Treat her well!" I shouted.

I brought my craft alongside the new ship. I inspected her as if she were my own and then landed my craft inside her bay. To my relief, the floor held. It was solid.

I quickly made my way through the ship. Her insides were identical. I ran through her like a kid exploring some fantastic new place he and he alone had found. I passed by Leopold and Lieutenant Holt in their capsules sleeping the sleep of children. Then there was Lee.

"Forgive me for not sharing," I said to her through the capsule glass.

Finally, I came to my cabin. I walked straight to the wheel and the window. He was looking back. I could feel it. I stood and pondered what might be.

If I was wrong, my ship and my crew would be fine. Part of me feels shame for leaving them, but the computer will handle everything, I know in my heart they would understand. If I am right, they will never know I left.

As I enter hibernation, I can not help but wonder what awaits me.

Yet, at the same time, I know every detail.

J.W. KURILEC

Is a 30 year old Connecticut Yankee, aspiring screenwriter, and children's author. Cumberland Dreams *is his first published story.*

Christmas Carol

EDWARD ASHTON

Sure, people get depressed during the holidays.
But maybe, for some, it's their own damned fault.

ELAINE CALLS ME AT TEN PAST SEVEN ON A FRIDAY night, the night before Christmas Eve. "Come over," she says, like she knows I have nothing better to do. "I've got a bottle and a couple of videos. We'll have fun."

My first impulse is to tell her I've made plans, but there's nothing more depressing than hanging around watching cable by yourself on a weekend night, especially during the holidays. So I say yeah, sure, why not, and she says terrific, and the line falls dead.

I pick up the remote and shut off the TV. I'd been watching "It's a Wonderful Life" for the tenth time this season, half hoping that this time the angel won't show and George will just kill himself and get it over with. Elaine says she can't understand how somebody could jump out a window on Christmas Eve like that guy up in Winslow did the year before last, but I can see it. I can understand how that happens. You're off from work, you've got nothing to do, you're moping around the house by yourself and every time you turn on the TV you see people with families and people in love. I mean, it gets to me after a while, and my life's really not that bad. At least I've got Elaine.

I guess I should say right now that Elaine and I are not a couple. We have never been a couple, and we are never going to be one. She's a nice enough person, I guess, but there's something that's just not there. The subject has only come up once, about a year ago, a month or so after we started hanging out. She was very up front, said she was interested and asked if I might be too. I said no, and that was that.

That's not to say we haven't slept together, because we have. But it's always been strictly a one-time thing.

Elaine lives a couple miles out of town, in a fifty-unit complex called Fox Run Apartments. I've never seen a fox there, which is not surprising considering that the only woods within ten miles of the place are on the golf course across Route 22. There are five buildings with ten apartments each, arranged around a horseshoe loop of road called Fox Run. That's not an excuse for the name, though, because I'm pretty sure the complex was there before the road was ever built.

On the drive out I count four-way stops and Slow Children signs—eleven of each. Forty-seven two-story bungalows, thirty-eight minivans, seven trees with tire swings. The last time I visited my brother, his wife was eight months pregnant with their second child. He doesn't drive a minivan yet, but it's probably even money he's shopping for one.

When I get to Elaine's there's a note on the door that says "it's open" and another that says "homicidal maniacs, please ignore." Elaine is the patron saint of Post-Its. She leaves a trail of them stuck to doors and walls and windows wherever she goes, until I sometimes feel like some kind of post-modern dung beetle, creeping along behind her, my pockets bulging with her wadded-up waste. These ones, though, I leave as they are. If she wants to cover her house in paper scraps I guess it's nobody's business but her own.

Inside, Elaine's sprawled out on her fat, black, flower-print couch, with a glass of something in one hand and a remote control in the other. She looks up and says, "Didn't you see the second note?"

Elaine's a nice enough person, I guess, but there's something that's just not there.

I shrug out of my jacket. Elaine sounds like she's already buzzed. As I step into the living room she sits up, finishes her drink and asks if I want anything. I say I'll have whatever she's having, and she gets up and goes out to the kitchen to mix up two more of whatever that is.

You're probably thinking that the reason I'm not with Elaine is that she's not pretty enough, but that's not it at all. She's tall and big shouldered, thin at the waist and hips, with short brown hair and deep-set blue eyes and a way of looking at you that makes you feel like a field mouse, scrambling for cover under the eyes of a circling hawk.

Elaine brings me my drink. It's yellowish-green and sugary. She calls it a parrot. I down half of it in one long swallow. Elaine says, "Careful, Jon. That stuff is stronger than it tastes."

I take another drink. "If I get drunk enough, maybe I'll let you take advantage of me."

She shakes her head. "I don't think so."

Elaine sips from her parrot. I sip from mine.

"You know," she says, "I had a dream about you last night."

"Really?" I say. "What happened?"

"Nothing much. It was a little strange. We were in school together, and you were sitting behind me and poking me in the back of the head. I kept whispering for you to quit it but you wouldn't stop. Finally I turned all the way around and punched you, and the teacher came and

grabbed me by the arm and dragged me up to the front of the class. You were laughing, and you reached up and pulled off your face—you were wearing one of those rubber masks like in the movies—and underneath you were actually Richard Nixon. That's when I woke up."

There's a long moment of silence before I realize she expects me to say something.

"Wow," I say. "So what do you think it means?"

"I don't know," she says. "Now that I look at you, though, you are getting a little jowly."

We finish our drinks. I put in the first video. Elaine goes to the kitchen for refills. When she comes back I say, "What do you think about kids?"

"I love kids," she says. "But I could never finish a whole one."

"Very good," I say. "Really, do you want one?"

"What, you mean now?"

The movie is starting. It's an old one, something about Martians who come to Earth to kidnap Santa. It reminds me of a preacher we had when I was in grade school who started every Christmas Eve sermon by reminding us that you only had to move one letter in Santa to get Satan.

"No," I say, "I don't mean now. Eventually."

"Sure. Yeah, I guess so." She sips from her drink, curls her feet up beneath her and turns to the screen.

Later, while a couple of kids in the movie are being chased by a guy in a bear suit, I say, "So what about now? I mean, you're thirty, right? If you're going to do it, you have to do it pretty soon."

"Yeah well, I'm kind of missing something, aren't I? Anyway, thirty isn't that old. Plenty of women have babies in their forties."

"Maybe. But you don't want to be sixty and just sending your kid to college, do you?"

She pauses the video, picks up our empty glasses and takes them out to the kitchen.

"Look, Jon," she says. "If you're trying to get over on me tonight, you can forget it. I'm not doing the weekend play-toy thing any more."

"Give me some credit," I say. "I am not trying to get over on you."

"Good," she says, but she doesn't sound convinced. She comes back with two different drinks, these ones thick and syrupy and purplish red. I take mine and sip. It tastes almost exactly the same as the others.

Elaine starts up the movie again. Santa's on a spaceship to Mars.

"Anyway," I say, "I don't see what's so bad about playing when neither one of us is with someone real."

There's a short silence, and it's like I can see my words floating in front of me. Too late to take them back.

"Real?" she says, very quiet, very calm. "What does that mean?" She has that hawkish look now, eyes narrowed and features taut, and I realize I may have crossed over some line. "Has it ever occurred to you that we'd probably have an easier time finding someone real if we didn't waste so much time hanging around with each other?"

We stare each other down through a long, awkward pause. The children and Santa are planning their escape. "You're right," I say finally. "You're totally right." She picks up the remote and turns up the volume as I stand, pull on my jacket and walk out the door.

Real. Here's a real story for you: My last girlfriend was Catholic. I don't mean Christmas-and-Easter Catholic, I mean church-going, God-fearing, no-sex-before-marriage-and-I-mean-it Catholic. I put up with that for about six months before I realized she was serious and broke it off. I told her it just wasn't working out. She smiled and shook her head and said, "Do I look stupid? Your cock is hot, and you're looking for someone to stick it into. And you know what? When you find her, I hope she turns around and sticks it right back into you."

If there's one thing more depressing than sitting around by yourself on the night before Christmas Eve, it's driving around by yourself on the night before Christmas Eve. It's colder now, and snowing a little—wispy white flakes that reflect back my headlights and stick to the windshield until I have to drag my wipers across the almost-dry glass. I drive once past my building, turn around and pass by again. Every window in the place is dark. I keep going. There's a song playing on the radio. It's something soft and sappy, and after a couple of minutes I turn it off. I take a left on Route 17, and a half mile later I pull into the almost-full parking lot of a club called The Shark Tank.

I've been here before and it's always been pretty crowded, but I didn't expect many people to be here on the night before Christmas Eve. There's a two-dollar cover. A live band is playing. When I ask who they are, the bouncer yells something back at me that sounds like Cult of Crud. I nod and keep moving.

The area back by the bar is pretty empty. Almost everybody in the club is either down in the pit or hanging around the fringes. I'm talking to the bartender, telling him to bring me a beer—a bottle, not a draft—when Colonel Klink sits down beside me and says, "This round's on me."

I lean back, look over. He's older, tall, thin and bald, wearing black shiny boots and a long gray overcoat and a monocle, for Christ's sake. All he needs are black leather gloves and a swagger stick.

"Hi," he says. "I'm Wilhelm." He offers his hand.

"Jon," I say. We shake. The bartender brings us our beers. Wilhelm hands him a twenty and tells him to keep a tab. I take a long pull from my drink and look over at the

stage. The band doesn't seem to know much about their instruments, but the drummer is steady and the singer is loud and as I watch a guy comes up out of the crowd and onto the stage, takes a run across the front and dives out onto a sea of hands. They catch him, pass him around for a while and put him down.

"That's insane," I say.

"Not really," says Wilhelm. "As long as the floor's packed it's actually pretty safe."

I shake my head and take another drink. The band finishes playing, and the singer says thanks, you guys are the greatest, we're taking a break. The club's sound system starts playing something by New Order as the crowd breaks up and heads back toward the bar.

"So," I say. "You're Colonel Klink, right?"

"Right!" he says. "I'm glad you noticed. A lot of the kids I meet in this place are too young to recognize me."

"Why?"

"Well, the show's been off the air for a while…"

"No, I mean why Colonel Klink?"

He shrugs. "Look at me. I don't really have much choice, you know?"

"Yeah," I say. "I guess I see your point."

A girl, maybe nineteen or twenty, slides up on the bar stool next to me, flushed and panting and dripping sweat. "Hi," she says. "Is Willy getting you drunk?"

"Absolutely," Klink says. "Carrie, this is Jon." Carrie smiles and shakes my hand. "It's very nice to meet you," she says. She's thin and dark-haired and pretty, and I hold her hand just a little longer than I have to.

"So what are you doing here?" Carrie says. I look over at Wilhelm, but she's talking to me.

"I don't know," I say finally. "Is there somewhere else I should be?"

She shrugs. "You look like the home-with-the-family type."

"I guess looks can be deceiving, right?"

"Sure," she says. "But they're usually not."

The bartender comes by. Wilhelm orders three more beers. I finish my old one in one long, lukewarm pull.

"So," I say to Carrie, "what are you doing here?"

"I never miss these guys," she says. "I'm sleeping with the drummer."

I'm not sure what to say to that. The bartender brings our beers. Carrie takes hers, hops down off the barstool and walks around behind me. "Thanks, Daddy," she says, and kisses Wilhelm on the cheek. He smiles and nods, and she disappears back into the crowd.

After another beer I say, "So that was your daughter, huh?"

"Yeah," he says. "She's a beautiful girl, isn't she?" And what I want to say is what do you think it does to a kid's psyche to have her dad dress up like Colonel Klink and hang out with her in a bar on the night before Christmas Eve, but instead I say yes, she is, and leave it at that.

We drink some more. Wilhelm says, "You're here alone."

I shrug. "I don't have a daughter to hang out with."

He laughs. "What about a wife?"

I shake my head.

"Girlfriend?"

"Well," I say, "I've got a friend who's a girl, but it's really not the same."

I'm thirty-one years old and it's the night before Christmas Eve and I'm sitting on a barstool making out with Colonel Klink. I can't help laughing.

"I hear you," he says. He's looking right at me now, not down at his beer like guys usually do. I was going to say something about Elaine, maybe tell him about the time in this very same bar that she said she thought I'd make a great father and I just sat there and stared at her until she said don't flatter yourself, I was just making conversation, but instead I shrug again and say, "yeah, well."

Klink takes another drink, then leans in closer and says, "Are you looking for some company?" Understand that at this point I'm feeling a little drunk and a little lonely and I'm assuming that he's talking about Carrie. And even though I think it's kind of sick for Colonel Klink to be pimping his daughter I turn to him and say, "Why do you ask?"

And then he kisses me. He pulls back and I say, "But..." and he does it again, and it suddenly strikes me that I'm thirty-one years old and it's the night before Christmas Eve and I'm sitting on a barstool making out with Colonel Klink. I can't help it. I start laughing. Klink takes his hands off of me and I get up and start for the door and I don't make it two steps before I'm doubled over, tears running out of my eyes. Klink asks where I'm going and I say home and he says you're drunk, let me drive you, but I wave him off and keep moving.

By the time I get outside I'm almost under control. I stop half way to my car, wipe my eyes and rub my face and breathe the cold night air. There are three or four inches of snow on the ground, but the sky is clear and dark and starry, and I'm feeling better, almost ready to go home, when I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn. The bouncer's standing behind me. He says one word, *faggot,* and hits me in the face.

It's an arm punch, no weight behind it, and as I stagger back a half-step and he swings again, part of me is

thinking that even drunk I could take this guy, that considering he's a bouncer he really can't fight, but instead of getting my fists up I'm saying wait, I'm not gay, he kissed me, and he catches me with a roundhouse and down I go.

"Stay home next time," he says, kicks me once in the belly and goes back inside.

It's a little later and I'm still lying there, almost comfortable in the snow, looking up at the stars and wishing someone would run me over when Carrie leans over me and says, "Hi. How's it going?"

"Pretty well," I say. "What brings you out here?"

"Daddy saw the bouncer follow you outside. He wanted me to find out what he did to you."

"I see."

I close my eyes, and after a while I hear the bar door open and slam closed. There is silence for a while, and then the rumble of a car out on 17, coming closer, gearing down, skidding a little on the gravel as it turns into the lot. I feel headlights sweep across me and I think well, this is it, either get up or don't, but the car stops before I have to make a decision. The door swings open and I hear Elaine's voice. "Jon? Jesus, is that you?"

"Yeah," I say. "Come on over. Have a seat."

I open my eyes. Elaine cuts the engine, cuts the lights. A man comes out of the club. He glances over at me and hurries off in the other direction. Elaine's boots squeak in the cold new snow. She stands looking down at me for a while, then shakes her head and sits down next to me. She looks a little like Carrie in the starlight—softer and smaller, and a little hazy around the edges.

"Are you hurt?" she says.

"No," I say.

"I didn't think so."

A black cloud is pushing across the middle of the sky. I sit up, touch my hand to my face. It isn't even swollen much. The cold probably helped.

"You're not going to tell me why you were lying in the snow in the middle of a parking lot."

I shake my head. "I don't think so."

"That's good. You'd probably lose my respect." The wind is picking up now, whistling past the building, and the snow is coming down again in fat, wet flakes. Elaine hugs herself and shivers. Her shoulder touches mine.

"So anyway," she says.

"Right." I climb to my feet. I offer her my hand, but she gets up by herself, brushes the snow off her pants and says, "Look, I'm sorry about what I said before…"

"Whatever," I say. She smiles, touches my hand, asks if I need a ride. I shake my head. She turns and gets back in her car, and I stand there and watch her in the falling snow. After the door bangs shut and before she starts the engine I hear a song in my head, an old Christmas carol I can almost remember, and at first I'm thinking concussion, but when I hold my breath it's even clearer—a gentle, muffled chiming, ringing in Christmas Eve.

EDWARD ASHTON

Is a research engineer by necessity and a fiction writer by choice. His work has appeared in a number of online and print magazines, including Blue Penny Quarterly, Painted Hills Review, Brownstone Quarterly, *and* The Pearl.

At some point, nearly everyone looks up to make sure water buffalo aren't falling from the sky.