

# **WEIRD WINDS**

**a short story collection**

by J. S. Worth

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Published by Fiction Worth Reading

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**Peace,**

**JSW 2017.**

About this collection:

Eight intriguing tales of friendship, healing, death, forgiveness, family, love, redemption, and faith—with generous helpings of aliens, amphibians, reptiles, magic, and visions; a shot of biological enhancements; a dash of dragon folklore; a vampire, an artist, and a time travelling physician.

These stories were written over a span of years. Even so, there are common threads throughout; the mention of reptiles and amphibians for one, for which I've always had an affection. As one of my wife's friends once said, "It takes a special person to love a reptile."

There are also elements of art in several of the stories. I've come to realize it's more than a hobby. Art is integral to who I am and shows up naturally whether I'm writing, conversing, or alone with my thoughts. In fact, two of the stories end in similar fashion as the protagonist embraces art in a symbolic act of renewal and acceptance.

Recurring themes of love, faith, and forgiveness also permeate the tales. However, these often come after intense personal struggle and following an unresolved loss or recent tragedy. You know, the way it often happens in real life.

The stories are also, for the most part, solidly grounded in the genres of Science Fiction or Fantasy, or a mixture of both. There is one exception in the case of "A Key Turning", but that one has salamanders, lizards, alligators and the swamp as a setting. So I included it anyway. Besides, it's one of my favorites and was the first time I actually got paid for my fiction. (More on that after you read it.)

As many of my readers know, I'm a Christian, and my worldview is reflected in much of what I write. However, though the persons of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are mentioned (and even Mary in one story - though I, personally, am not Catholic), they are used in relation to the characters and do not take center stage. But they do influence my tales in a very real and personal way. I try to refrain from preaching, but may slip a time or two - mostly in regards to conservation and the envi-

ronment, as I believe Christians should be more concerned with these things than what I typically see, since we are clearly given stewardship over God's creation.

That said, not many of the characters in these tales are squeaky clean. And in the case of Darwin Macallough, he uses what some folks would consider 'salty' language. It's not excessive, but it's there. He's also drunk at the time. There are also mildly risqué elements in the story "Waking the third eye". Mostly the mention of body parts. For all of the above, I can only suggest that it's no more graphic than what you'll find in the movies, possibly your own speech, and even the Bible in certain passages and with accurate translation. (And as I repeatedly tell my sons, you can curse someone without ever using a 'cuss' word. Intent and context is everything.)

But when I look at the people Jesus chose to be his disciples I think, "Yeah, he'd pick someone like my character Darwin." After all, he even picked me.

At the end of each tale is a "story behind the story" section. An afterword of sorts. Please feel free to skip these if you want. There are interesting facts in a few, some recommendations, and even some links if you're curious and click-happy. But please DON'T read them first, as they often contain spoilers about the stories they describe.

All right, I've rambled long enough. Get on into these tales and have fun. Doesn't matter where you start...well, actually start at the beginning of a story and then read on through to its end. But read them in whatever order you'd like; that's what I meant. Just don't get lost.

Or maybe do get lost, at least for a while. Follow where the weird wind leads; a bit off the main path, into surroundings which may seem a little strange and unfamiliar.

In my experience the wind blows where it pleases. You may hear it, but you can't always tell where it comes from or where it goes. But following it along has made for an exciting and interesting trip, and it'll carry you where you need to go, eventually.

Peace,  
John Stacy Worth



Table of Contents and approximate word counts

A Key Turning - 3000 words

Fledgling - 5400 words

Miracle Child - 7300

Waking the Third Eye - 2000

The Vampire and the Professor (originally published as 'Transfiguration') - 4500

Sacrament - 4400

Hallowed Ground - 6400

The Lazarus Gap - 5000

## A Key Turning

About thirty minutes before she died, my mother named me Zachariah. I spent my childhood surrounded by her things in the home in which she, herself, grew up. As for my father, he left me the surname Grey and, according to everyone, my face. But the only tangible relics were from his old sea bag—a tarnished brass lock and its key.

Gram did her best, setting an example by praying over everything from scraped knees to unpaid bills. I'll never forget how she somehow managed to buy me some nice used terrariums for my thirteenth birthday. Of course from my father I got nothing. Not a card. Not even a phone call. That weekend I went down to the lake and held the lock in my hand, wanting to drop it into my reflection and leave it. Instead I just spat into the water then turned to the bicycle rack.

I pulled my chain through the wheel and fastened the lock. In the distance, I heard Susie's bell as she pedaled closer. *Her* father ran a counseling center and worked long hours, so after school and on weekends she hung with me. When we'd stop by Gram's shop, the customers just raved when they found out who Susie was; *Dr. Preston is such an inspiration. He's so brave to be rearing you by himself.*

They'd never say such things about Gram. Oh they'd tip her well, once she'd cut and styled their hair, and they'd bring old clothes for me. But, as young as I was, I could tell from the way they barely met her eyes, they regarded Ruby Watson as a thing to be pitied, not admired.

"Hey, Zach." Susie dismounted, then secured her bicycle. Her tan was offset by light blue overalls and a sunflower-patterned shirt. With her hair pony-tailed, I could see how her brow furrowed, putting a little slanted dent below her forehead. "Are we ready?" Her backpack clinked as she shouldered its rainbow-colored straps.

I nodded, adjusting my own. "Thanks for bringing the extra jars."

"Sure, birthday boy." She smiled. "Now let's go fill those terrariums."



"Zach, I caught it!" Halfway along the nature trail, Susie trapped a fence lizard in a Mason jar. With mottled grey scales that blended perfectly against an oak and its stubby, triangular head, the lizard seemed to me a miniscule dinosaur. Holding it overhead, we examined the throat and belly to find the dark blue patches. Definitely male. I popped the lid with an ice pick, labeled it, *Sceloporus undulatus*, and placed it in my backpack.

Susie tugged the sleeve of my Atlanta Braves jersey. "Let's rest a minute."

We walked to a fallen oak. Sitting, I caught a flash of movement in the grass. "A tiger salamander!" I scooped the amphibian into my palms. "*Ambystoma tigrinum*." It wriggled, emptying its bowels.

Susie leaned in. "Hop-etology, right?"

I smiled at her joke. "*Herpetology*."

"Yeah, frogs and lizards."

"Amphibians and reptiles, yes." I scraped my soiled palm with a twig.

Susie stroked the creature's black and yellow head. "I've never seen one before."

I realized she wasn't squeamish—didn't falter with the lizard, and here she was touching a salamander.

"Can I hold it?" she asked.

"Sure." I set the prize into the cup of her hand.

"Get a picture of me with it." She dropped the backpack from her shoulders and, with her free hand, passed it to me.

I took the backpack and fished for her camera. "Hold it in front of you."

"Does that prince trick only work with frogs, or will any amphibian do?"

"Try it and see."

To my surprise she did. I snapped the photo.

“Hmm. Nothing.” She looked at the salamander with mock disappointment. “Oh well, maybe *someday* my prince will come.”

*Maybe I’m right here in front of you.* I wanted to say it, but was too afraid.

Susie finally broke the silence; “Now let’s get a picture of you with the lizard.”



Years passed, and eventually Gram began her swift, inevitable decline.

“Zachary.”

I bent across the hospital bed. “I’m here, Gram.”

“Maybe your father will come to the funeral. Maybe the two of you can—”

“Don’t waste what breath you have on him, okay?”

She wrung her hands. “Oh, I hope Eugene comes. *I pray* that he and you—”

“Hush, now. You need to get your sleep.”

“Nonsense.” She gave a wry smile. “I’ll be asleep in the Lord before long. That’s the only sleep I need.”

I lowered my head. “I don’t want to hear that, and I don’t want to talk about my father.”

“Oh, Zachariah. Not today. Let’s not spend it like this.”

And I realized what she seemed to know already; these were our last hours together.

Tenderly, into the crook of my arm, she placed a hand as withered as a flower pressed between the pages of her Bible. “If you don’t want to talk about the past, then at least tell me about your future. Have you and Susie set a date?”



Leaning over Gram's coffin, he'd actually had the audacity to place a rose in one of her hands. He muttered quietly, once more giving voice, I supposed, to the goodbye he said long ago. Eventually he walked over to where I stood.

"You gonna be all right?" Eugene Grey, the man who left when I was two, put a hand on my shoulder.

I could smell he'd been drinking, and it seemed everyone in the funeral home was watching. I didn't pull away. Pastor Jenkins discretely nodded from where he stood, talking to Sue and her father. Finally I answered, "Sure."

Eugene squeezed my shoulder. "Son, I want you to know I'm sorry. For everything. I knew Ruby would give you the care I couldn't."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I don't."

He dropped his hand, wisely changed the subject, "You gonna marry that girl?"

"I've asked her. She said yes."

"Mind if I come to the wedding?"

"I don't care." I shoved my hands in my pockets. "I suppose you want to meet her."



To gather data for my Graduate Thesis, Sue and I relocated for a summer stint of field work in the Okefenokee. She would start teaching high school English in the fall, and Eugene followed us for some reason. He was staying at a shelter, which Sue hated, but the cabin we'd been provided had barely room for two. Besides which, I doubted the park officials would want a drunk hanging around any more than I did.

"You know, you look so sad in these pictures." Sue was at the small, wooden table, perusing our wedding album. Most of our belongings were back at UGA, in storage; the rest was still waiting to be unpacked.

"It was the happiest day of my life." I took the crudely fashioned chair beside her.

“Well Eugene’s a chipper best man, but you’re the most solemn groom I’ve ever seen. We should have waited.”

“Gram wasn’t coming back.”

Her forehead dimpled. “And I pressured you to include your father. I shouldn’t have done that.”

He’d showed up sober for both rehearsal dinner and wedding, actually gave a decent toast, and even smiled when I handed him the token gift, a tarnished brass lock with a fresh inscription: *What you left behind.*

I kissed the slanted dent between Sue’s eyebrows. “It’s okay. It made him happy. You’ve befriended him, which is more than I can do.”

She was quiet a moment, then said, “Do you think I wasn’t angry at my mother for leaving me? You think I didn’t blame myself?”

“That’s different. Your mother died of leukemia. My father *left.*”

“Maybe he had reasons we don’t know about.”

“My mama died giving birth. He left because he couldn’t stand the sight of *me.*”

She closed the album. “I don’t think he blames you at all.”

“Can we just drop it, please?”

She took out her cell phone. “I can call Daddy if you’d rather talk to him.”

“No, Suze. I don’t want to talk to Clifford.” I got up to head outside. “Not to anyone.”



We were on the jon-boat, passing beneath a stand of towering cypress adorned in swags of Spanish moss. I killed the motor then paddled the rest of the way.

*“Lo! All grow old and die—but see again, how on the faltering footsteps of decay youth presses—ever gay and beautiful youth in all its beautiful forms. These lofty trees wave not less proudly that their ancestors moulder beneath them.”*

“Who’s that, Shakespeare?” I asked.

Sue grinned. “Not every poem is Shakespeare, darling. It’s by an American poet, William Cullen Bryant.”

“It’s a nice one.” Dragging the paddle, I turned us from an outstretched limb with its clustered nest of busy, black-winged wasps. “What’s it called?”

“*A Forest Hymn.*”

I took it all in, the canopy of trees she serenaded, her face bright with sunlight reflecting from the tannin-darkened water. Why couldn’t every moment be like this one? I tied off to a worn stump and took out a pH meter.

“Look. It’s our lizard.” Sue pointed to an oak.

I smiled, noticing the fence lizard bobbing up and down, a male trying to impress the ladies with his pushups.

“You can even see the blue patches,” she said.

I slipped a probe into the water, recorded the pH and water temp. “I didn’t know that was our lizard.”

“Remember how I helped fill your terrariums?”

“Oh, I remember, I just wasn’t sure you did.”

She smiled. “Are we going to fish today?”

I put away the probe. “If you want.”

We pulled in sunfish, channel cat, and Sue caught a small snapping turtle, which I tagged and released. After awhile she took her camera and snapped a few pictures. All in all, a perfect day. As we were getting ready to leave, she asked, “Next time can we bring Eugene?”

I had vetoed the idea so many times. Maybe I should give a little. “We’ll see.”



Eugene yelled above the motor, “Hey, thanks for bringing me!”

“No problem.” I was giving him a test run, to see if he was really ready to bring along with Sue.

We trolled toward a mound-shaped nest of mud, leaves, and rotting detritus, provoking the mother, a nine-foot alligator, which moved to intercept. Dark eyes glistened, protruding above the skull and out of the water, while rows of gray ridges stretched out behind. Throttling back, I turned down an adjacent gully.

Once we were a good distance from the nest, I pulled up to a water oak and tied off. As I took out equipment, Eugene smiled. It occurred to me how old he looked: haggard-eyed, face eroded by hard years, his nose bulbous as a diseased root.

“You know, that Sue’s a good woman,” he said. “Brave and true, like your mother — *and* grandmother.”

My jaw clenched. “Whatever you say.”

“Son, there *are* a few things I need to say.”

I busied myself with water testing. “Nobody’s stopping you.”

Eugene sighed, took off his cap, ran a hand through thinning hair. “Your Gram ever tell you how your mother and I met?”

I eased a probe over the side. “She was visiting her cousins in Pensacola, where you were stationed. You kept in touch through letters, and when your four years were up you followed her to Albany.” I took a logbook, jotted down the dissolved oxygen.

Eugene put his cap back on and reached around his neck. Instead of dog-tags, the necklace was weighted with his old lock and key, though now both were polished bright, reflecting sunlight into my eyes. “I was glad to see you had these. That you had held on to at least some piece of me.”

I looked away, blinking. Stowing the probe, I took out my fishing rods and tackle box. “Want to cast awhile?” Maybe it would give him something to do besides talk.

“It *has* been a long time.” Eugene slipped the lock back under his shirt. Taking a rod, he rigged it, cast the plastic worm and started reeling. “Anyway, I got a job and your mother and I were married. Things



were good, and when Beth told me she was going to have a baby, well I'd never been so happy in my life."

I kept silent, just casting a top-water lure.

Snatching suddenly upward, he bowed his rod severely. "Whoa! Already got one." With hook set, he worked the fish toward us, alternately reeling and giving slack. I cranked in my line and took out the dip-net as a largemouth broke the surface, thrashing. "Don't you throw that worm." Excitement lit Eugene's face.

Once he worked it alongside, I scooped the fish. Holding the net between us, I grudgingly admitted, "That's big enough to mount."

He took the bass, grinning. "Yeah, but she's fat in the belly. Got eggs to lay." With a pair of needle-nose pliers he gently worked the hook free and handed her to me. "Get a feel of that."

I hefted the fish again then handed her back, and he released her over the side. We watched as she turned the surface with a flick of her tail.

I let out a slow breath, took up my rod and cast again. "So, you were about to tell me how Mama died, and you just couldn't stand the sight of me, right?"

The light left Eugene's face. "No." He adjusted his worm and threw beside a cypress knee. "She had a miscarriage, Zach. Didn't know about that did you?"

I shook my head. Snagging a lily pad, I lightly tugged free as a leopard frog gave a startled croak, diving away.

"Nobody knew except us and Ruby, and we never told her what the doctors said. They told us Beth shouldn't get pregnant again. Actually wanted to tie her tubes, but she wouldn't let them. She wanted to be a mama so bad, and I'd made sure she knew how much I wanted a son." He reeled in, cast. "Two years later she was pregnant again, with you."

I absently worked my lure. "And then she died giving birth to me."

"She got to hold you, named you even—after her father. But, yes, she died. I blamed myself, for putting her at risk, for not realizing how

dangerous childbirth could be. If we had just listened to the doctors...” Eugene worked his bait in, set the rod down. “But there was the flip-side, of course. I *did* have you and loved you so much, but then I’d feel guilty for *that*. I started drinking. One day Ruby came to keep you while I went to work, like she always did, and found me passed out. You were standing in your crib, crying. Soon afterwards I gave her custody. Said I’d come back when I got straightened out, but years went by and with each one I got worse, not better. I was in a halfway house in Atlanta when she finally caught up with me. Sent a letter, pictures of you and Sue, and a quote from Corinthians of all things.”

It was Gram’s favorite scripture, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13, and one of the few I remembered. Her voice was the one that paraphrased in my head: “*Love is patient, kind...keeps no record of wrongs...endures all things...hopes all things...Love never fails.*”

Eugene sighed. “I made it into town just in time for Ruby’s funeral.”

I wondered, was all of this supposed to make me feel sorry for him? I wanted to lash out, tell him he got everything he deserved. I wanted to call him weak and selfish and curse him for leaving like he did, regardless of his reasons. Instead I somehow managed to hold my tongue. I reached into the cooler and offered him a soda.

He took it. “When you asked me to be your best man, I almost declined. I’d been anything *but*. Then Sue smiled at me, and I couldn’t turn her down.” He opened his can and drank. “During the ceremony, I kept thinking about you as a little boy, wishing I had been there to see you grow up, to give you guidance, advice. But I can’t turn back time. I—”

“Eugene.” At the time, I figured I was just trying to give him what he wanted, so he’d eventually shut up. But maybe it was something more: like the echoes of Gram’s faith, or Sue’s gentle promptings. Whatever it was, I somehow choked out the words, “Anything you want to give me, go ahead.”

“Alright then,” he said, reaching around his neck. “I’ll start with this.”



After seeing Eugene off, I returned to the truck, considering everything he’d said. How none of it was my fault, how he wanted to make things right, that he *would* stop drinking, and that he really was ready to change.

But what if he didn’t? And *if* he did, would that really make a difference? Was it even possible to overcome our past? I rubbed my temples. Even if he did deserve everything he got, was it my job to keep making him pay? I gripped the steering wheel. Maybe Gram’s unfinished prayer was finally being answered. Maybe God was actually trying to give me and Eugene a second chance, if I’d just take it.

With a trembling hand I turned the ignition, but before putting the truck in gear, I reached into my shirt pocket. Felt my hand steady as it curled around a chunk of cool, smooth metal. Pressing my fingertips to the engraved surface, I did what I hadn’t done in years and bowed my head. I haltingly uttered the first real prayer Gram taught me: “Our... *Father...*”

Suddenly, though heavy as brass in my chest, my heart felt like a lock with its key finally sliding into place—and turning.

*The End*

*The story behind the story: "A Key Turning"*

This is the first short story that I actually got paid for, over ten years ago. I enjoyed this first success by winning the Albany Herald’s sixth annual fiction writing contest in 2005. I was awarded first prize (\$250) by the local newspaper, which published the top three winners. It was during this year that I heard God speak to my heart very specifically and very clearly. Twice.

When the contest was announced I was thinking about entering it. I had always enjoyed writing and even had the rejection slips to prove it.

I'd tried my hand at short stories, mainly science fiction and fantasy, because I'd read that this was how to break into publishing. Get Asimov's, Analog, or The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction to publish a short story and that would give you publishing credits to get you out of the slush pile when you submitted a novel to one of the publishing houses.

I tried so hard to get one of them to publish me, but kept getting rejection slips. I prayed and told God that I would enter this contest, and if I won that would be a sign from Him that I was meant to write. If not, then I would stop trying. Call it a fleece or whatever, but I honestly wasn't trying to test God; I just wanted to hear from Him and know if this desire was from Him or not.

Shortly after this prayer I was driving home from work (I was an analytical chemist for a Pharmaceutical company at the time - more about that in a moment), when I had a vision of a brass sea bag lock in my mind. I recognized it immediately having served in the Navy for four years. I thought to myself, probably even said it out loud, "What's that for?"

Then God spoke directly into my heart, "That's for your story."

That's all He said. And for the next several weeks I worked on the story that you've just read. The word count limit was 3000 words. My story was almost exactly that. I finally tweaked it to where it is now and sent it in. By the time I got the call from the paper, I had almost forgotten it. Got home one day and my wife handed me a slip of paper with a phone number on it. "Who's that?" I asked.

"It's just someone that called and wants you to call them back," she said. So I picked up the phone, thinking, *This is weird*, and called the number.

When the guy answering said, "Albany Herald." I said simply, "Yeah, this is Stacy Worth. My wife said to call you back?" And he gave me the good news that I had won. I was so excited. It was incredible,

and I'm still grateful for what I still hold onto as a confirmation from God.

During the Fall, God spoke directly into my heart for the second time that year.

My youngest son Levi, had been born that Spring. The contest was in the Summer, by Winter I would receive the news that the Pharmaceutical Plant where I worked would be closing. Some guy from Corporate that no one had ever seen was in the cafeteria when they called us all in that morning. Those of us who were there had survived three layoffs in the previous few years, so we were really nervous, but still hoping against all odds.

The Corporate guy got right to the point. The company had decided to close five Manufacturing facilities in the US, and ours was one of them. Most of us just sat there stunned. Some people just walked out. I remember one guy stating very loudly as he walked out, "They don't care a thing about us!" I had been with the company for 8 years and could remember that in 1998 when I started, we were working as much overtime as we could. That plant made the company a lot of money.

But this was coming on the heels of the Vioxx debacle, and we were already outsourcing much of our intermediate products to plants in India and Puerto Rico. We had also lost three drugs during Phase III clinical trials, which almost never happens. (This is one of the final steps in getting a drug to market.)

We got three to Phase III clinicals and couldn't prove efficacy. And some of our blockbusters had gone off patent, so the pipeline being dry was not a good thing. I had watched our stock go from ~\$45 a share all the way up to \$88 a share (actually got 250 stock options that year, which were never exercised). Then the market plunged and my company followed it down. By the time those options matured I had gotten another 250 at \$55 a share, which also became useless by their maturity date.

The stock was around \$32 when I finally left the company. I remember driving home one day so angry about the whole thing. I was venting aloud to God. "If this was gonna happen then what in the world did I move over here and work eight years for!!!"

"You have a wife and two sons don't you?"

That's all He said. It's all He had to say. All of my anger disappeared in that moment, and I finally had peace about the entire thing.

During 2006 I interviewed with the company I worked for now. We had to move. Neither of the boys really remember our lives in Albany Georgia, but the place will always have a special place in my heart. I still have friends there. Lots of memories. It's where I met the love of my life. Where she gave birth to both our wonderful boys. I left one company on a Friday and started work at the new place on a Monday. I'm still at my current company over a decade later.

But if things changed tomorrow, I've learned that God is my source. He's my provider. He will always make sure that my family and I are taken care of. He will even give me ideas to include in my stories.

Peace,  
JSW

# Fledgling

Crouched beside a scorched heap of timber, Jason Aves emptied his mother's urn into her favorite cookie tin. A morning breeze danced over the ashes.

*Please not now.*

Jason glimpsed a fluttering of black—looked to see a feather drifting toward the tin. He snatched it from the air. A flash of inspiration and he used it to gently coax the rest of the ashes free. Satisfied, Jason set the urn aside and let the feather go. He pressed the tin's lid into place.

With a charred twig, he reached into the coals from last night's bonfire and scratched them into powder. He compared the ashes on the ground to those in the tin. Not even close. Still, what were the chances the old man would ever check, much less remember the color and consistency of his wife's remains? Using a small iron shovel, Jason replenished the urn. Then he dusted himself off, gathered everything, and went inside.

He placed the urn back on the mantle where it had sat for seven years, then the shovel into its station alongside poker and broom. Once he'd stepped away from the fireplace, Jason froze. The entire wall was a shrine, adorned with his mother's photography: a bald eagle she'd spied in the Smokies, cardinals and blue jays in her own backyard, and the seagulls and terns of Cumberland. Which reminded him, if he was making the nine o'clock ferry, he needed to keep moving.

When he finally got his new Mustang loaded, Jason turned off his cell and dropped it in the cup holder. He had about a thousand dollars of graduation money and two whole weeks to himself. He fired the engine, determined to get out of Jacksonville, do this one thing for his mother, and clear his head for once.



Sara Aves had called it an idyllic hide-away, and Jason could see why. Cumberland was paradise—massive live oaks draped in Spanish moss and vast, peaceful beaches. Let the rest of the senior class have Fort Lauderdale. This Georgia island was perfect. Only three hundred tourists allowed per day, no crowds, no parties, just eighteen miles of relative solitude.

Lulled by the unhurried pace, Jason finished his lunch and began using his small cooler to save stranded jellyfish. Something his mother might've done, he realized.

Then, turning to watch an albatross veer inland, he saw the girl. Wearing a tie-dyed sundress, beads and feathers in her hair, she was scavenging the beach, placing scraps of ocean debris into a pouch.

*Don't speak. She's just a dope-smoking hippie.*

It was exactly what his father would say. Easing his cooler to the sand, he decided he would speak after all.

"Treasure hunting?"

The young woman drew a feather aside. "Always. What about you? Are you looking for something?"

He felt his heart catch. Either she was stoned or had the most serene eyes he'd ever seen. "Maybe." *The right spot to scatter my mother's ashes.*

She craned her neck to peer into his cooler. "Are those jellyfish?"

He picked it up, stepped into the water, and gently sloshed its contents back into the ocean. "Some people save whales. For me it's jellyfish."

"Cool." She smiled. "A death-cheater."

She had it backwards of course—death had cheated him—but he only shrugged and said, "Nah, I just relate to jellyfish." He tramped ashore, set the cooler down again.

"I'm Anastasia Hale, and *I'm* looking for magic." She reached into her pouch and fished around. "It's everywhere here. Wild horses, castle ruins, tales of love and loss." She withdrew her hand and opened it,



exposing the tiny pile of frosted glass nestled in her palm. “Look, sea glass—tumbled by the ocean. Very powerful mojo.”

He squinted at the handful of fragments, beer bottles shards for the most part. “*Right.*”

“A skeptic! Here.” She grabbed his wrist and transferred the glass into his palm. “I’ll prove it.” She pressed his fingers around the glass and closed her eyes tight.

“What are you doing?” His initial misgivings were justified. The girl was crazy.

“Now open your hand.” She helped him do so. “The first is for your past.” She picked up a red, teardrop fragment and slowly opened her eyes. “Oh. Red, the most precious, and in the shape of sorrow. You’ve had loss, very serious loss.”

He kept his composure. She was just reading facial cues and body language, putting together what anyone with common sense could tell.

She closed her eyes again. This time the glass she retrieved was blue. She looked. “Water! A loss in your past, and in your future an uncertain choice.” She held it up. “You see, water doesn’t know what it wants to be—ice, vapor, a wave upon the ocean. It vacillates, ever changing, never certain. You’re running from loss, *and* you have a choice to make.”

He rolled his eyes and lied. “Wrong on both counts.” He took her hand and dumped the glass back into it.

“Your mother.”

“What?” He felt warmth drain from his face. Time stretched out, and even his heart seemed to limp along like some maimed, broken-limbed creature.

“Your mother died.” She slipped the sea glass back into her pouch. “And you’re expected to fill your father’s shoes, but you’re not sure you can or if you even want to.”

“How did you—”

“No more.” She held up a hand. “This is Cumberland. We should be having fun, not probing the depths of the human soul.” She smiled

again. “So are you going to tell me your name or do I have to divine that too?”



Back on the mainland, Jason put his gear in the trunk. He placed the tin—still heavy with ashes—on the passenger seat, let his gaze rest a moment upon the lid. An ocean scene, three gulls silhouetted against the sky.

Settling in, he savored again the new car smell. Dr. Frank Aves had missed the graduation, working another shift in the ER, but no one could say the man didn’t compensate—first with the car and then by allowing Jason to host one last party, complete with bonfire. Guilt might not cover a multitude of sins, but it was good for something.

Jason dug into his shirt pocket and took out a business card. Anastasia had returned on the noon ferry, while he wandered about until four, searching for the right place. He looked to the card.

It was two-sided: Anastasia’s Sea-Trinkets on one and Hale’s Bed and Breakfast on the other, with the same St. Mary’s address for each.



As he pulled up, he spotted her on the porch swing. Jason parked and got out. He feigned nonchalance, casually making his way to her.

A large book occupied a small wicker table near the swing, a tome of *Ancient Magic*, according to the cover. Anastasia was anchoring eye-hooks to sea glass. She looked up and grinned. “I knew you’d come.”

“Thought I might bum around St. Mary’s for awhile. Maybe head out to Cumberland again.” He still needed to spread the ashes.

“I’m hungry.” Anastasia set her things aside and hopped to her feet. “Come on. Let me show you the local fare.”

He followed her down the steps.



The restaurant was within walking distance. The food, Cajun. From the décor Jason would have never guessed its five star rating. On the tables sat rolls of paper towels, pegboard games, a simple handwritten menu, and a small stack of cards for evaluating food and service.

Anastasia had Jambalaya, while Jason chose the Crawfish Etouffee. The tea was sweet enough to hype up a hummingbird, brought in pitchers and placed center-table so customers could help themselves. They sat outside, listening to seagulls chatter while the sun set behind them.

“My parents own the bed and breakfast,” Anastasia said. “I’m helping out till I leave for college. Psychology major, by the way. I also sell my jewelry, but can’t convince folks to pay what it’s actually worth.”

Jason paused, a crawfish halfway to his mouth. “Psychology.” He put the crawfish in. “You know that’s only a *bit* more respectable than fortune teller.”

She smiled. “Let’s talk about you now.”

He pushed at his last grains of rice, then spied a pencil half hidden behind a bottle of hot sauce. He traded his fork for the pencil and started doodling on the back of a rating card. “My mother died when I was eleven. Cervical cancer. And Dad, well...all I know is he would’ve pushed me harder if he’d had time.”

“Is he a good man? Someone you’d want to emulate?”

Jason kept scribbling. “I guess. I mean, he tries to give me what I want, so I’ll do what he wants. But all parents are like that, right?” He started to meet her gaze, but remembered how serene Anastasia’s eyes could be. How they pulled at hidden places.

“Okay, forget him. We still aren’t talking about *you*.” She put a hand on his. “What makes Jason Aves come alive?”

He felt lightheaded. His fingers relaxed under Anastasia’s, his grip loosening on the pencil. What did he care about? What was he truly interested in?

He thought about the High School he'd just left. Debate Team, Dad's idea. Science Club, co-sponsored by his father's practice. Then he went back further, remembering a set of pastel crayons an enthusiastic art teacher gave him in fifth grade.

The memory was a buried one, all but forgotten, though now it came vividly. He had shown a class assignment to his father. A drawing of a multi-colored bird, soaring. His father only grunted and said that artists starved.

But his mother had loved it, displaying it proudly in her hospital room. On the day of her funeral, Jason folded it and discreetly placed it under her crossed hands. It was the last thing he'd ever drawn.

Before he could dwell too long, his mind skipped forward in time—to a rare moment of praise from his father after a perfect score on a tenth grade final. "Good," Frank Aves said. "Now keep doing that. Maybe someday you can pick up where I leave off and save some other kid's mother."

"Come back, Jason," Anastasia called from across the table. She released his hand.

He flushed. "What just happened? What did you do?"

"I take it you didn't find your happy place."

He clenched his pencil again and began scrawling. "You want to know what makes me tick?" He looked at the note card, then to her. Back and forth, concentrating on neither.

But a wistful expression lit her face. "I really do."

"Trying to do the impossible," he said. "Make my father proud and let go of my dead mother."

"Ah. You're trying to prove yourself, and to disprove your greatest source of pain."

He'd never heard it put so. He met her gaze, awaiting further analysis.

“Let’s get out of here.” Anastasia stood, once again the weaver and breaker of spells. “Hey, that’s pretty good.” She picked up his scribbling and held it to a bare-hanging light bulb.

He stared at the mess of lines and felt his insides lurch. He hadn’t been drawing with intent, just scratching at the paper. But there, formed by a frenzy of whorls, smears, and crosshatch, stretched the unmistakable form of a bird, winging skyward.

“You have real talent,” she said.

He reached for it. “I was just...doodling?” He wadded it, and then tossed it onto his leftovers. Anastasia stared with an expression he couldn’t decipher: sadness, disappointment, anger? “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Didn’t think you’d actually want that.”

“I just hate to see anyone cast their gifts aside.”

There was no condemnation in her tone. Still, Jason had to steady himself as he went to the register to pay.

Then he walked with Anastasia down moonlit streets. As they talked he began to wonder—if she wasn’t magic, then she was, at the very least, some sort of hypnotist. He decided to spend as much time as possible with this girl who was so incongruent with the world he’d always known. Maybe *she* could call forth his courage and help him tap into the source of her serenity.

Then he heard his father’s echo. *Always waiting for someone else to solve your problems. When are you going to grow up?*

The sight of the bed and breakfast stilled his father’s voice.

“Grab your bags while I go get my jewelry and book,” Anastasia said. “I’ll check you in and introduce you to my parents.”



The next morning they ferried over together. They hiked and swam, while Anastasia filled him in on the island: the Timucuan, seven foot tall natives that the Spanish came to convert; the Carnegies, who pur-

chased the island as their private sanctuary; and the feral pigs and horses, both considered nuisances by the DNR.

Jason listened intently to this enigmatic girl. As they walked along the shore, he found himself wanting to press into her, to touch her shells and sea glass, stroke her skin, and smell her damp, salty hair.

She turned to face him. "I've got something for you."

She went to the skirt of her bathing suit, found its pocket and pulled forth a slim, leather cord. Dangling from one wingtip was a metallic bird—an amalgam of discarded metal that she'd obviously crafted herself.

"An albatross." Her eyes sparkled with the sea.

He recalled the epic poem. "Isn't that bad luck?"

Anastasia shook her head. "Coleridge calls the albatross a *good* omen. It's only hung about the Mariner's neck after he kills it, once the bad things start to happen. *This* albatross is alive. In flight even." She held the cord open. "Now bend over so I can put it on you."

He obeyed, and then fingered the dark metal. "Kind of crazy looking on me, huh?"

"No, Jason. It suits you." Her own neck was draped with a string of sea-glass. "You *can* be a doctor without becoming your dad, you know."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm not sure I do."

She took one of his hands, guiding it to the small of her back. "Take my word for it. At any rate, you do have a surgeon's touch."

He pulled her closer. Alone on the secluded beach, they kissed quickly.

"We don't want to miss the tour," she said.

They collected their belongings and hurried to the boardwalk, eventually arriving at the castle ruins. Anastasia fished a camera from her beach bag. Like all the tourists, they took turns snapping pictures. A mare and her foal grazing, an osprey alighting upon a tree limb, one another. They asked an elderly gentleman to take a few of them together, back-dropped by the crumbling stones.

Then the park guide came and began his tour.

“The official name of this mansion was Dungeness, but I like to call it the Widow Maker.”

Jason grimaced. Pure cheese. Still he couldn’t help but listen.

“On days like today, it’s not hard to imagine Nathaniel Greene dying of heat stroke while building the original.” The guide wiped his brow with a kerchief, as if to underscore the fact. “His widow finished Dungeness only to have it burn to the ground in the 1860s. Some believe the fire was set by former slaves.” He shrugged as if that was unknowable. “Fortunately Thomas Carnegie purchased the site. But, just like Greene, Carnegie died, and *his* widow finished the new Dungeness—an incredible Scottish-styled castle.” He took a sip from his canteen. “But in 1959 it was torched again, so that today nothing remains but an expansive set of ruins.”

“It’s still beautiful,” Anastasia said, raising her arms to the vine shrouded walls.

“All of Cumberland is breathtaking,” the guide agreed, leading them away from the ruins and down a trail. “And some very notable people have been drawn to it. Robert E. Lee’s father died here. Of course they moved him to Virginia, to place him next to his son, but the original gravesite remains—which we’ll see shortly.”

Jason touched the albatross. Were the father and son close in life, or only brought together in death?

Anastasia chimed in again, “Oh. And JFK Jr. and Carolyn Bessette got married here, in an old African American church.” She squeezed Jason’s hand.

“We’ll see that too,” the guide said.

Jason shook his head. Was there even *one* happy ending among the stories surrounding this place? But to Anastasia he said, “You’re so subtle.”

She put her head on his shoulder and whispered, "It was fate brought us together, convergent destiny. Our spirits are entwined now. Inseparable."

Finally he smiled. *Inseparable*. He liked the sound of that.



Week's end found them stepping forth again on the shores of Cumberland. He took her hand. "Let's get going. Our tent isn't going to put itself up."

With camp made and a risen moon, they settled in for the night. Anastasia removed her jewelry. She accepted his first advance, and they exchanged shy kisses. She stopped him though, when he sought to remove his albatross. The good omen would bless their night together.

"Besides," she said. "We're not going all the way. Not without rings and vows."

He smiled. Once again she surprised him. A free spirit that was not into free love.

Later, as they lie on their backs gazing up through the tent's window, Anastasia told him tales of French pirates that had once taken refuge on the island, of lost treasures and the ongoing struggle to preserve the natural ones. She told him of the Carnegies, hitching rides through the surf on the backs of sea turtles, masters of their own private Eden. Lying there beside her, he couldn't help but think how she was the real treasure, her arms the only true paradise.

*I'm not alone anymore*. He stifled his emotions before they could overwhelm him and curled against her to sleep.

In the morning Anastasia sat up and slipped on her necklace, anklets, and bracelets. She smoothed out her tie-dyed sundress then crawled to the tent flap. "Nature calls," she said. "Last night was wonderful by the way."

He furrowed his brow. "*Transcendent* is the word I was thinking."



She laughed. “Jason Aves, I believe there’s hope for you yet.” She moved outside.

Changing into his swim trunks, he could not believe what his life was becoming. Maybe he should even forget Pre-Med and pick a new major, maybe a degree in fine art. He smiled. Frank Aves would—

He heard a snort, followed by a squeal and a panicked scream.

“Jason!”

He scrambled out the tent and toward the woods.

Shoving aside a palmetto he stumbled into the forest and felt the world fall away. Anastasia lie bleeding, her right shin flayed to the bone.

“Oh, Jason!” Her eyes glazed then fixed on something behind him.

He heard hooves tearing up the earth. Turned just in time to see the boar—about two hundred pounds of fury—head down, tusks raking forward.

“No!” He put himself between the beast and Anastasia. Stretched forth his arms as if to wrestle it to the ground.

It went under his groin. Thrust its snout upward to send him tumbling. His head slammed the trunk of an oak. Fighting for consciousness, he watched it turn to Anastasia.

He heard her feverishly babbling, “Arise, my heart, take flight...I give my life... a sacrificial love...”



They buried Anastasia in her favorite sundress. Her mother picked fresh jasmine blooms and placed them in her hair. Jason noticed two empty eyehooks on her sea glass necklace. He stood at the side of the casket with her parents, determined to keep his composure.

Finally, her father spoke, “The park guide told us that the boars are usually nocturnal, and very shy. This was a freak event. Not your fault.”

Jason wasn’t sure who the man was trying to convince.

Her mother laid a hand on his arm. “I feel compelled to give you this.” She reached into a large handbag and brought out Anastasia’s

book. "I taught her never to question her intuition. We weren't happy that she went camping with you, but we trusted her. I think she would want you to have this." She pressed the book into his hands.

Jason nodded. "Thank you. I want you to know, we didn't...that is I didn't...you know. Your trust in her was well placed."

He looked at Anastasia's hands, crossed upon her heart. Touched the albatross still at his throat.

"Jason."

He turned, recognizing his father's voice.

Frank Aves stood there, haggard, eyes bloodshot, as if he were the one who'd been grieving.

"Excuse me," Jason said, turning from the Hales. He walked over to his father.

"I thought you were in Fort Lauderdale—" Frank Aves stopped. "It doesn't matter." He looked away. "It's all over the news. They were talking about how rare this kind of thing is. How terrible. Then they panned over to you."

Jason vaguely remembered the news vans, and giving a brief statement in front of a cameraman. "I would have called, but I was kind of ...preoccupied." He couldn't remember what he had said to the reporter.

His father put a hand on his shoulder. "Come home, son."

Jason sighed. "There's something I need to tell you."

When he'd told his father about the tin sitting in the front seat of his car, Frank Aves said, "I know she's your mother, but that's not your decision to make." He rubbed his cheeks, suddenly seeming ancient and infinitely tired. "But if it will help you, well, maybe we could do it together."

Jason frowned. Hot then cold, as always his father was predictably inconsistent. "Look, I'm sorry. But I need to take care of..." He couldn't bring himself to say her name. "They've asked me to stay for the funeral."

His father nodded. "Take a few days. Let me know when you're ready."



*He stepped outside the tent and followed a dainty set of footprints. Pushing aside the ferns and palmetto, he saw Anastasia, huddled at the trunk of an oak, draped in jewelry and Spanish moss. He hurried over. Knelt.*

*She opened her eyes. "What now? Do you build upon your father's Dungeness? Or leave it to crumble?"*

He awakened, heart racing like a frantic, caged thing. He pressed his face against his pillow. Though the nightmare faded, the lingering scent of his own sweat triggered painful memories—the salty fragrance of sea in Anastasia's hair. He heard again the surf breaking, and realized the crashing waves were his own heaving sobs.



The day after the funeral, Jason ferried to the island and sat nestled among the roots of a live oak. He reached into his backpack and took out his mother's ashes. *Mama, what should I do?*

Then he noticed a book shoved into one side of his pack. He set his mother's ashes aside and picked up Anastasia's tome, opened it and read. Before long, he knew what he was meant to do.



If it was designed to freak Jason out, the ritual was doing its job. Was it mere coincidence that he still had his mother's ashes, the one crucial ingredient? Or was something else at work? Convergent destiny?

*Maybe I'm simply losing my mind.*

He camped in the exact ill-fated spot, wearing the same swim trunks he had on when Anastasia died. Under the light of a full moon,

he knelt on the sand and opened his mother's tin. He put two fingers into her ashes and then smeared a cross onto his forehead.

He thought of all the Catholics he'd seen observing Ash Wednesday. What would the Spanish missionaries think if they could see him? Then he took the ashes and marked an infinity symbol over his heart, a circle around his navel. He closed the tin.

Though everything inside Jason clamored to turn back, he set his face, approached the forest, and pushed the foliage aside. He went to where she'd died. Knelt. A recent downpour had washed the spot clean and rejuvenated the crushed ferns and grasses.

Then he caught a hint of reflected moonlight. He reached down and picked up a sea-glass trinket—crimson, like a drop of blood frozen in time, and with a broken clasp attached at one end.

He put the sea-glass in the pocket of his swim trunks. *What now?*

He heard a rustle of feathers, followed by a screech. Looked for the source. A silhouette flitted across the moon. He started running, following the erratic screech and the sound of beating wings. Touching the albatross at his throat, he chased the one overhead.

*Now prove you're not a bad omen.*

He ran south along the beach, checking ever so often to make sure the bird was still there. It turned westward. He followed, into the foliage again. He lost sight of it, but kept moving until he found himself in a clearing. A shriek. He looked over. The bird alighted clumsily atop a tombstone. He moved closer.

General Henry Lee's original resting place, though now just an empty grave. The bird stared, bobbed its head as if urging him to look downward. He did so. There at the bird's feet, as if purposely set upon the gravestone, was another glass fragment.

He picked up the glass and held it to the moon. This piece shone blue-green, as clear as coastal shallows. His skin tightened into goose-flesh as he pocketed the glass with the other.

"What next?" he asked his feathered guide.

And was answered. *My precious son, now you face the truth.*

Though its beak didn't move, he knew the bird had spoken, and in a voice he'd never forgotten. "Mama?"

*I became as much a weight as everything else. But now let me help in the one small way I can. After tonight, choose your own path, nothing for my sake anymore. Or your father's. Know that I give you all my courage, all my love.* A sudden gust lifted the bird. *Come.*

He followed again, onto a sandy trail. It didn't take long for Jason to realize where he was being led. He turned a corner to arrive at Dungeness. He squinted, disbelieving. A shimmering patina of moonlight lit everything like a ghostly flame. He looked around but the bird was gone.

Then he heard Anastasia. "Hello Jason." She stood atop the weathered steps, a string of sea-glass about her neck.

He ducked through a wooden barricade, hurried up the steps to a stone doorway. It was Anastasia as he remembered her: in her sundress, eyes shimmering like sunlit waters.

He stopped, unwilling to reach out, for fear she'd evaporate at his touch.

"Beloved, why have you come? Do you know?"

"You have to ask?" He choked down tears. "For you."

She put an ethereal hand into his chest. "You will always have me. Right here." His heart kindled, and his entire being flooded with warmth. The aura surrounding Dungeness faded, transferring slowly onto Jason.

He tried to grab her wrist, but his fingers passed right through. "That's not good enough. We were supposed to be inseparable, remember?"

"We are inseparable. You have me in the only place that ever matters."

His voice trembled. "Then *you* tell me why I came. Why you had to die too!"

She pointed to the grassy fields beyond him. “For this.”

He looked to find a bloody-tusked boar, pawing the ground. He turned to Anastasia but she was gone.

He focused again on the boar.

“Be real. Let one thing tonight be flesh and blood!” He vaulted down the steps, slid through the barricade. Ran headlong, ready to pull those tusks to his chest—where they could razor through his flesh and cut out the pain.

The beast squealed, tearing the ground as it rushed forward.

He spread his hands to give it access, threw himself upon its tusks.

And found himself grappling with a human form. Powerful arms took him by the neck to wrestle him down.

“What are you doing, Jason? All these years and you’re still pining after ghosts?”

Jason lie stretched on his back, shoulders pinned under his assailant’s knees. He looked up into a shadowed, though familiar, face.

“Dad?”

A hand came down and struck his cheek. “She isn’t coming back! Why can’t you just accept that?” He slapped Jason again. “I’ve tried to do my best. Given you everything.” The assault now was verbal, as he yelled in Jason’s face, “What do I have to do? What do you want?”

Jason bucked, rolled his father off, and crawled atop him. “It was never about what *I* wanted!” He barreled in with both fists, punching in quick succession. “You never bothered to ask. Never had any faith that I could make my own decisions.”

He stopped. His father’s profile lie shrouded in darkness and blurred by his tears. When the head turned again the features had shifted. Jason stared into his own bloodied face.

“Have faith,” it echoed. Jason realized then that the voice had never changed. All along it had been his own, not his father’s.

Before he could process the realization, his twin surged upward, shape-shifting again. He tumbled, got to his feet only to find he was

once more facing the boar. It raced toward Jason, then hit him hard, throwing him into the air.

As he sprawled toward Dungeness, his head impacted stone. He struggled to rise as the boar came rushing, but collapsed flat on his back.

A snouted face hovered over him. He reached with both hands and took hold of its tusks. His last sensation was of a coarse, wet tongue lapping his cheek.



Jason became aware of a hand stroking his brow. He opened his eyes. “Anastasia?”

She leaned in. “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

He tried to sit up.

“Not yet.” She pressed gently against his chest. “You’ll be out of that bed soon enough.” Anastasia still wore her sundress, her lower legs exposed and unmarred. She stood barefoot, with anklets of aluminum pop-tops winking atop perfect, dainty feet. “My parents are in the lobby with your father. I found his number in your cell phone, and he got here within the hour.” She caressed his cheek. “He gave permission for me to be here when you woke up.”

Jason faltered. The simple gesture of allowing this girl to be at his side caused a subtle shift, like a cage door opening. He shook his head. “But how? I saw you gored, bleeding to death. Anastasia, you died!”

She scrunched her nose. “You rushed that boar before it could even get to me. You attacked it. Took the tusks in your *hands*.”

He pulled his hands from beneath the bed sheets. Both were bandaged across the palms, which he realized were stitched and tender.

She reached to his throat, picked up the charm anchored there. “I told you this was good luck.” She pulled her fingers away. “Oh. They haven’t done a very good job of cleaning you.”

Hooking the fabric with his thumbs, he gently lifted his hospital gown to peer beneath. Light gray patterns stained his chest.

Anastasia sniffed the hint of ash on her fingertips. “A spell!” She looked at him intently. “So did it work?”

Relief flooded his mind. “Actually, I think I completed one that you began.” He wasn’t going crazy. It had *not* been a dream. Jason pushed back with his elbows and sat up.

Anastasia didn’t protest this time, but instead helped adjust his pillow. Jason felt then the albatross resting gently against his throat. He looked to the sea glass around Anastasia’s neck. There were no empty eyehooks.

Then he told her all that happened in their now-averted future. And though the words were grossly inadequate, he whispered, “Thank you.”

Her eyes were radiant and serene. “So are you *truly* back in the land of the living? Have you finally laid your past to rest?”

Jason gave a single nod. “I believe I can even handle the future now.” Though still undecided about everything, he realized it no longer mattered. Whatever his decisions, they would be his own.

He kissed Anastasia’s hand, touched the albatross, and *soared*.

*The End.*

*The story behind the story: “Fledgling”*

After I wrote this story, I submitted it to a few of the major magazines that were active at the time. Most sent me a form letter rejection, but there was one that went on to say they were “going to pass on this one...” but were forwarding it to on their senior editor for further review. I got a few notes on what they liked about the story and that they were looking forward to seeing more from me. Alas, I never submitted to them again. That was back around 2001, as I recall.

More recently, in early 2017, I learned that there are those who want to rezone and develop Cumberland Island. At the time of this publication, the issue seems to be resolved and plans to develop will not move forward. I pray they never do.



The historical aspects of this story are true. The elements of fantasy and magic are also true, in the sense that this beautiful island evokes a peace and serenity beyond words. This story was born from my desire to pay homage to a place that has brought me much joy and great memories. It reflects the wonder I've felt every time I've visited, first with my wife and later our young sons.

It's a love story, with a dash of history, some folklore, and magic at every turn, I hope you enjoyed this tale of love, loss, and redemption. This is how Cumberland Island speaks to me. Oh, and if you ever get the chance, do visit the island. You will remember the experience forever.

Peace, JSW

## Miracle Child

If no one else noticed, José did. Aunt Joy was *not* living up to her name. “Aren’t you glad it’s my birthday?” he finally asked.

She took him in a warm, but weak embrace. “¡*Querido!* I’m thrilled. It’s just that I’m tired. It is a long drive from Havana to Baracoa.”

As she released him, he said, “Okay, but smile more, or I will think you really aren’t glad to be here.”

“You are too precocious.” The school teacher in her came out. “Look that up if you don’t know what it means.”

He grinned. “Don’t need to. I *am* precocious.”

“But not enough to beat me at *Utopia*.” She tousled his hair.

He raced to the console as fast as his little legs would take him. “We’ll see about that!” He logged on and brought up the game while Aunt Joy walked over. As he began to set up the basics of his economy and government, he couldn’t help but notice how slowly Aunt Joy moved. How frail she seemed. Something was definitely wrong.



Her Preclusion was the first one José noticed, a week later, just after his mother tucked him in for the night. It was as if his memory suddenly split backwards, forming two parallel tracks—one in which Aunt Joy existed up until the split, the other in which she never existed at all.

José was already awake when his mother came to rouse him in the morning. “Mama, did something happen to Aunt Joy?”

“I’m sorry, honey.” Grace Contreras smiled. “What happened to who?”

“Aunt Joy. Your little sister.”

“Do you mean Aunt Julia? Daddy’s sister?”

“No. I mean *your* sister.”

“Sweetheart, Mommy doesn’t have any sisters. I was an only child. Like you.” She tousled his hair, just as Aunt Joy would have. “I think you mean Aunt Julia. She came for your birthday last week, then flew back to Kublai.”

She got up from the side of his bed and pointed to the colorful map on his wall-monitor. “See, this is where we are.” She pointed to a green island-state of the United Amerigos. José knew it was Juana; the map had touch-screen text, which he’d used to learn the names. “And here is where Aunt Julia lives.” She pointed to the string of purple islands off the Mongolian coast. “At least I think that’s it.” She checked with a tap of her finger. The word ‘Kublai’ appeared.

“Mama, I know all that. I just turned four, remember?” He got up and walked to the map, picked up its pointer. “Here’s Europa, these are the Soviet Democracies.” He tapped in quick succession, the names appearing right after he said them. “And this big stretch of land is Israel. It’s where all the world’s oil is produced.”

His mother scrutinized the display. “Looks like you’re right, honey.”

José realized: *She doesn’t even know where all the nations are.* He wondered what else she didn’t know. Could it be she really didn’t remember Aunt Joy? How was that possible?

He decided to say nothing more about it. But later that day he looked in the picture albums she had made for him. There was Papa, Grammy, Uncle Hari and Aunt Julia, but no pictures of Aunt Joy. Then he opened the baby book that his mother was still meticulously updating.

The photos of his birthdays—the one he had just had and even last year’s—Aunt Joy was in *none* of them. Just like she was absent from the new track of memory that had emerged in his mind. But she had been in those pictures. Right there, looking over Uncle Hari’s shoulder. The picture of Grammy holding him, it had originally been Aunt Joy in that very photograph. And when he thought about it he could remember

being held for that picture, once by Aunt Joy and once by Grammy, at the same point in time. Though confusing, he *could* discern both memories.

So what had happened? He remembered Aunt Joy playing with him, teaching him to play hide and seek, and how to beat the giant in his favorite video game. But then there was the line of memory that insisted she'd never been there at all. José determined to figure it out. Find a way to bring Aunt Joy back. In the meantime, he knew enough to keep quiet.

About a week later, he discovered what had happened.



“They call themselves doctors, but what they’re doing is about as far from medicine as you can get.” José’s father, Eduardo Contreras—a physician himself—turned the volume up on the telenet.

José watched. They were showing a middle-aged man, smiling politely. The link-tag *Dr. Kenneth Preston – Head Physicist, Tempco* appeared on the screen. He was flanked by a younger gentleman and followed by a gang of reporters.

“Did *you* support the legalization of Temporal Euthanasia?”

“What do you think of the term ‘Retrocide’?”

“Just how much are you profiting from this?”

As Kenneth Preston stepped into the quantum scanner of a large corporate building, the younger man turned to face the cameras. “My client respectfully asks that you desist from following him. His views will be expressed through the usual channels. Thank you.” He turned and stepped inside the scan chamber, then followed Dr. Preston into the building.

José’s father logged off. “It’s not enough to go back and meddle with world events, now they’re screwing with individual lives.”

“Now, honey,” said José’s mother. “They don’t dramatically change things. Fate won’t allow it. And they take an oath to do only that which advances the common good.”

“Killing someone simply because they are dissatisfied with life does not advance the common good. Besides, what about those alternate news-files?”

“I thought they were all hoaxes.”

“Grace, darling, you need to be more skeptical.”

“But how would those files even exist if they’ve already changed things?”

“Quantum Rigidity. They can fix the quantum states of their time travelers, what’s to keep someone from tagging a news-disk?”

“But that would mean the data was tagged before the changes were made.”

Eduardo nodded. “Exactly. It would just take someone tagging the footage before the first missions even deployed. Hell, they probably did it themselves, just so they could have a reliable gauge for their changes. Afterwards they could just seal the records.”

“So you think alternate artifacts are really just leaks?”

“It makes the most sense.”

“To someone who’s hopelessly paranoid.” She smiled.

Eduardo did not. “Grace, this is how paranoid I am; I’ll bet there were even unforeseen chains-of-events that they had to go back and fix. Multiple times.”

José listened intently. So that was it. They were changing the past. And now they were actually erasing people’s lives. He asked, “Papa, why do they tag their time travelers?”

Eduardo looked at him, suddenly reminded José was in the room. Unlike his wife, Eduardo did not talk to his son as if he were a mere child. Instead he answered directly and thoroughly. “The first agent who actually changed something lost his mind—since his original memories conflicted with his new ones. So the government figured out

how to ‘lock’ a time traveler’s mind—they call it fixing his quantum state, *tagging*. As a result, agents can only confirm a successful mission by viewing news-files at their debriefing. To everyone else a change seems to have always been there. *We* don’t remember the original past. Does all that make sense to you, mi hijo?”

José nodded.

His father smiled. “You are a smart little man. Maybe someday you will grow up to be a doctor like your Papa, eh?”

José smiled back and nodded again. Maybe he *would* become a doctor, one of these time traveling kinds. That way he could change what was done to Aunt Joy. But even as the idea occurred to him, he knew he could not tell anyone. If Eduardo Contreras was to be believed, the government had recording devices everywhere.



Though he’d learned about Preclusion—as they were now calling it on the net—it still did not explain how José remembered when no one else did. That’s when he decided it was true what his mother said. He *was* a miracle child. But not because Grace Contreras had been told for years she was infertile and then, lo and behold, José. Nor because of his first word, ‘Mama’, at two months of age. It was because retaining his original memories, even as new ones formed alongside, had not driven him mad—so far.

José read all he could about time travel. Viewed every public record he could access. He learned about the ‘Multiverse Theory’—how it had proven to be false, as evidence by that first mad time traveler. When the wave function collapsed, all options not chosen disappeared and did *not* manifest as alternate universes. The only evidence that different realities had ever existed were the memories imprinted on the minds of the time travelers.

He learned how certain events seemed immutable: Europeans always found their way westward, the main thrust being Christobol

Colon's expeditions. There was no way, apparently, to expedite that process. And, though the most dangerous sects had been tweaked from existence, the older religions persisted, though in dwindling numbers.

The Abrahamic branch called Islam was the sole exception. Europeans had been assisted in eradicating its followers during a series of crusades, a radical, but necessary move, according to the net reports—to erase all terrorist offshoots and avert a once-probable World War. Now Judaism was the sole religion of the middle east, Buddhism was practiced in Mongolia, and Catholicism remained in Europe. This last had taken tentative root in most of the Amerigos, though only a few Juanans, like Eduardo, were strict adherents.

There were other events, of course, that had been manipulated. Kublai Kahn was helped in conquering the evil nation that had been called 'Japan' in the original timeline. His empire, along with that of the Soviets, was influenced until it eventually became a democracy resembling that of Israel, Afrika, Europa, and the Amerigos.

Other changes were more subtle. The predominant world language was English, though the influence of Latino explorers was still evident in the Amerigos. Some conspiracy theorists argued this was because the man who invented time travel was Anglo, and that changes were being made that favored the white race over others.

Yet, even though there were extremists who blamed time travel for all sorts of imagined ills—ludicrous things that they could not even *begin* to prove, given the current state of world prosperity—most everyone else agreed that these changes *were* for the common good. If Jose's father spouted off now and then, at least he wasn't trying to bomb Tempco buildings or publish unauthorized documents on the net.

Once, though, after one of Eduardo's outbursts, the police actually did come by and pay them a visit. Officers Juarez and Cruz, two of Eduardo's old classmates.



José was in the backyard, and the policemen either didn't know or didn't care that he could hear them. Bullies with badges is how his father described them.

Cruz played back the audio of Eduardo ranting to his wife, then said, "You need to watch what you say, Eduardo. You are respected. People listen to what you say."

"What, I can't speak my mind in my own home now? To my own family?"

"We think you might be poisoning the boy against authority," said Juarez. "That is very bad. What if he parrots you at school? There's no telling where it might lead."

Eduardo shook his head. "Yes, people might start thinking for themselves. We all know how terrible that would be."

"That *is* a fine boy you have there," Cruz said. "Would be too bad if something were to happen to him."

"Don't you touch my boy," Eduardo muttered.

"We don't have to touch him," Cruz said. "With a few calls, we can make it so he never existed at all, and the funny thing is, you wouldn't even remember him."

"So it has started already," Eduardo said. "For all I know I could have had many sons and daughters. For all I know Grace was fertile all along and José was the only one allowed to live."

The two men laughed out loud. Juarez said, "You always were such an easy target. Still paranoid as hell. Don't worry, Eduardo, we don't have the authority or the connections to make good on the threat. Not yet anyway."



Eduardo was more careful in what he said after that. And José was doubly resolved not to utter a word of his ambitions.



*I do it for Aunt Joy, but it will also be for you, Papa. You wish to be rid of this system, but you can't do anything without endangering your family. So I will have no family. Nothing they can use against me.*

But there was still so much that could go wrong. For one, all the really big changes were, so far, made in the distant past, so that José's memory was not affected at all. But what if they changed an event that occurred *during* his lifetime, one of such magnitude that it did in fact drive him mad?

José got nervous every time he became aware of a Preclusion. Of course he usually only noticed if it was someone he knew. When the old man across the street disappeared and his run down place transformed into the well-kept home of a family whose little boy had never/always been José's playmate, José worried, but again the duality did not drive him mad.

Even so, he began to keep to himself. Made no close friends and kept even his acquaintances to a minimum.

*The less people I know, the better. I must never get too close to anyone, lest my memory fracture to the point that I can no longer function.*



By the time José finished high school the ever-increasing memories still did not seem to harm him. Not so he could tell, anyway. Instead it was the loneliness that weighed on him. Could he bear this burden of solitude for as many years as it would surely take?

As always, he just pushed the matter aside, and took the next step.

"I'm so proud of you," Eduardo said. "Have you decided on a specialty?"

"No," José lied. When his father found out it would break his heart. Let them have these next few years together, before José had to announce his plans.

Just like with his SAT, José breezed through the MCAT. But even with that, and an impeccable academic record, he ran into problems.

Though still a minor, and against the screening psychologist's wishes, José was present for the discussion. Eduardo insisted upon it.

The psychologist did not look up from his chart. "A mild case of Asperger's was my first suspicion, but what José exhibits is subtly different. It is as if he is *willfully* detached. As if he refuses to even allow himself to feel sympathy."

José grew anxious. He hadn't meant to reveal this.

Eduardo huffed. "He is analytical. He has always been that way. Hell, I am that way. Are you saying I'm not a good doctor?"

The psychologist looked at Eduardo. "I have compared his evaluation to yours. Yes, I had them pull your eval. You may be analytical, but you are also *very* emotional. You care very much what happens to others. Especially your patients."

José felt his life's goal slipping away. "But doesn't the very fact that I want to be a doctor prove that I care?"

"No." The psychologist finally looked at him. "Medicine is quite lucrative. Perhaps, being Dr. Contreras's son, you are very aware of the privilege you enjoy, and would like to build upon that fortune."

José kept his face neutral. Surely even now his mental state was being assessed. "I'll make sure my patients get all the care they need. *Everything*. Isn't that what a good doctor is supposed to do?"

"What if they need a sympathetic ear? You can't give them that, José. Or rather you won't. Maybe your reasons can only be found on a subconscious level, nevertheless, you do keep everyone at arm's length."

Eduardo stepped in. "Just because he enrolls and is accepted, that doesn't mean he'll graduate. He'll have to pass the board review, right? If he fails at that point, *then* you can keep him from being a doctor, but don't withhold the mere opportunity."

It was this plea that finally got José accepted into his father's alma mater. The only school that would even agree to consider him.



He graduated first in his class. And by that time the psych-requirement for his chosen field had been updated, so that his eval was a surprisingly close match. But, just as José expected, when Eduardo discovered what his son intended he was livid.

“Mary, Mother of God, have mercy!” Eduardo genuflected. “A Retro-assassin! Years of your life, all that work, and you want to become a killer!” José’s mother just stood there, wringing her hands.

“A Preclusionist,” José said calmly. *Forgive me for what I must do.*

“Retrocide!” Eduardo’s face was red. “I don’t care if you go back and do it while they sleep. It still makes you a killer.”

“We trace back to the point of conception and preclude it.”

“How, by kicking the father in the *cojones*?”

José had expected it to be just this hard. “We add a contraceptive to whatever beverage is consumed by the mother. She never conceives. Not during that cycle, anyway. So, you see, there’s no killing involved at all.”

Eduardo shook his head. “I’m beginning to wish someone had done it to me.”

José frowned. “You wish you’d been Precluded?”

“No, kicked in the crotch!”

“Now, Eduardo,” Grace said.

“I swear, Grace, if he goes through with *this*, then I am through with *him*.” He stared intensely at José. “You are Catholic, José. You know the scriptures. ‘*Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.*’ This path you are choosing *is* murder.”

José didn’t even blink. “I won’t debate theology with you, Father. But I will do what I must.” *I will never stop loving you.*

“Son, you do this thing, become a Retro-assassin, and not only will the church excommunicate you, but *you* will be dead to me.”

José wanted to embrace his father, to somehow communicate his feelings. Instead he simply watched as Eduardo turned his back to him.

José hoped there was no camera recording the solitary tear that threatened to fall.



“You had an Aunt that was Precluded. I must tell you that from the start.” The head physician donned a net-glove and activated the virtual display. He tapped at a file icon, opening it. “You don’t remember her, but we keep a dossier on all our patients.”

José looked at the evidence that his father had been right—they did tag records of those events that they would change. There was a picture of Aunt Joy, just as he shouldn’t, but did, remember her.

*You were so beautiful.*

“Normally this would keep you from becoming a Preclusionist, but we had the government send us a copy of their file on *you*. For us they even unlock their tracking of your net activity. You have always been very steadfast in your interests. Even your psych eval marks you as someone who would excel in this line of medicine. It’s as if you were born to do this, José.” The physician smiled.

José did not smile back. “I believe I *was* born to do this.”

“Looking at that dossier, does it bother you?”

“No.” José studied the image. Read the application written in Aunt Joy’s own hand. ALS. A slow degenerative death.

*I would have cared for you, with my own tiny hands I would have.* José corrected himself. *I will care for you.* He noticed the date and time the procedure was initiated. Sixteen years ago, eight oh five p.m. eastern, just after little boys in Juana would have been tucked in for the night.

The physician closed the file and pulled up a readout. “These are your vitals. A monitor of your current sweat-gland activity, pulse rate, alpha waves. It appears you are telling the truth.” He deactivated the screen and removed his glove. “Congratulations.” He offered his hand. “You’ve passed your first test.”

José shook it.

“You know, José. Some people think we have no compassion. But the truth is, we have the *most*.”

José nodded. “I know exactly what you mean.”



José activated his copper bracelet, entered the date, time, and global position into its keypad. His trainer, Shauna, did the same. The tagging device was integrated, so that their quantum states became fixed as soon as their respective fields ballooned around them. As they phased out of the timeline and reemerged in a New York apartment, José wondered how the tagging would affect his memory.

He looked around. The single woman who would soon *not* become pregnant was at work. The technology that made time travel possible also allowed them to monitor any point along the time stream. The next thirty minutes were clear. Even so, each bracelet produced an intermittent tachyon burst—a homing signal lest anything go wrong and it become necessary to pull them back.

“You feeling okay?” Shauna was a three year veteran, beautiful and intelligent. Already she had hinted that, if José wanted, he could take her out sometime.

José nodded. He would never ask her out. No girlfriend, no wife, and especially no children.

She misconstrued his silence. “Sometimes an intern will get nauseated their first time out. It’s no big deal.”

“I’m fine,” José said. “Let’s do this.”

Shauna walked to the refrigerator and opened it. She took a vial from her shirt pocket. For now José was only allowed to observe the Preclusions. To learn, and to serve as an additional check to Shauna’s actions. There was no such thing as working solo. He watched as she opened a carton of orange juice.

While she unscrewed the cap on the vial, José marveled at the simplicity of the procedure. Watch the time stream until you see the target enter an empty dwelling, usually their own home. Wait for them to take a drink. Make sure no other fertile female drinks from that same container for at least two hours. Enough time for the drug to bond with specific enzymes in the target, while the unconsumed portion completely degrades. When these conditions are met, the entry point is established—at least twenty minutes prior to the target’s arrival, but no more than forty. The drug would be effective for this cycle alone.

José watched as Shauna emptied the vial into the juice. A single ounce. That was all. José prayed silently to Mary, asking her to intercede on his behalf, for extinguishing the spirit which would now never enter the target’s womb. *Forgive us, though he has requested this very thing.*

But the sentence *was* issued by the victim, who would never be born anyway so how could they be killed? Were they really killing a human soul, as his father, as well as the Catholic church maintained? After all, there were no needles inserted under the skin, no machine delivering carbon monoxide, no electricity coursing through the body, no forceps slipped into the base of the skull. It wasn’t murder, it was mercy. José had heard every comparison repeatedly in his own home, up until the bullies with badges showed up. The defenses he heard everywhere else. But he was his father’s son, and his guilt felt as heavy as a dead albatross around his neck.

Once she put away the empty vial and closed the refrigerator, Shauna walked to the window and motioned José over. “See that?” She pointed to the twin towers.

He gazed at the two structures that shouldn’t be there. She had obviously anticipated his guilt, and was trying to alleviate it.

“Every time someone questions whether time travel is a good thing I mention those. This technology has saved thousands of lives. Millions over the whole of history. The facts are documented.”

“I agree.” Though he liked Shauna, José did not trust her. “But how do you convince people that what *we* do is right?”

She smiled. “Think of the needless suffering we prevent. And there *are* restrictions in place. No one who is already a parent and only the youngest of siblings or an only child can apply. So it’s not like we are forcing anyone to be precluded.”

José nodded. *But I’m sure we’ll come up with good justification when we do.*



Upon returning to their facility, José was surprised to discover that the tagging had been effective, even upon him. There was no dual memory. Only that of receiving his assignment yesterday and then carrying it out today.

*Good. I can do this for years, as long as it takes to get close to Preston, and run no risk of going mad.*

That was how he was going to do it, he’d decided. Go back and Preclude the very man who invented the technology. That should undo it all.

Shauna went to the safe where they had stashed the tagged copy of their assignment. She opened it and handed the disk to José. “Upload our specs to the mainframe. That way the hospital can verify that we just completed an operation, and the government will credit our accounts.”



Within the year José was ready to lead an operation. As with all interns, for his first lead he was required to sit in and observe the final step of approval.

“Who is this man?” the old woman asked her therapist.

José answered for himself. “I am the one who will preclude your existence.”

She took his hand. “Thank you, for what you are about to do.”

José smiled, gently squeezed her hand before releasing it.

The therapist spoke up. “At this point, Miss Seaver, he is expected to ask certain questions. Is that okay with you?”

She nodded.

José prepared to read from his chart. It was more a test for him than a questionnaire for her. “Miss Seaver,” he began. “Has your life really been so devoid of meaning and joy that you would rather just erase it?”

Her eyes narrowed. “My parents abandoned me. I grew up in foster homes and was molested from the time I was six until I was thirteen. The only man I ever thought I loved began to beat me after six months of marriage. A year later he put me out on the streets while he shacked up with my replacement.

“I’ve been hooked on every drug you can imagine and spent half my life turning tricks to feed my habits. When I walk out of here today, I go back to the shelter. Tomorrow I eat at the soup kitchen like I have for the past ten years. I’m losing my eyesight because of an incurable degenerative disease. Do you really need me to go on? Because I can.”

Of course this would be a worst case scenario. One last attempt to convince any intern that might question their chosen career. José shook his head. “We can move on to the next question. How do you feel about the government funding your treatment? Do you think it is morally questionable for them to do so?”

“I think it would be wrong if they didn’t. Look, they’ll free up a lot of resources by simply paying you to wipe me from existence. I’ve always been just one more useless mouth to feed. Even I know that.”

*You are wrong. You have infinite value.*

More than anything it was what he wanted to say, what she had apparently never heard. And now she never would. He suppressed his emotions and continued down the list.



Somehow José made it through the survey. He watched as the therapist made a last mandatory plea with his patient before signing the form that would allow the procedure. When José finally walked away he found he was actually thankful for the experience. Though emotionally drained, he was emboldened in his life's mission.

But he still had to Preclude her. Probably hundreds more before he could get to Preston. He felt the weight again, heavier now. Not an albatross, but a millstone.



As the years passed, José proved to be the consummate Preclusionist. He advanced quickly, working his way up to lead physician in record time. He saw Preclusion become government directed. No longer was it merely a voluntary thing. Now the state could decide which lives were expendable. Of course some sectors of the public got up in arms when this began, but the door had been opened. Retrocide was not going away; even the term had lost its reproach.

And so, in spite of his true feelings, José defended the practice. Retrocide was solely responsible for doing away with the prison systems, welfare was only a few years from being completely unnecessary, and hospitals hardly ever had to deal with terminal disease anymore. Also, the very idea that they might be erased had motivated a lot of people to apply themselves and excel. Technology was advancing at exponential rates, the world economy was booming, even taxes and insurance costs were down. José spoke at symposiums and lobbied when he had to. Met with the President of the United Amerigos and other world leaders, and all the big names in the various medical fields.

But the Rabbis, Pope, and even the Dalai Lama continued to speak against Retrocide. José worried that he might someday be ordered to Preclude them.

The hardest thing, of course, was that José remained anathema to his father. It was a chilly October day when they scattered Eduardo's

ashes into the Atlantic Ocean. Jose's mother cried and clung to him, while he kept himself impassive and unreadable as always.

*Papa, what am I doing?* A sob caught in his throat.



The chance José waited for finally came. He was appointed Chief Executive of Preclusion, which meant regular access to Kenneth Preston. José arrived for their first meeting fifteen minutes early and was soon ushered into Dr. Preston's office.

The man had aged even beyond his well-advanced years. The wrinkles on his face were the same as the ones José had seen on his own father's. Lines etched more by grief than time.

"A pleasure to meet you, sir." José stuck out his hand.

Preston waved it off. "No need to bother with that nonsense. Sit down."

José did.

"I'm dying," Preston said.

So that was it. Which meant José needed to act soon, get as close to the man as he could, learn as much as possible.

"Nobody knows yet. I haven't told the press, nor posted it on the net. But that's neither here nor there. I'll get to the point. We're cut from the same cloth, you and me."

José smiled benignly. "How so?"

"I too have been a man of single-mindedness. Lest anyone turn me from my goal."

José gestured, palms up. "It seems you already understand me as well as anyone ever has. I am who I am."

"Just let me advise you, make the most of your time and continue to be careful."

José realized the man was speaking obliquely.

Preston continued, “I’ve been watching you for years, Contreras. Just keep in mind, striving toward an objective and achieving it can be two very different things.”

José’s heart sank. Had Preston somehow guessed what he intended? But he had been so *careful*. Had endured so much. Pushing his father away, keeping everyone else at arm’s length. He had even performed Retrocide himself, for years, all for the chance to get at Preston and undo this mess. But now, if the man had guessed all this—

“I opened Pandora’s box,” Preston said. “Didn’t mean to, but I did. I was looking for a way to solve the problems of faster-than-light travel. Wanted to get us beyond this solar system and populate the universe. Instead I merely gave us the means to tweak our own history until it conformed to what we think we want.”

José was unsure what to say. This was not what he’d expected. Still he kept his face neutral and gave a safe answer. “The world is a better place because of your work.”

Preston laughed. “You don’t really believe that.”

José didn’t respond.

“Yes, even now the government has its ears open to every word we say. Well I’m too old to care, and I’m dying anyway. From the beginning I knew if I spoke just one ill word, they would pull my funding then keep me under house arrest my entire life. And I couldn’t have that. Not if I wanted to get all I’d unleashed back into the box. You see, I remember everything, Contreras—every tweak of the timeline. As I suspect you do.”

Again no response.

“Most Recalls—that’s what the government labels folks like us—most of us lose our minds. And those that manage to hold onto sanity usually make the mistake of seeking help for their condition. Either way, they are eventually Precluded, for no other crime than remembering.” Preston grunted. “For years I tried to find some way to undo it all. I leaked so many tagged files that they had to actually pre-

tend they *wanted* the knowledge out there. But they were sure to explain why those changes had to be made: Japan was completely evil, ditto Islam. The few things they couldn't spin they labeled hoaxes, which the complacent masses were all too willing to accept. Besides, anyone that did get too vocal or acted out by trying to bomb Tempco buildings, they just went back and Precluded." Preston paused.

José waited. *He's trying to see if I acknowledge the bomb attempts. I remember them, Dr. Preston, but I won't turn that card for anyone to see.*

Preston cleared his throat and continued, "They never knew I was the source of the leaks. Of course, they're going to find out once they review this conversation. But I could never take direct action. What needed to be done would either short-circuit the time-stream or put me in an unending temporal loop. I was willing to take that risk, but they watched me too closely. "So I started watching. Looking for someone who would do it for me. A street-smart genius with a very specific psychological makeup, combined with a certain religious upbringing. I would do everything I could to see that this person rose to the top." He paused. "And here you are." He raised his eyebrows and said, "You know, only one thing remained in Pandora's box."

José finally accepted that Preston was indeed feeling him out. *He wants to be Precluded. He has virtually hand-picked me to go back and do it!* He nodded. Tried to keep his voice from trembling. "Hope."

Apparently that was what the old man was looking for. He smiled and leaned forward. "The ones you Preclude, do *you* understand them? Do you try?"

"It's no longer my job to understand them. I simply do what the government tells me." *And it is killing me inside.* José wiped a bead of sweat that had popped up on his forehead. Careful. "But I once had access to their Dossiers. I would study them extensively. Back then it wasn't enough to just *want* to be Precluded, each patient had to have their cases examined by the United Medical Judiciaries, then approved by their personal therapists."

Preston nodded. “To make sure they were as sick as they claimed, had no children, made no significant contributions to society. I know. But did you understand them?”

“As much as a person could understand someone in that amount of pain, I suppose.”

“And did you ever once believe that you were helping them?”

José answered truthfully, but so that other ears would still not recognize it as an admission. “If I did not think I could ultimately help them, then I wouldn’t have chosen the path I’m on.”

Preston stroked his chin. “Maybe the path chose you?”

“Maybe.” This was getting too dangerous. He needed to end this conversation and get out of here.

“I feel that way. But it’s more like I was hijacked by a destiny I never wanted. That picture over there.” Preston pointed to a wall on their right. There was a lone photograph of a young couple, a toddler on the woman’s lap. “Those are my parents, Ike and Donna Preston. That’s me when I was two. We’re on the patio of their favorite restaurant, *Gimlee’s*. They had lunch there every Saturday. Started before I was even so much as a thought.”

José could scarce believe it. The man was feeding him every piece of information he would need. He waited for Preston to guide the conversation.

“That’s what matters, Contreras. Family. Love. Caring about one another. Not chiseling away at history, sacrificing whatever it takes to get things exactly like you want. Or even doing away with the things you don’t want. Pain and Joy, Love and Despair, they all color our lives and shape them into things of beauty. If we’ll let them.”

Though Preston had said it for both of them, José was weary of guarding his heart. “My father disowned me.” His voice trembled noticeably. “We didn’t speak for the last thirty years of his life. I would show up for holidays and birthdays, but he refused to say a word to me. So I understand sacrifice. Just as I understand love. I never stopped lov-

ing him, and I believe, despite all his anger and disappointment, he never stopped loving me.”

“I’m sure that’s what keeps you going. Keeps you doing what you must do.”

José fidgeted. “Maybe it is as you say.” *Let’s get this done.*

Preston stood. “Maybe.” He extended a hand, the gesture apparently no longer nonsense. “Good day to you, Dr. Contreras.”

José gripped his hand. Felt the note that was surreptitiously passed into his palm. “Good day, Dr. Preston.” He slipped the note into his pocket and hurried out.



José knew a team of agents would soon start looking for him. It was an unscheduled jump, and a solo one at that, so alarms would go off all over the compound as soon as he entered the time stream. Preston had pulled up a very peculiar set of coordinates, which would trigger scrutiny of the video from the cameras hidden in his office. Soon government agents would review the conversation and would probably even see the note switch hands.

At any rate, José had dropped the slip of paper, the coordinates Preston had given him, into a trashcan, right in full view of an undisguised camera. It was common for someone committing a criminal act to make glaring mistakes. It would be interpreted as such.

But, although he had received the coordinates, José did not use them. In one thing Preston had been utterly correct. He was a watched man. To follow those coordinates would mean certain failure.

They were surely waiting there, undercover agents inconspicuously posted about a small café called Gimlee’s. Preston had obviously slipped in his old age not to realize it. There was only one way, and it too was a long shot. Same premise, but in a different place.

José prayed. *Do not let them guess my true destination.* He activated his bracelet, keyed in the coordinates and jumped.



Arriving in the middle of the street, José had to dodge an oncoming car. He hurried to the sidewalk and pulled the bracelet from his wrist. Crushed it underfoot to silence its homing signal. There would be no return trip. He looked around. Good. No agents so far. José was unsure if it was even possible for him to do what he was attempting. Still he had to try.

He began to walk up the street, straight for his parent's house, hoping that he had calculated his point of arrival closely enough. There. He walked up, vial in hand, determined to grab his mother and force its contents down her throat if he had to. He knocked on the door.

Eduardo Contreras opened it. "May I help you?"

He looked as young as José could ever remember seeing him. "I hope so," José said. He steeled himself. What if this didn't short circuit the whole time-stream like Preston thought it might? What if it only caught him in an unending temporal loop?

*My penance*, José decided. *If I loop for eternity it will be payment for all my sins.* "Is Grace Contreras home?"

"She's working," Eduardo said. "Always one of us is working. But tonight..." Eduardo grinned and winked at him.

José still had the vial cupped in his palm. He tried to remember where his mother had worked while his father completed his residency. Finally he just asked, "Do you mind telling me where she works?"

Eduardo squinted. "What is this about?"

José felt a bead of sweat snake along his temple. Maybe he could come back later. But then he considered that wink. What if *tonight* was the night of his conception? He had to act soon. "Sir, it is vital that I speak with your wife."

"Who are you? What are you hiding in your hand?" Impulsive as always, Eduardo grabbed him by the wrist and twisted his arm.

José winced, his fingers forced open. The vial dropped to the ground, bounced twice without breaking, and spun wildly toward a sewer grating. José gasped as it rolled to a stop and teetered on the edge. Remarkably, it did not fall.

Eduardo forced him to his knees, even as both of them reached for the vial. José was closer, however, and managed to touch it first.

It turned on its center, away from his fingers, and fell tumbling into darkness. In a single moment José, just like his life's work, came undone. "No. ¡Estoy salao! No! *Nooooo!*"

"What *was* that?" Eduardo demanded. "What are you trying to do?"

José began to cry. All was lost. He had to get away. Try to think of a way out of this. He tore himself free, wrenching his arm from its socket. He groaned and backed away from his father.

Eduardo rushed in, his right fist cocked.

In a moment of desperation José squared himself and kicked as hard as he could—right between his father's legs. He felt time slow to a crawl, as reality unraveled around him. Short-circuited by paradox.



José Contreras was born with a full set of memories. Still, he kept quiet until his first birthday. His first word was 'Joy', spoken to his favorite aunt.

*You will have what your name promises, I will love you so fiercely. You will not feel as though you face the future alone.*

When José was two, the problems with faster-than-light travel were finally solved, thanks to one Kenneth Preston. Even on Cuba's government controlled airwaves it was big news.

All across the world the ripples were being felt. Now there could be *real* change. Perhaps the countries of the world, with their various type governments, would finally work together so mankind could reach for the stars as one.



José decided that he would be among them. After all, they would need doctors out there on the new worlds. Eduardo Contreras, the city's best-loved police officer, would be so proud.

Though just a middle-class Cuban boy growing up in a communist regime, José knew that he could do it. After all, he was special. A miracle child.

*The End*

The story behind the story: "*Miracle Child*"

I love me some time travel stories. I remember as a child reading H.G. Wells "The Time Machine". Then it was on to books like "The Guns of the South" by Harry Turtledove, or "Timescape" by Gregory Benford, and "Replay" by Ken Grimwood, and a host of other novels and short stories. "All You Zombies", a short story by the Grandmaster of Science Fiction - Robert Heinlein, set the bar for just how weird and extreme these stories can become.

While I don't for a second pretend this tale is as groundbreaking as any of the above, I do believe it portrays the problem of paradox as never before. It's that moment of desperation near the end that leads to one of the most hilarious paradoxical twists ever seen in a time travel story, in my humble but accurate opinion.

When I wrote it, I realized that I must be some sort of gediot (genius idiot), or maybe even an idnius (idiot genius). Anyhow, this one was really fun to write. Hope you enjoyed it and God bless.

Peace,  
JSW

# Waking the Third Eye

## (or how Shimmel got his groove back)

For his eighty-third birthday, and to commemorate his *second* Bar Mitzvah, Shimmel bought a new perspective. It started with a gold and purple eye.

The young model in the holo-feed marketed Add-Apps with her four-breasted figure and a sultry declaration: “The latest in regenerative science our Additional Appendages are—”

“Appendages?” Shimmel raised an eyebrow and pretended to straighten his prayer shawl. “Is that what they’re calling those now?”

The girl smiled. A stall routine, he realized, feigning interaction while algorithms fed on his profile.

“Think of them as *pendulous* appendages.” She gave a coy laugh and returned to her sales pitch. “We also restore failing eyesight, replace faulty—”

“My eyes are fine,” he said.

“Yes... and such a deep, mysterious brown. A girl could lose everything in those eyes, Mr. Feynstein.” She winked. “Just remember our Add-Apps are backed by a two year guarantee...”

The interactive had gone viral in three cycles, but it was her next line, patterned for his general psyche, which hooked him: “...all the rage among the young and daring.”

Shim was neither. So naturally his mid-life crisis compelled him to disprove both facts.



And that’s how he found himself, three weeks later, gauze wrapped down to his nostrils. This, according to the surgeon, would keep his old eyes in tandem with the new.

“Couldn’t you just get a tattoo?” Yankel, the only childhood friend to linger into adulthood, snipped the scissors twice in Shimmel’s ear. “You’re gonna look like a total schmuck, you know.”

“You’re one to talk,” Shimmel said. “Zelda’s told everyone about your extra little friend. Now cut this bandage.”

The gauze parted with one clip.

Shimmel’s first sight was of Yankel, putting down the scissors and grabbing his crotch to shift things around.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time,” Yankel said. “But it just gets too crowded. Everything is in each other’s way. I’d have the shorter one removed, but that’s just more money down the - ah- tubes.” He straightened his yarmulke. “I’m telling you, Shim, you’re gonna wish you’d just gotten some good old fashioned body art.”

Shimmel blinked all three eyes as they finally adjusted to the light. To answer Yankel, he pulled aside his tallit.

“You mean like this?” He stretched his neck to show it was still there. *Amethyst*. Bioluminescent symbiots spelled out her name in flaming letters of red and green.

“You pisher! You promised you were gonna terminate that thing.” Yankel’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you’re *still* pining for that nafka?”

“Amy’s not a whore, Yankel.”

“Right,” Yankel said. “She only had sex with *three* men not her husband.”

Shim ignored as best he could. But he couldn’t help touching his neck, now that he’d exposed it. The letters gently pulsed beneath his skin.

He kept saying he’d inject a biocide or irradiate it—but couldn’t bring himself to do either. Thus the tallit, though he was no more devout than Yankel, and the reason for no new tats. Why bother injecting your flesh with a living memento that you couldn’t bear to look at—or part with?

All he could seem to do was keep hiding under a prayer shawl and away from anything that would remind him of what had been.

Like Tofu-kabobs, one of the many compromises at their wedding, which he'd loved to his surprise. He hadn't eaten any in ten years, two months, and seventeen days. Not that he was counting.

"Look, just tell me what you think, okay," he finally said, covering his neck again.

Yankel got up close. Looked Shim square in the eye. "Pretty. Figured you'd keep them all one color though."

Shim shrugged. "I wanted to be edgy."

"Unh-huh. Was that thing cultured or donated?"

"Both sorta. It was repoed," Shimmel said. "From an LSU dropout. Cheaper that way."

Yankel just shook his head. "Honestly, I can understand an extra eye, but in the *front*? So what if you have a higher line of sight? What good is that, really?"

"I'm tired of being practical," Shimmel said. "You never did say if you liked it."

"I said it was pretty. By that I meant pretty useless, pretty stupid, and not worth bupkis!"

"Thanks a lot, Yankel."

"Anything for you." He put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Now hurry back to WiOwnU already. Eight straight hours is killing me. And besides, you don't want them figuring out how much they *really* need you."



That first cycle Shim got absolutely no sleep. The bandage kept the movement of his eyes synchronous, but hadn't quite matched their circadian rhythms.

"I think that college kid was cycle-erratic," he said during lunch at the Kosher Koala.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding. Really?” Yankel studied the eye and snorted. “Your newbie’s just little riblets of blood.”

“I think you mean rivulets.”

“Freudian slip,” Yankel said, dropping a gnawed Koala bone to his plate.

Shim took a sip of eucalyptus tea, but found the idea of eating his wallaby burger too tiring to carry through with. “I’m sorry man, but I’m gonna have to call in sick.”

“Oh sure,” Yankel said. “I’ll cover your shift—again. What’ve I got better to do? Go home and shtup Zelda?”

And so Yankel went back to the Cube and jacked in, while Shim shuttled back to his sleep cell.

The process reversed itself this time. He got up four hours later with bloodshot lowers and a pristine upper.

“Oy, this sucks!” he said over a virtual feed.

Yankel laughed. “Hey, me and Zelda’s about to head over to Lackey’s. You game?”



On the way to his favorite Lounge, Shimmel’s vision blurred. “Crap!”

The eyes started to dis-align, then his vision completely doubled and he had to sit down. He took a sidewalk bench and closed his eyes. Though his fingers confirmed they were all closed, he started getting input.

*Has to be the new one.*

What he saw made his stomach lurch. It was Amethyst, singing the wedding song she’d written herself: ‘Ode to a Spadefoot Toad.’

*What’s that got to do with anything?*

Realization dawned for the first time.

*Was she high? Was I drunk already?*

They'd gotten married at one of her labs, the one near that podunk swamp half the country away. His family and friends had taken it in stride. There was Yankel, schnockered but smiling.

He relived it all as the vision played out in his mind. Watched as she tried dancing the Hora, lauding an amphibian for its 'vertically slit pupils and burrowing skills'. While everyone else sang Hava Nagila.

That night, in the back of her cloning lab, they'd begun their honeymoon—her naked beneath a labcoat, while he wore nothing but a blinding shroud of assurance that all they'd ever need was each other.

But he saw it all clearly now. Theirs was a match made in Dante's ninth circle. She was a black market geneticist, and he was just a data geek for WiOwnU. And all this time he'd kept some idealized version in his heart, languishing after the woman who'd left him for a one armed herpetologist named Billy Boomslang.

Well two armed again, he had heard.

Shim opened his eyes. The vision of Amethyst faded, while his sight synched again into one perfectly tall view of his surroundings. He wondered if it would ever happen again. What else might this eye show him? What other insight might it shed on his hindsight?



As Shimmel bellied up at Lackey's Lounge, he smiled at his friends and said, "First round's on me."

"Hi, Shimmie," said Zelda. She hung on Yankel's arm, a pretty young girl barely sixty. "You aren't really going to let him buy tonight," she cooed in Yankel's ear. "He's still *recoverating*."

Yankel arched an eyebrow. "Zee! Like I'm *not* gonna let this free-loader pay for once?"

The guy running the bar came over and stared vaguely at the center of Shim's forehead. "What's your poison?"

Shimmel winked his third eye. "Willie's Waster."

The man grimaced and took a fifth from the shelf. He poured the shot.

Yankel covered his crotch. “Not wastin’ my willies,” he said. “That stuff’s like a jacked-up antibiotic.” He looked at the bartender and said, “Schmaltz malt.”

The bartender pulled a bottle from beneath, opened it, and said to Shim, “He’s right you know. It’ll be like twenty four hours with an extra immune system—one that scorches everything all the way down. And *through*.” He put the fifth of Waster away and turned to Zelda.

“Zinfandel,” she said. “Hey, Shimmie, I’ve got this girlfriend I’ve been wanting you to meet. Name’s Reyna.”

Shim touched the shot glass. “Um. Not sure if I’m ready for that yet.”

“Not ready!” Yankel exploded. “Ten years you’ve been schlepping around, now here you are getting an implant and drinking this rot, but you’re still not ready to go on a *date*?”

“Blind date,” Shim clarified. “I’m just not sure I’m—”

“She’s very pretty, Shim,” said Zelda. She smiled at the bartender as he passed her the wineglass.

“Pretty? She’s a complete knockout.” Yankel picked up his beer.

“Really?” said Shim.

Yankel moaned. “What? You gonna believe me or your own stupid eyes?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ve got it!” Yankel snapped his fingers. “Why didn’t I realize this before? You got a two-for-one with the implant. Full frontal lobotomy, no extra charge. Am I right?”

Shim sighed and threw the tallit off one shoulder, jerked a thumb at his tattoo. “I’m gonna douse this thing, okay. That’s why I’m drinking the Willie’s.”

“Well it’s about time,” said Yankel, holding his beer bottle high. “Here’s to wiping that crap off your neck.”

“Like I’m gonna drink to that,” said Zelda, giving Yankel the stink eye.

“To what then,” said Yankel. “His lobotomy?”

Zelda smiled and, with a diplomatic tilt of her head, raised her wine glass. “L’chayim.”

“To life,” answered Shim, lifting his shot, and they all clinked their glasses together.

Shim pounded the drink and gasped. The shot glass shattered on the floor, and, as he fell, all three eyes rolled back.



He awoke two days later, a bandage once again firmly around his head, but not his lower eyes this time. “Ow.” His head was pounding.

“Shimmel the schlemiel,” said Yankel, standing up in the virtual feed and walking over. His holo-image stared down at Shim. “They took your new eye, what was left of it anyway. And I’m stuck here, covering your shift again.”

“What?” Shimmel propped on an elbow and tentatively probed the bandage. He looked around at the Med-cell.

“That’s right,” said Yankel. “That extra immune system wiped your tat clean, but it blasted your implant too.”

Shim closed his remaining eyes.

Suddenly he saw in his mind an image of Yankel: at his first Bar Mitzvah, dropping silent-but-deadlies while Shim read the Torah; then in their dorm room, tutoring Shim on the finer points of writing good malware; at his wedding, shouting Mazel Tov louder than anyone, and even louder at the divorce.

All along his life Yankel was there, calling him klutz, schlub, putz, schlimazel—like only the closest friend would. For all his bluster, Shim had to admit, the guy was a real mensch.

He opened his eyes. And here was Yankel again, leaning over his bed in a virtual feed, snatches of Cube interface visible around him.



*My Cube*, Shim realized.

“Sorry about your eye. But it did look pretty stupid.” Yankel sighed. “Now, about Zelda’s friend. You don’t have to marry the girl, but Zee has already started harping at me to talk Reyna up. And besides...” He motioned to the interface around him. “I figure you kinda owe me.”

Shim laughed, though it hurt all over. “You know what. Since you put it like that, sure, I’m game.”

And for the first time in a long time he was.

*The end*

The story behind the story: *“Waking the Third Eye”*

First of all, I have nothing but respect for Jewish culture and religion. My own beliefs are based on the teachings of a Jew, Yeshua, whom I revere as Messiah. The Jewish people have endured much in the way of persecution and vilification, often at the hands of people who confess to be Christians. With this tale, my intention is to celebrate this wonderful people and their culture.

In the opening scene there is mention of a 'second Bar Mitzvah'. At 13 a Jewish boy undergoes the Bar Mitzvah ceremony to move into manhood. The Old Testament also mentions 70 as the age a man can expect to live:

**Isaiah 23:15** ... *Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king's life.*

**Psalms 90:10** The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty...

Using these two significant ages, 13 and 70, some branches of Judaism have instituted a second Bar Mitzvah for a man who has reached the age of 83. Considering a normal lifespan as 70 years, an 83-year-old can be considered 13 in a second lifetime.

I don't recall how I initially encountered this little known fact, but I was intrigued by it and thought it would fit well into my story. Set in a

not-so-distant future, where the lifespan of humans has been extended, my story depicts a person in that season of life as merely 'middle-aged', hence Shimmel's mid-life crisis.

I also mention the tallit, which is a prayer shawl. The main character, Shimmel, uses it to cover a regrettable tattoo, and throughout we see that, while he is ethnically Jewish, he is not particularly adherent to any of its religious facets. I can identify with that, as I've been in various Christian denominations throughout my life and, though I am unapologetic in my beliefs, I strive to live under no religious law—only Love.

For anyone offended at some of the mildly risqué elements of the story, I can only say that I found them humorous and, in my opinion, crossed no overt lines. That's about as close to an unnecessary apology as you're gonna get on that one. And for the super sensitive religious types, go read the Bible in its entirety - seek out the literal meanings in some of the steamier passages. My story is no more graphic than ancient Scripture.

As for the repeated use of Yiddish in the story, that's one area where I want to clearly state that it's done in nothing but good natured fun.

I was born in the South, specifically Georgia. More specifically, Jeff Davis County, a place named for the sole President of the Confederate States of America. You just don't get any more Southern than that.

So I know how it feels to have my accent, and my colloquialisms used in a humorous manner, both to poke good natured fun and to belittle. There is a discernable difference. And I can often tell when a person is doing one or the other. Not always, but usually.

I have no problem with the first, but get fighting mad at the second. I believe that I have steadfastly held true to the first use in implementing Yiddish as an element of humor. I love the colorful aspects of that language and the words are just fun to say. So please see it for what it's intended to be.

Lastly, I wrote this story to show how the friendship between men may seem rough on the outside, but is often as selfless and giving as any relationship can be. This is ultimately a story about a best friend, sticking by his brother through thick and thin. Even while ribbing him in what may seem a merciless, unrelenting fashion.

In short, it's a bromance. It's also one of the shortest stories I've ever written, 2000 words at best, but manages to incorporate biological implants, mention of a one-armed herpetologist, a restaurant called 'The Kosher Koala', and the impartation of a sixth sense via the addition of a *literal* third eye.

Really, what more could you ask for?

Peace,

JSW

# The Vampire and the Professor

## (originally titled 'Transfiguration')

Xal craved exuberant life, pristine blood. The woman below promised neither. Though the night was awash in scent—blooming wisteria, jasmine, and honeysuckle—he still smelled death, tucked into the folds of her wrinkled skin, alongside the odor of mothballs from a cedar chest and sports cream rubbed into arthritic knuckles. She was not long for this world.

He decided not to take her; too many feastings on the infirm, though they'd kept him alive, had weakened him. His next prey should be young, healthy. He almost turned away, but was too intrigued. What was she doing at this hour, with waders and a dip net, waist-deep in swamp water?

He watched as she trained a flashlight on a protruding set of frog eyes and slowly raised her net. She plunged it into the water—so intent that she did not see the other, much larger pair of eyes moving in from the side.

*El Legarto.*

Even as he saw the creature, Xal felt its intent. The alligator lunged. Without thinking, Xal swept from his perch.

His momentum shoved the beast down. He wrapped both arms around its neck, gripping his right wrist with his good hand, and was pulled beneath the water.

*I'm too weak to kill it.*

He hoped the reptile would not sense this. A death roll could crush him against the bottom, or worse, impale him on a cypress knee. He channeled fear into the alligator's mind. It struggled to flee, and he released the chokehold.

Standing, Xal wiped the tannin darkened waters from his skin.

Elisa could not even scream. Merely a gasp and then a clumsy stride for the shore. But she hadn't fled. In fact, she'd actually managed to capture the frog. While her benefactor trudged ashore, she reached into the net and grappled the amphibian into her fist, dropping her flashlight. She fumbled the frog into a canister and screwed down the cap, hefted her flashlight again.

*I'll crack his head if need be.*

Then reason returned. Any man that could tackle an alligator would do as he pleased with her. She almost laughed. What would he do? Ask her to bake him some cookies?

*Lord, protect me.* She touched the crucifix hidden beneath her cotton shirt.

Xal smiled at her, careful to keep his lips closed, and stepped onto the bank. "Senora. Sorry if I frightened you." Already he was sending heat into his skin to quickly dry his clothing.

Elisa stifled her surprise. The man appeared Latino, though his skin and hair were white as the full moon shining upon this section of Okefenokee.

"The alligator frightened me. *You* saved me." She extended a hand, gazing into his pink eyes. *An albino*, she realized. Probably a migrant on his way north to harvest onions, merely passing by. Or was he in hiding for something he'd done?

Xal reached to meet her greeting and chose an alias. "Manuel Cruzados."

Elisa paused for the odd sensation of a thumb and lone index encircling her hand. She made an effort not to glance at his disfigurement, then answered, "Elisa Myrrh, College professor and all around grunt." She pointed to the white canister at her feet. "Students are on spring break, so I'm down here collecting specimens."

She went to a Jon-boat lying ashore and gathered from its belly a Secchi disk, conductivity meter, field notebook and so on, then divid-

ed the gear between two well-scuffed aluminum pails. Mumbling at the boat's latest compromise, she stood and kicked it.

"Rust bucket nearly sank on me. Got it to shore and, well, it's a good thing I had these handy." She unbuttoned both straps and shed the olive skin of her chest-high waders.

Xal frowned sympathetically, reached down and hooked the canister, then pressed it to his body with his disfigured hand. He unscrewed the lid and peered inside. He could make out three squat, amphibian forms.

"I'm something of a shade-tree herpetologist myself," he said. Which was true, given his various abilities and centuries of knowledge.

"Oh really?" She looked at him. The man did not talk like a migrant.

He nodded, screwed the lid back on the canister, and set it carefully inside the nearest pail. He picked up her dip net from where she'd tossed it. "What exactly is the nature of your studies?"

At this she raised a brow. "Help me lug all this gear and I'll show you." He knelt to take the pails. Elisa knew she should be cautious, but for some reason felt no immediate fear of this strange, almost angelic being.

*He did save me, after all.*

She showed him to her Jeep.



Back at her barn, Elisa dug through her pockets. She mated a tarnished brass key with its lock and opened the wooden door. She flicked a light switch, motioned come-hither.

Xal followed. Passing an old table, laden with mason jars, he stopped. He set down the pails and picked up a jar. "Nice specimen," he said. He peered intently at a frog poised upright in formaldehyde, watching as it made a slow, macabre pirouette. "Rana... *palustris*?"

Elisa stopped to face him. "Okay, young man, what gives?"

Xal smiled. *Not nearly so young as you.*

He sent calm into her mind. "Oh, don't be upset, you almost fooled me. I was about to label it *pipiens*, given the similarities." Pointing at the frog, he continued, "Then I noticed the blotches between its dorsolateral ridges. Rectangular, about fourteen of them. This is clearly a pickerel and not a leopard, as I suppose you expected me to say."

Elisa bristled. "I didn't *expect* anything. What I meant was, how do you happen to know that this frog is a Ranid, much less *Rana palustris*?"

He returned the frog to the table. "I told you already—I'm an amateur herper. Can't a person have hobbies?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "Come on then."

Xal retrieved the pails and followed her to a series of terrariums lining the back wall. He looked with immediate comprehension.

Behind each pane were various amphibians, all plagued with some radical deformity. There were eyeless frogs, tailless salamanders, frogs with up to seven legs, and some with only two. In one terrarium a tiger salamander boasted an extra head, sprouting gape-mouthed from its black and yellow dorsum. In another a barking tree frog had, dangling from its face, an extra set of flippers instead of eyes.

"Alas," Xal said. "It's the same all over Mexico."

Elisa swept a wrinkled hand. "All of these were collected right here in Georgia."

Xal touched the glass opposite a tiny spring peeper, tumors hanging from the cross-patterned skin of its back. "A depleted ozone," he said. "UV damage to the DNA of their eggs."

"That's one premise," she said. "But frankly I'm not sure what to believe anymore."

"What do you mean? The ozone hole is a proven fact." Xal prided himself on a wealth of human knowledge. "The oocyte DNA of amphibians is mutating under excess UV light." One more reason to hate that accursed Sun.

“Maybe. I’m just not convinced that’s all there is to it.”

Xal was annoyed. Was she a scientist or not? For a moment he contemplated snapping her neck and drinking her down.

“Listen,” Elisa said. “What do you say we retire to my home? We can keep each other company and maybe even get a good night’s sleep.” She doubted he’d slept under a roof for some time. “We can walk. It’s just atop the next hill.”

Xal accepted. He’d saved her out of mere intrigue, but now he’d actually been invited into her home.

*I can find out anything I want, and feast if she proves too bothersome.*



Situated upon fifteen acres, Elisa’s house was grand. The yards were abundant in sculpted habitats, shallow pools alive with quick green frogs and meandering salamanders. The house itself was of older construct, the wood painted a pale cerulean that seemed to glow in the moonlight. Its insides were just as pleasant, filled with antique furniture, original oil paintings of newts, turtles, lizards, and such.

Ushering her guest in, Elisa directed him to a deep, cushioned chair. “My parents left me what remains of the family estate. It has the barn and a pond just behind the tree line. I come to stay when I’m down here doing fieldwork. My apartment is near the University.” She opened an entertainment armoire and began rifling through her DVDs. “What say we put on a movie, drink some hot tea, and try to settle down for the night?”

It was her routine, after all. Why change it just because she had company? Besides, looking directly at this young man made her nervous. Perhaps a little distraction would calm her nerves.

“Ah here we go.” She chose a classic. “Lon Chaney Jr., now his was an era for fine cinema.” Slipping the disc into her player she realized—how exactly was a horror flick supposed to calm her nerves?



*First I invite him home, and now I'm watching this with him. She swallowed hard. Elisa, old girl, your judgment's become quite questionable.*

Xal propped his feet on a block of wood, apparently there for that purpose, noticed a relief carved into one side—a frog, sprawled and clinging. An etched signature marked it Elisa's handiwork. He smiled. As with all the art displayed about, the workmanship confirmed the talent residing in this woman.

*If only she were stronger. I would take her life in sweet doses over the course of an entire night.*

Elisa left for the kitchen, then came back and handed off a steaming cup of herbal tea. She placed her own upon a cypress table between them. She finally sat, then dug a remote from the cushioned chair and cued the video. "This is one of my favorites."

Xal pretended to sip his tea.

Having noticed the way he'd hooked the cup with his wounded hand, Elisa asked, "How did you...? You know?"

Xal smiled again. This he appreciated about the older ones. They were more to the point, less concerned about meaningless propriety. "Gang fight," he lied. "Shot with a sawed off shotgun." He set down his cup and wagged the loner at her. "Quite a tale, and I don't mind sharing it some time, but..." He motioned to the credits, "Our film is starting."

They watched the motion picture with continuous remarks, some related to the genre and others far removed. Finally, Claude Rains pummeled the werewolf to death with a silver tipped cane, watched in horror as it transformed into his own son, the gypsy Maleva eulogized, and the video played out its merchandising ads: Wolf Man T-shirts and the like.

Elisa rose and turned off the set. "Great art," she said. "Not like those gratuitous blood fests they put out today."

Xal was careful to avoid her gaze. Those ‘blood fests’ would pale in comparison to all he’d done. “Speaking of art,” he said. “I’ve noticed your paintings and etchings.”

She shook her head. “Just a hobby. Nothing else.” The way she said it belied her words. “Besides, my hands are too shaky for detailed work anymore. Fumble and grab is about all I can do.”

“You’re an excellent artist,” he said, meaning it.

It was Elisa’s turn to avoid his gaze. “Manuel, I usually read a bit before retiring. Would you mind waiting a moment?”

Xal was puzzled, but nodded.

She left and returned with a leather bound volume. She sat again, opened it, and read, “Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.” She looked at Xal. “That’s in Romans chapter eight verses twenty one and twenty two.”

“What has that to do with anything?” He seethed. She dared to read from *that* book in his presence. For this she would suffer.

“The frogs,” she said. “The mutations. All DNA is degrading with time—bondage to decay, groaning as in the pains of childbirth. Consider the lifespan of humans. Once it was nearly a thousand years. And now, well I fear I’ll soon reach the end of mine and I’m only sixty five.” She sighed. “But perhaps all that can change. When humanity truly realizes its own identity as sons and daughters of God, begins to steward this world accordingly. Perhaps...”

Xal furrowed his brow. The woman was mad, or perhaps only senile. Either way, she was a wealth of contradictions. An adherent to *that* religion and yet she called herself a scientist, a lover of horror movies who read from alleged scripture. He knew then how he would punish her.

*This curse I bear. I’ll pass it on to her.*

She reached over and touched his arm. “Think about it,” she said, not a trace of fear in her eyes. “I’m going to bed now. You’re welcome to sleep on the couch.”

“No,” he said. “I must be going. The sun burns my pale skin, you see. I move about at night and sleep during the day. Thank you for your hospitality.” *And for inviting me in.*

She looked closely at him. Definitely no migrant farm hand, if he was that vulnerable to sunlight. “All right then. But do stop again if you’ve a mind.”

He stood and let her see him to the door.



That night Xal hunted. But no matter where he looked he could find no suitable prey. There was a homeless man, but he carried HIV, Xal could smell the virus at work. Then he found a camper, but the tent was closed and the camper inside—effectively a sanctuary to which Xal had not been granted access.

By the time the first faint glow of sun dusted the sky, Xal had still not fed. He returned to Elisa’s estate and entered the barn—opening the lock with but a touch. He would take her tonight; he was too weak not to. In a corner he found a heavy tarp thrown askew. He hid himself beneath it and went dormant.



Xal dreamed, which for him meant sensing the images so vividly that it was like reliving events. He was back in Tenochtitlan, running in the sun.

The Spaniards’ arrival had changed everything. These strange, white monsters pretended friendship then decimated his people. They forbade him to speak in his own language, forcing him to learn theirs,

condemned worship in the ancient temples, insisting that he cling to their god instead. He vowed never.

So they chained him in the center of a courtyard and denied him water, driving him mad with thirst and unbroken sun. But Xal was Azteca, smaller than the Spaniards and, though it scraped the skin from around his hands, he managed to pull his wrists through the shackles.

Then he ran.

The dream shifted, to the sixth day of Xal's escape. He knelt in the darkness, by a sacrificial pool. He considered lashing boulders to his neck and jumping in, but something stayed him. A soft, seducing voice in his mind.

*Revenge*, it promised. *I can help you.*

*Who are you?* He did not speak aloud.

*Quetzalcoatl*. The feathered serpent. *Be my disciple. My swiftly striking son. Only begotten.*

Xal saw the full moon reflected in the pool, watched in the water as a cloud writhed across the moon's surface, descending. He raised his face to the sky. *Yes*, he thought. *Yes* to everything.

Thus was he transformed. As his flesh lost all its color, Quetzalcoatl imparted everything Xal would need to know. Avoid the sun, let no wood pierce his flesh, never enter a human abode uninvited—lest opposing spirits assail him, and feed on human blood. He could move silent as a jaguar through the forest, leap so far and quick that he almost soared, send impressions and emotion into the minds of men and creatures, and, best of all, live forever. Just like the gods.

After that night, he veritably flew through the rainforest—descending on his victims like a taloned eagle, striking swift as a serpent. Quetzalcoatl incarnate.

In his dream Xal savored the revenge that followed. He became a plague upon the Spaniards; draining their blood, snapping their necks, or tearing out their beating hearts with his bare hands. But they were

too many and kept coming. He could never kill them all. So eventually he started to roam, moving north, killing his way through the centuries.

He never aged, but he could be hurt. It wasn't the spearhead slicing through his palm that stopped him short, but the wooden shaft as it entered his hand. Everywhere it touched raw flesh, he felt the meat shrivel and die. Still he tore his hand free, watching as three fingers rotted and fell away. Then he pushed on into the young Apache and tore out his throat. And though his wound healed very quickly—that very night, in fact—his powers did not extend to regeneration.

And ultimately he discovered, Quetzalcoatl had betrayed him. Xal witnessed his civilization fade to a shadow of its former glory and then disappear. Living always as an outcast, he watched while the world continued to change around him. He tried to keep up, learning all he could about the societies that kept evolving. He could speak numerous languages and dialects, became a voracious reader, self taught in mathematics and several branches of science, and he grew to appreciate and recognize great art.

Only two things he eschewed, technology and religion. He found the former too inaccessible—being a nomad it was difficult for him to acquire anything more than a passive acquaintance with the tools mankind kept developing. As for religion, he had grown to hate it. Quetzalcoatl ceased speaking to him. When the old ways faded into the past, the old gods seemed to pass away as well. As for the Christ-god, so much pain had been wrought in that name that he would not speak it, or long tolerate anything related to it.

*Where are you Quetzalcoatl?* he asked.

Xal was still in dormancy, but no longer dreaming. His sleep state deepened as his question went unanswered and his mind fell dark and blank.



When he awoke it was night again. He sat up slowly, moving the tarp from over him. He was not alone in the barn. He could smell death, moving about.

*Elisa.*

She stood by her specimen jars, not twenty feet away. "I knew you were in here, Manuel." She did not look at him. "I've been having the strangest daydreams about you. Perhaps you could explain them to me."

And he realized;

*She's caught the overflow of my dreams. Suspects what I am.*

"You can kill me if you want," she said, turning to face him. "But first I want you to hear *my* story."

He considered her countenance. So resolute and brazen. "Perhaps it is why I've spared you thus far." Had she been younger, he might have taken her for a mate, though he'd learned long ago that his kind was sterile. Mercifully so.

She motioned him over and pulled two folding chairs from behind a broken down tractor. They sat.

After a long pause, she started. "I wanted to be an artist," she said. "But my father was a medical doctor with other ideas. I was an only child, and he wanted one of two things for me. That I marry a doctor, or, failing that, become one myself. Well, I never married. But I did enter college, pursuing a biology degree on my way to following in Father's footsteps. Then I fell in love." She reached over to the table and picked up a jar. The lizard within tumbled slowly. "Amphibians and reptiles were just so *fascinating*."

"You became a scientist," Xal said.

"A biologist. I teach ecology and herpetology. And I've done a lot of research that only a handful of people really seemed to care about. This infuriated Father. I'd effectively pursued a career every bit as lucrative as that of an artist." She smiled. "But it wasn't out of spite, Manuel. I truly loved what I did. Still, if I had it to do over..."

“Did you reconcile with him?” Xal remembered seeing his own father skewered by Spanish blades. His mother taken away and never seen again.

“The year he died he became a follower of Christ. And, after a stubborn battle on my part, he introduced me to God. So yes, we made our peace. But, I don’t know, since I’ve become a Christian, it’s made me question my whole life’s work. What difference have I really made? I haven’t furthered His kingdom by even one soul.”

Xal had no answer. “We all have regrets,” he said.

*What am I doing? Why am I trying to comfort this human?*

“When I talked with you last night I thought, ‘Oh to be young again’. The things I would do. But you are not young, are you... *Manuel?*”

“My name is Xal,” he admitted.

“Saul? Are you on your way to Damascus then?”

He frowned. Her reference was lost on him. “You would spell it X-A-L. But, as you were saying, what things would you do—if you had it to do again?”

She looked away. “Follow my first passion wholeheartedly. Instead of simply studying and championing His creations, I would make art to glorify the Creator. Does that make sense to you?”

He thought of the Great Pyramid built for the deities Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. “It sounds like what men have been doing throughout all time.”

“Xal,” she tried out his true name. “Do you even know God?”

He wanted to scream at her. *I am God! Incarnate!* He wanted to bare his fangs and see her tremble in raw, primal fear. But the way she smiled at him, so sublimely, stirred something of the human in him. He remembered his own mother smiling that same way so many centuries ago.

“A new name,” he said suddenly, to regain control of the conversation and his own composure. “If you were to start over you would need a new one. What would you choose?”

“What a strange question.” She frowned and something like worry crossed her countenance. “I think I’m tired of this conversation.” She moved as if to get up.

Xal grabbed her wrist. “I would hear you choose a name.” She would soon need one.

She calmed and then peace came over her face. Finally she said, “Shekinah.”

“What?” Xal felt his pulse hammer in his temples. The blood lust coming upon him? No, it was different. Strange and confusing, almost like...*fear*?

“Shekinah,” she said again. “That would be my name. A walking tabernacle for the presence of God, shining forth his love so that it touches everyone and they become radiant too. Like God’s glory on the face of Moses when he came down from Sinai.”

“I don’t know that story.” He felt a hunger rising in his heart. Again, not the blood lust, but still an urgent sense of need. But for what?

*Redemption*, whispered a still, small voice.

Quetzalcoat? He had not heard the voice of his master in ages. He no longer recognized it.

**No**, came the reply, stronger now. ***I am Truth. I am Love.***

He pushed the voice aside, turning his attention to Elisa. “Are you aware that you are dying?” He felt a tear flow. *Am I crying?*

She nodded. “Terminal brain tumor is what the doctor said. Impairs my judgment, makes my hands shake. I’d blame the arthritis on it, but I had that before.” She reached over with a gnarled, trembling finger and wiped the tear from his cheek. “That’s part of the reason I don’t fear you. I don’t know what you are, but I think God sent you to me. Please, let’s continue this conversation in my home.” Elisa stood.



"The furniture is much gentler on these old bones." She folded the metal chair and put it away.

Xal followed her lead and then closed the door behind them.



Back at her house, they entered the den where they'd shared tea. Xal sat while Elisa went to her room. She came back with her Bible. "There's something in here I need to share with you before I die."

"You don't have much time." He meant more than she would think.

"It won't take long." She sat. "I'm only going to tell you ...everything."

When she finished, she set the Bible in her lap, bowed her head and closed her eyes, but not to pray. Her strength was gone, her life slipping away. Xal knelt at her feet, took one of her hands in his own. He raised it to his mouth.

*You will not die today, Senora.* His lips parted.

Elisa's eyelids fluttered open. "No," she whispered. Realization lit in her eyes. "Not that."

He bit down.

*Here, sweet Elisa.*

Xal did what he'd never done before. Instead of taking her blood, or initiating the process that would make her as undead as himself, Xal began to press his remaining life-force into her. No blood flowed, only the life that was in it. Whatever time he'd stolen he now gave away. It would not add centuries to her life, would not transform her into an unholy creature, but it might add years and vigor.

*I am through with this world,* he decided. *I am so sorry. Please forgive me.* His thoughts were no longer directed at Elisa. *I accept. Believe! Oh...*

Xal opened his mouth and released Elisa. He crumpled in a heap, as her wrist slipped from his hand.



When Elisa woke, she saw the young man lying askew on the floor. She recognized his face, though the skin was brown as potter's clay and the hair obsidian black. His eyes were closed, but his lips were parted in a beatific smile. His teeth were white and straight, but otherwise unremarkable. And both hands were intact, folded together as if in prayer.

She touched him.

He dissolved into a golden dust that shimmered and then quickly disappeared.

Elisa flexed her hands. Though wrinkled and spotted with age, they moved freely and painlessly. The arthritis was gone. Moreover, the constant ache in her head had ceased. There were two puncture wounds in her wrist that had already scarred over.

*My own stigmata*, she thought. She stood, realizing she had not felt this vibrant in years. She went to the window and pulled back the curtains to let the sunlight in.

*I have to capture this feeling, before it's gone.*

She went to her closet, took out paint, easel, brushes—set it all up on the very spot that Xal had fallen upon, and painted.

She painted all morning, translating into images the last impression Xal had sent into her mind: A colorful plumed bird, tropical and regal. Soaring upwards alongside it was a dove, white and lovely. Below them on the ground a serpent writhed, its head crushed.

When she finished she stepped back to study it. Good. It was very good. She signed in a controlled, elegant script.

*Shekinah.*

*The End*

The story behind the story: "*The Vampire and the Professor*"

This story was one I wrote when the whole vampire market was blowing up: Buffy, the movie version of Anne Rice's "Interview with the Vampire", then the Twilight novels, the Vampire Diaries television series, True Blood," and a host of others.

One thing else I'll mention is the fact that I really don't like vampire movies. They just freak me out too much. I grew up watching the old black and white classics on "The All Nightmare Movie" that came on WTOC out of Savannah every Saturday night.

The host was Jack North and he would throw in little details about who starred in the movie, historical factoids, insert the occasional zany humor, etc. For a twelve year old boy it was an education in horror movie classics. I discovered Bela Lugosi, Lon Chaney Sr. and Jr., Boris Karloff, Claude Rains, and a slew of lesser known actors.

Anyway, as I wrote this story, I wanted it to be in the same tone as those old classic movies. Suspenseful, foreboding, but without any bloody attacks like you saw in those first few minutes of 'Blade'. Which was more than I could take, by the way; I do NOT recommend that movie.

The first screen vampires to freak me out were on the original TV mini-series for 'Salem's Lot'. The blue alpha vampire that was clearly channeling Max Schreck's 'Nosferatu', then the floating vampire at the window, scratching on the glass. Ughh, I still shudder.

Then 'the Lost Boys', while possibly the coolest vampire movie ever made, just had my insides all knotted up, when the frog brothers crawled into the vampire lair during the daytime. (You know, for someone who doesn't like vampire movies, I sure have seen a lot of them!)

But back to my point; the original 'Dracula' with Bela Lugosi had a level of creepiness that I wanted to emulate, and with none of the gore that I came to loathe. So I set out to write a vampire story that paid homage to the classics, while putting an original spin on the genre, with my personal worldview inserted as well. I wanted to tell a 'Christian' vampire story, if such a thing were even possible.

Narrowing down my focus, as you must do when writing short fiction, I began to explore the question of whether or not a vampire could experience salvation. I decided for the purposes of my story, that the answer would be yes, and set out to find out what that might look like. I'm pretty pleased with the results.

This is one of my personal favorites as far as my own short stories go. But I'm really more curious as to what YOU think. Did you enjoy the ride? And more than that: Do you have a favorite horror story/movie? If so, what is it? (respond at [jsw@jsworth.com](mailto:jsw@jsworth.com)) I'll be watching my inbox to see what you have to say.

Peace,

JSW

## Sacramento

Crossing the wide, concrete bridge in his dad's old pickup, Zack Darby saw a ghost. He looked right through her torso to the banks on the far side of the Altamaha river. Then he slowed, staring as he drove past.

Pulling as close to the guardrail as possible, he stopped.

He spied the girl in his rearview. She stood on the wrong side of the rails—clinging to the concrete posts with both hands—and leaned, arms stretched out behind. Zack checked for traffic, then got out, slammed the door, and turned.

That's when he recognized this translucent version of a girl who sat on the opposite side of his art class.

"Penny?" He moved forward, unsure what he would do.

She released the guardrail, tumbled forward and vanished.

Zack reached the rail and looked over. Georgia was entering another drought, so he knew that only shallow water and rocky shoals lie below. He scanned the ground anyway. Nothing but sand, chunks of flint, and tumbled stone.

A flashback, it had to be. He'd only done LSD a couple of times, and over a year ago. Still, it was the only explanation. Unless...

"Darby, get that piece of crap out the way!" It was Phillip Lee, pulling up behind in his Corvette, poking his head out the driver's side window.

Zack wiped his brow and stood. "Thought I saw a gator."

"I've seen plenty of gators, so have you and everyone else in fifty miles. What's a matter? Sweatin' off another bad trip?"

Zack made his way to his truck and opened the door. "I'm clean dude. Three months now." Technically true. Sure there was a dime bag of homegrown hidden in his cattle skull, but it was absolutely the last of his stash, just in case.

Phillip smiled and leaned even farther out his window. "Right. Seriously, you know where I can score some?"

"I'm going to school now, Phil-boy."

"Party at my place Friday night. Bring some of what you've coming down from."

Zack got in his truck and put it in gear.



The last time he'd experienced such a thing, Zack had been too young to do much about it. So this time he didn't hesitate. That morning during art class he took the first step as their teacher asked in his unhurried, almost lazy drawl, "...and what about you, Mr. Darby?"

"Penny," Zach said. The whole room tensed.

Penelope Wilkes didn't answer. Like everyone else she sat in stunned silence.

Zack stared at her and raised his eyebrows. "Partners?"

She blinked. "Yes...uh...fine with me." She went back to reading a worn paperback.

Mr. Beale stepped over and stopped right beside Zack. He leaned over and whispered, "Maybe there's hope for you yet." Then he went alphabetically to the next unpartnered student. "And who would you prefer to work with Miss Dirks?"

Zack tuned out. He began to study the girl across the room from him, started sketching her pale eyes, the copper flecks upon her skin. She wore a dark shirt with sleeves past her wrists and a high neckline that hid everything, save the rosary draped over it—the one tangible artifact separating her from the Baptists in this part of Georgia. No matter, Zack realized, her difference was still palpable.

But it was done. For the rest of that week he'd sit next to her, constructing pinhole cameras.

"You'll pair up tomorrow," Beale instructed. "For now I want to go over assembly. You can use virtually anything, but we'll stick with the basics—shoeboxes and oatmeal cylinders. And when you take your pic-

tures I want you to choose a location that you find interesting and incorporate objects that have special meaning for you.”

Zack immediately thought of the alabaster head on his nightstand. Maybe even the cattle skull hanging on his wall.



He was on his way to the parking lot after school when Phillip clamped him by the shoulder. “*Penny* for your thoughts.” He leaned close and laughed. “Dude, what’s up with you? What’s Charlene gonna think?”

“She broke it off with me, Phil-boy. Weeks ago. And I got my reasons, okay.” He didn’t need to justify everything to the in-crowd, did he?

“It’s cool. You’re Zach D, resident artist. Probably designed tats for half the county.”

Zack smiled. The count was exactly ten. And there were none on his own body, no token piercings, not even facial hair.

“I’d be careful though,” Phil said. “You go banging old Penny Prayer-beads and all bets are off.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“So you gonna score us some for the party Friday night or what?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Righteous.” Phil slapped his back and trotted off.

Zack just shook his head. He may have made a few sacrifices to fit in, but Phil tried way too hard. The guy was a chameleon. *Righteous?* Who said that anymore? Obviously Phil thought that artsy dope-dealers did.

Zack considered not even going to the party, but everyone would be there. Everyone but Charlene, he realized. She’d be up at UGA with her new boyfriend; third string quarterback was what he had heard.

He got to his pickup, climbed in, and fired the engine. Randomly grabbing one of his dad’s old cassettes, he slammed it into the tape deck.

Show me the way, Dad.

Neil Young was in mid-song, singing praise to a 'Cinnamon Girl'.



When he got home Zack entered to the smell of incense and heard Jim Morrison groaning. Not a good sign. His mother met him in the den with wine on her breath. He bent to kiss her cheek, had to brush aside a feather to do it.

Barely able to look at her, he made for his bedroom. He closed the door and picked up the chunk of alabaster on his nightstand. He handled it carefully, knowing it was a touchstone for emotional avalanche.

He sighed. Why did his mother have to be so *unbalanced*? Maureen Darby was just one more reason he eschewed the stereotypical artist mold. Because her arms bore wolves and snakes—her 'totems'—Zack vowed to keep his skin clean. And since she braided her hair around beads and feathers, he kept his one color and at a respectable length.

She even wrote incoherent poetry and made dream catchers, which were stationed all over the house. Still, if that was the extent of her weirdness, Zack could have overlooked it.

Ever since his father had died, she had gotten progressively worse. First she'd abandoned the church, refusing any solace they extended, claiming that God had 'taken her Ronnie.' But even if there was a God, he hadn't taken Ron Darby.

A bullet through the head had done that. Since there was no suicide note, and by virtue of the fact that cleaning supplies for the gun had been all neatly set out, the death was ruled an accident.

And, bless her heart, but Zack thought his mother actually believed that lie.

Even so, his father had done right, Zack admitted. By making it look like an accident Ron Darby assured his family would be taken care of. They were still getting by with the insurance money.

But Zack knew all along that it was no accident. He'd tried to convince himself otherwise, but in his heart he knew. For he remembered



seeing it happen—about a week before it actually did. A transparent version of his father stood in the backyard and held the gun a few feet away, pointing inward at a certain angle, and deliberately pulled the trigger.

The psychiatrist had called it post-traumatic stress disorder. Zack had not foreseen the event, the man claimed, but was simply confused—as any ten year old would be after finding his father that way.

The ‘memory’ was a reaction to emotional trauma, and had somehow implanted at a point prior to the event that had caused it. A most intriguing case, the doctor said, but definitely *not* precognition.

Zack had tried to believe it was so. After all, doctors were doctors while he was just a kid. Even now, he couldn’t blame the doctors for grasping at the only explanation that made sense. He could understand that, just as he could overlook his mother’s willful insistence in believing a lie.

The one thing Zack *couldn’t* overlook in all this mess was the alabaster head now in his hands. It came from a cherub he had bought for his father’s grave. When his mother had seen it, she cast it to the ground, shattering it.

“There were no angels watching over him when he died, and he damn well doesn’t need any now!”

Zack was only twelve when that happened. He’d picked up the cherub, but it was broken in too many places. Only the head remained somewhat intact. It was after that that he started using pot, then dealing a little too. Slowly he forged a persona for himself, just an average guy—but one who could get you anything you wanted.

Zack rolled the angel head over in his hands and cursed his mother again. Now she had the audacity to be *dying*.

He set the head back down. It and the skull would do for the pictures. He gave a half-hearted laugh. Two severed heads embodied all he had to say.



“So how’s your mother doing?” Penny asked, once Zack sat down at her table. She closed her book, setting it face down, and looked at him.

He hadn’t expected her to speak first—or much at all for that matter. “Good days and bad,” he said. He supposed his mom’s fight with cancer *was* common knowledge. “Won’t know anything certain for months.”

Penny touched her rosary. “I’ve been praying for her.”

*You and half the county.* “Thank you. Prayer never hurts.” Though he doubted that it helped much either. Time to deftly change the subject; he needed to get inside this girl’s head, not the other way around. “It’s hard sometimes. Sometimes I wonder if I can go on. You ever feel like that?”

She averted her eyes and put her hands in her lap. “We do what we have to do. Or what we *think* we have to do at the moment. That’s how I feel.”

Suddenly Zack sensed his curse manifesting again. He saw their classroom slowly superimposed by a copy. He noted a wall calendar, April here, May in the transparent world. Each student had a double, except for Penny. He looked across and even saw a future version of himself—back in his regular seat, with a face haggard and sad.

*So who dies?* he wondered. *Mama, Penny, or both?*

“Zachariah?” Penny waved a hand before his face.

Zack shook his head and the ghostly world faded. “It’s Zack. No one calls me by my full name.”

“I think it’s regal,” she said. “Like Penelope. Though only the teachers call me that. Everyone else insists on Penny, like I’m some coin to be tossed down a well.”

Off the bridge, Zack mentally corrected her. “How about this,” he said. “I’ll call you Penelope if you promise to call me Zack.”

She smiled. *Finally*. And then quickly closed her lips around the mouthful of braces.

Zack took a new approach. “So, who are you reading?”

She picked her book up. “Gregory Benford.” She showed him the cover.

Zack’s jaw dropped. This girl was *not* a sci-fi geek. Sure she was strange, but she just didn’t fit the mold. “Timescape!” he said, taking the book.

“I see you’re familiar with it.”

“Best time travel story ever written,” he said.

She nodded. “So far, I agree. I haven’t finished it yet.” She took it back from him.

Thus, they spent the next half-hour relating. She had a quick mind and a subtle wit. Had she been more conventional Zack might have found her attractive. No, he definitely *would* have. And the more he talked with her, the more he saw in her to admire. He looked around and saw the furtive glances of their classmates, the whispers passing back and forth.

*But if I can keep her from jumping..*



Friday night Zack found himself at the Lee estate. The doctor and his wife were taking a weekend in the Bahamas, so Phil had the place to himself. Such a dutiful son.

Zack shrugged. Guess I’ve done worse.

He brought his quarter ounce of pot, cheap stuff really—but Phil would rave about it on Monday morning, as would anyone else chosen to partake. And maybe Zack would even gain back some of the ground he might’ve lost befriending Penny.

The thought bothered him vaguely. Still, he shoved the matter aside and reached for Phil’s outstretched hand.

“Zack, I knew you’d come through.”

Not, *'I knew you'd come.'* The guy wasn't glad to see him. And he just took it for granted that Zack wouldn't show up empty handed.

*Well, mustn't disappoint him.* "I got a little. Good stuff, but not enough for everybody if you know what I mean."

"Out back," Phil said. "Behind the pool house."

Once they were squatted beneath the huge live oak on the far side of the property and safely hidden from view by the expansive pool house, Zack took out his sack and let Phil do the honors.

Phil rolled a loose joint, sloppy even, but Zack let it slide. After all, he wasn't here to get stoned.

So why was he here?

Phil lit up and took a long toke. He passed it—*away* from Zack—and asked, "So what's the deal with you and small change?"

Jeff Chaney chimed in. "It's that Catholic vibe man. Those girls are wild in the sack. Ain't that right, Zack D?"

"I wouldn't know," Zack said.

"Anybody dressed that modest has to be a freak," Gary Patton said. "In more ways than one."

Jeff nodded. "Just begging for somebody to help her shuck her inhibitions."

Zack didn't try to hide his contempt. "That's shed, you idiot. *Shed* her inhibitions."

They were all so stupid they took it as ribbing, Jeff laughing loudest of all. When the joint reached him, Zack put it to his lips, made a sucking noise, but didn't inhale. Nobody even noticed.

A half hour later they made their way back to the house. Zack was completely straight, while the other three acted twice as stoned as they had any right to be.

Still, Zack followed Phillip inside and accepted a beer from a cooler.

"Don't look now." Phillip gestured behind him.

Zack turned. There was Charlene standing among her group of girlfriends and looking his way. She smiled wanly and began to make her way over.

“Be strong dude.” Phillip clamped his shoulder, then moved away like he had business elsewhere.

“Hey,” Charlene said, her eyes darting nervously.

Zack gave a single nod. “So where’s...Brad?”

“Gosh, Zack, do you have to be so to the point? This isn’t easy, you know.”

He shrugged. “What isn’t easy?” Then it dawned on him. “Oh, Brad dumped you already.”

She sighed. “His name is Brett. And I suppose you think I deserve that, and maybe I do, so I’ll let it pass.” She took a deep breath and stared up at him. “Listen, we all make mistakes. But, just for the record, mine has made me realize how much I really do love you. I was hoping you’d forgive me.”

Zack couldn’t believe his ears.

“You’ve moved on haven’t you,” she said. “It’s true what they’re saying about you and that slut, Penny Wilkes, isn’t it?”

Zack found his voice again. “For one, she’s not a slut. And two, what exactly are they saying?”

Charlene took the beer from his hand and popped the top. “Sure she’s not.” She made a face, putting her free hand on her hip. “I bet it’s because she’ll get high with you and do whatever sick thing you ask her to. Well, Zack I can be just as willing as she can. More so.” She took a long drink. Then smiled and wiped her mouth. “You got some weed you want to go smoke. I’m serious. I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Zack. We can ditch this bunch of losers, then go get high and make love in the back of that beat up truck of yours. Matter of fact, just the thought of it is actually starting to turn me on.” She walked past him and opened the cooler. “Here.” She fished out another beer. “I know

how to take care of my man.” She opened it one handed and held it out to him.”

Zack just shook his head. “Charlene, I’m sorry. I think I need to go.”

Tears welled in the corner of her eyes, and her face scrunched in anger. “You’re making a mistake, *Zachariah*.” The way she said his name made it clear; his days with the in-crowd were numbered.

He turned toward the door.



Saturday at noon, Zack met Penelope at the place of her choosing: the river, of course.

But damned if I’ll let her near that bridge.

He was glad now that he hadn’t actually partaken. Phil, Jeff, and Gary were probably nursing severe hangovers in addition to home-grown headaches.

Penelope had a large cloth bag, packed with pinhole cameras. She’d actually ridden there on a bicycle.

“I could have picked you up,” Zack said.

“Not appropriate for two people who aren’t dating. That’s what I think. We wouldn’t want people to talk now would we?”

Zack furrowed his brow. Was this girl actually baiting him? Trying to see if he was the source of the rumors that had surely reached her by now? “Suit yourself.” He pulled a grocery bag of pinhole cameras from the cab of his Chevy and joined her on the bluff. “Where do you want to shoot?”

She shrugged. “You’re the artist.” She began to take various sized cameras from her bag. “I’d like to use a few of these, if you think we can do something with them?” She pulled from her bag a porcelain doll, a teddy bear, and a small marble statue of the Virgin Mary.

“You want to tell me the significance of these things? You don’t have to, of course.” Zack picked up the doll; it was either worn with neglect or the deep love of a child. The thing seemed ancient.

“Will that make a difference in how we shoot them?”

He shrugged. “Might.”

“Episodes from my life,” Penelope said. “I want to record them, before they’re lost forever.”

“Yeah, well I’ll give you that toys fall apart, but stone can be pretty permanent. Besides, I’m sure there’s more to tell than that.”

“I want to be enigmatic.” She smiled.

*You’re certainly that.* “Okay then.” He shrugged, resigned to let it go.

Her smile disappeared and she actually waxed poetic. “Secret for secret,” she said. “These things hold the deepest of meanings for me, they represent precious facets of my life, the innermost parts of my heart. Isn’t that what Mr. Beale wanted? I won’t share them cheaply.”

*Okay, Zack decided. I’ll play along.* “So I tell you my darkest secrets and you’ll tell me yours.”

She shook her head. “They don’t have to be dark. And I retain the right to hold my tongue, should you share anything I consider sub-par.”

He frowned. “So I tell you my secrets and you tell me squat?”

She gestured to the items. “It’s the chance you’ll have to take if you want to know what these mean.”

*And maybe even save your life in the process. Okay here goes.*

“That truck over there.” He jerked a thumb at the beat-up Chevy. “It belonged to my father. He killed himself when I was ten.” *The main reason I’m trying to save you.* Zack put a finger to his heart. “A Thirty-eight Special, in our backyard one Sunday morning while mama and I were at church. And I still haven’t figured out why. Sometimes when I drive that truck, I imagine he’s beside me, and when I’m doing that, when I’ve got one of his old cassettes in the tape deck, I’m almost

scared to look over. I'm afraid he just might be sitting there. Of course he never is."

Penelope stared for a moment. "Worthy. Very worthy. Okay, pick an object. Any of these you want to know about."

Zack scanned the articles. The Virgin Mary was surely self-explanatory. The day she dedicated to Catholicism. Her confirmation or whatever they called it. Doll, Teddy bear, both seemed so benign. Maybe this wasn't such a fair trade after all. "The doll," he finally decided.

Her eyes closed serenely. "My great grandmother on my father's side was at Auschwitz. It was there she was widowed and robbed of her three-year-old daughter. When the Soviet army liberated the camp, they found her in the brothel—a rape house, actually. The Nazi's had allowed her to keep her child's doll. Emotional torture, of course. She remarried and gave it to her next daughter, my grandmother, who named it after her departed half-sister, Hannah."

Zack was speechless. And suddenly afraid to ask about the statue and bear.

"Your turn."

"We don't have to do this," he said.

"No," Penelope said. "I want to."

"Okay," Zack said. He walked over to his truck and took the alabaster head from the front seat. He told her all about it then put it back and came out with the cattle skull.

Penelope nodded approval. "I'm all in. I'll tell you everything, so go ahead and fill me in on that skull."

"Okay." Zack patted the skull, still in his hands. "This is where I kept my stash. It's empty now. And it's going to stay that way." He set it down and rolled back the sleeve covering his left arm. "Here," he pointed to the scar tissue on the inside of his elbow joint. "I shot heroin for two years. Everybody knows I'm a stoner, but they don't know that I actually overdosed last summer. Mama found me in the backyard, same



place I found Daddy. That's when I knew I had to stop. When I came to in that hospital bed, saw what I'd almost made her go through again..."

Penelope nodded. Her eyes seemed full of compassion. "But how does a fourteen year old kid get heroin?"

"Distributers don't care how old you are. And pushers get freebies till their hooked. Once you're hooked, though, you pay. That's when you steal from grandma's purse, take money from the cookie jar, forge checks. It's not that hard. And then Mama got all wierd, which made it even easier."

"I see." She swallowed hard. "My turn now."

"You sure?"

"Certain. But which should I tell you about first, Mr. Jim or Mary?"

Zack smiled. *Mr. Jim*. But when he answered he said, "Mary."

This time Penelope rolled back a sleeve. She pointed to her wrist. "My own scar tissue. I took a razorblade and cut deep as I dared. I lost a fair amount of blood, which might explain what happened next, but I don't think so. I think it really was the Virgin Mary in my bedroom. And I really believe that when she touched my wrist it was to slow my bleeding to preserve my life. I'll never forget what she said. 'My son took your wounds already. There's no need for you to bear them.'" Penelope rolled her sleeve back down. "You ready to hear about Mr Jim?"

Zack sighed. These items of theirs, they weren't just random objects, they were sacred. And this sharing of secrets was a holy rite.

"Not just yet," He said. Though there was no tangible object to represent it, he had one secret left. Would she think he was crazy? He told her what he'd seen six years ago and what he'd seen Monday morning.

"That could be a flashback," she said. "Or trauma from the overdose. At any rate, I'm not suicidal anymore."

"Good." *Let's hope not.*

She touched her rosary. "I do have one theory."

Zack furrowed his brow.

“Our friend Gregory Benford was right.”

He frowned. “Alternate realities?”

She fished into her jeans pocket and pulled out a coin. She flipped, caught, and slapped it down on the back of her hand. “Heads here,” she said, raising her palm. “But tails in a parallel universe.”

“Go on.”

“Well, you’re not crazy and you’re not psychic. You can just see, every now and then, into one of these alternate worlds. Some are just slightly ahead, and some are spaced so that, sometimes, you can actually see a possible future. Maybe this also explains *déjà vu*; maybe everyone can glimpse these not-so-parallel worlds, but only ones that are *really* close, just milliseconds ahead of ours. That’s why we get the feeling that something has happened before, but we can never really see it coming. It did happen before, but only *just* before, so close that it only registers subconsciously. And maybe you’ve developed some kind of heightened ability with this thing.”

“Like seeing the entire spectrum instead of just visible light.” Zack grinned. “I’m not sure I’m buying this, but let’s said it’s true. Let’s go pick some numbers.”

She shook her head. “Won’t work. Too many possibilities. Even this coin gives you no better than a fifty-fifty chance.”

Zack thought about it. She was right. In alternate realities sometimes events might foreshadow his own, but more often they’d just veer in other directions. “So the girl I saw—”

“Is only one version of me. Maybe she never sliced her wrists or had a vision of Mary. So she never got over her depression.”

He rubbed his temple, felt his head clear. “Let’s take some pictures.” He wiped his brow. “But first tell me about Mr. Jim.”

“He’s my teddy bear,” she said. “I sleep with him every night.”

Zack laughed. “Worthy, very worthy.”

After they’d returned to their work-site, they posed the items and exposed the film inside their boxes. Short exposure, then long periods

with the tape pulled away from the pinholes. Even double exposures, taking turns standing right in front of the cameras, or off to either side.

"These are going to be great," Penelope said.

"I don't know. There's something missing." From the corner of his eye, Zack spied a spray of color. He turned and gathered a handful of blooming wildflowers. "I know the film is black and white, but we can make enlargements if we want and do watercolor washes or something." He began to intersperse their objects with the flowers. He exposed a shoebox camera then closed the pinhole with its window of tape. "Now you," he said to Penelope. "Up close. I want you right in the middle."

When they finished he tied the flowers into a makeshift bouquet.

"For me?" Penelope teased.

He shook his head. "For my mother."

She smiled. "Good man."



The next week everyone developed their film in the dark room, in back of the art class. Zack and Penelope agreed on their favorite photo and signed the back of it with a small brush and gold enamel paint.

Penelope, she wrote in a script bold and regal.

And beside it he signed, like he would mark all his work from now on:

*Zachariah.*

*The End*

The story behind the story: "*Sacrament*"

I wrote this story during a flash challenge at a writer's forum that I used to frequent. For this particular challenge, the participants were given a photograph and a time limit in which to craft a story around it. Then we voted and the winner got a \$50 gift card to Amazon, as I recall. The photo was a montage of images; prayer beads, a cattle skull, a teddy bear, all the items mentioned in my story and then some. Wish I still had a copy of that picture - it was really cool.

I don't remember the forum, (Liberty Hall maybe?) but I do recall that there were a handful of us that participated. All the participants then received a copy of all the stories, with the authors' names removed to keep it unbiased. We then voted for our favorite story.

Most of us were logged into the forum using names we'd made up. I was known as Crotalus. Which is Latin for rattle and the Genus of several rattlesnakes in the U.S. Another of the participants was Silver 3. This writer was very, very good. And I narrowly beat her, by one vote to be exact. I won first place, I think she placed second. She later told me that she had voted for mine. I remember thinking, "How kind." I suppose she could have voted for herself and won.

Not that it really mattered. Because Silver 3, aka Aliette de Bodard went on to much bigger things than an Amazon gift card. But I did have the pleasure of cross critiquing her work and the work of other writers in the group at that time.

So do yourself a favor and look her up on Amazon or her own website: <http://aliettedebodard.com>. That's her real name, even though I knew her when she was still Silver 3. She has won a ton of awards and deserves every one of them: Two Nebula Awards, a Locus Award, three BSFA (British Science Fiction Association) Awards, as well as Writers of the future. Sci-fi geeks will know what I'm talking about.

Rock on Silver 3. May your tribe ever increase. The rest of you, go buy her stuff and read it. You won't regret it!

Peace,  
JSW

(aka Crotalus)

## Hallowed Ground

I called it a Vision, having come to evaluate such things with a mindset passed down from my parents. But it wasn't superstition; as with all cultures, they had simply put any new experience in familiar terms.

I watched, as if floating outside my own body. But the body I watched was that of my thirteen-year-old self, so many years ago, striding barefoot upon the waters until he reached the Dragon's side. The reptile turned its scaled face and tender gaze toward the boy, even as it draped a taloned forearm around his shoulders, drawing him into a gentle embrace. "Oh, Elliot," the Dragon whispered. "I'm so sorry."

When my younger self spoke it was in the language of my mother. "I wish they were dead."

The reply was also in Seminole, soft but firm. "You know that is not our way."

I was fighting unwanted tears that came streaming, despite my best efforts. The men had raped Mother and had strung Father up from a Cypress. She had suffered a horrible, merciless death, and Father had sustained such damage to his throat that I knew, even as had I loosened the knot and tended his wounds, that I would never hear his deep, magnificent voice again. I was remembering these things (a thought within a vision) as my younger self answered, "*Our* way?"

The Dragon pained visibly and replied, "I never intended to speak for you. I only hoped that you would learn."

The dream-form of my boyhood self said, "I have learned that all they know is hatred and killing." The boy wiped his eyes with the back of an already broad hand.

"I am not defending them," the Dragon said. "I condemn their ways. That is why you must not hate. And remember, revenge is never the Way."

The boy raised his eyes level with those of the Dragon and spoke with a softer tone, "I know, but still ... there is hate in me, and I don't

know if it will ever go away." The tears that came then were shed freely, unashamedly. "Mother said that you are a Teacher, and that her God sent you to us. I don't know if I believe in any Great Spirit, but I do know that this hate is killing my soul. Teacher, promise me something."

"What?" The Dragon carefully wiped a tear from the dark brown cheek of my childhood version, then stroked the boy's long black hair.

"Don't let me die without learning. Mother would have wanted me to learn."

The Dragon smiled. "Your desire is the first step. I will teach you," there was a pause as we embraced again, "...but it is up to you to learn."



Waking from that dream for the third time, I stretched and looked at the digital clock on my nightstand. 4:30 a.m. Robbie would be arriving in an hour for our usual morning trek into the swamp. I threw off the patchwork quilt and got up.



When Robbie and I returned from our rounds, Sarah was at her second favorite post, the lab, her first being the Okeefenokee itself. We were dripping a good portion of swamp onto the floor while hefting a cumbersome burlap sack. Robbie reached into it and began setting one bone after another onto an empty specimen table. He stopped long enough to mop the watery beads from his pale forehead and then tossed me the towel. "So, whadaya think?"

I winked, wiped my brow, and answered, "I think you should learn a lesson from this, believe everything I say—even if *I* don't." This time, however, beneath my usual mirth, there was worry. *Might my father's tales be true?* I touched the medicine bag at my throat, and remembered ...



The face of my Father. Even to a child, it had been apparent that this was more than just another old swamper. Tom Bennett *was* Okeefenokee: voice big as a Bullfrog's croak, teeth like sun-bleached tortoise shells, and a face as dark as the silt-blackened waters. I remembered kindness and wisdom, evident in every gesture, the fierce nobility that flamed in his eyes, and the crown which he shared with the whispering streams—a patch of that same off-white foam.

He had long since passed, and, for a what seemed an eternity, I was alone. Until, thirty years ago, Robbie arrived, and the roles had shifted so to speak. Robbie stepped in as the curious, talent for trouble child, as I took my father's mantle to become the wizened Sage. I would practically raise the small white child, while his mother worked the long hours necessary to support them. I became, not only his closest friend and mentor, but eventually his right hand man.



"Hey, Sarah, look at this." Robbie held up a skull which sported six inch teeth and brow ridges that expanded back into twin horns. I felt sudden shame and pain at the sight. I wanted to turn away, so I glanced at Sarah instead.

Lively and athletic, with a mind every bit as attractive as her body, she could have chosen any number of more lucrative professions. Instead, she practically jumped at a chance that most deemed a last resort. Robbie and I were dirt poor, then Sarah joined our cadre and earned her share of nothing. But she had no care for money. She loved the swamp and its inhabitants, the turtles in particular. And the more I observed her in Robbie Burns presence, the more I realized that that wasn't all she cared about.

"What the—?" Sarah had dropped the marred pondslider back into a drum of similar corpses. That was her passion, isolating disease among



the shelled reptilians, finding the causes, and, more importantly, the cures. Robbie moved quickly to her side.

"The Hallowed Dragon," he said, pressing the skull into her eager hands. He and I were still soaked, having impulsively abandoned ship for a half floating chunk of peat. It had drifted out of Dead Water with the skull riding trophy-like upon its back, irresistibly beckoning—*come and get me*.

Sarah probed into its incredibly huge eye-sockets, her hands striving to convince her mind. She was discovering what we already knew. It was true bone, not the replicated framework of a fossil.

"If this thing's as recent as it seems—"

Robbie finished for her, "—then maybe we can find us a live one."

"Uh, Robbie," I motioned covertly, holding, in one hand, down and out of sight, a dirty clump of peat.

"Yeah?" Robbie walked over. I was holding the human skull so Sarah wouldn't see, hoping that the Dragon could keep her interest while Robbie and I walked outside.

"Who do you think it is?" he asked when we were safely out of the lab.

"Don't know. Haven't heard of any missing persons. Have you?"

Robbie shook his head. "I think maybe we should keep this to ourselves," he said.

I agreed, and we convinced ourselves that it was the right thing to do. Actually, though, we were doing whatever would suit our purposes. Later that night we took it, along with the other human bones we secretly removed from the peat, and buried it all deep, far back in the swamp.



If anyone was going to come back with a live Dragon it would be Robbie Burns, and not some government suit. That's what Robbie declared, red-faced when I'd suggested sending in a report. I figured he was over-

reacting. The way environmental disasters had been siphoning away at government funds, surely there was little chance of them throwing any money, or attention, our way. As usual, though, I went along with his decision. We would wait until we'd captured a live one.

Three months later, with funding at an all time low, we made one of our daily treks into the Okefenokee. All three of us were armed with tranquilizer guns and Robbie with a high powered rifle. Sarah, he could probably depend on, as she seemed always eager to please. It was me he was worried about.

He'd persuaded me to take the larger vessel, while he and Sarah occupied the jon-boat. We were in the section of swamp known as Half-Moon, so named for the slice of land that curved in towards Dead Water. Right where the mound had come drifting out into our waiting hands.

I bellowed across twenty feet of swamp, over the din of the motors, "This is as far as we go!"

Robbie smiled and yelled back, "*We?* Elliot, we're in *this* boat, you're in *that* one!"

There was, at once, rage and fear I could hear in my own trembling voice. "Don't go into Dead Water, Robbie, especially not with her aboard!"

Sarah returned, completely unconvincing, "I can take care of myself."

I ignored her. "Don't do this."

Robbie looked at me, somber eyed. His reply was almost a whisper, but I could read the words, knowing him like I did; "Sorry. I've got to." He pushed against the handle of the Evinrude, steering away from me and into the shadows. And then I *saw*, slipping once again into a Vision. But instead of the past, this time I remained in the present as my mind's eye followed them in:



Robbie took it slow, looking up at the thick clutches of Spanish moss. I watched as the Vision led me into his mind. He was remembering his first week in the swamp, over thirty years ago, and how he'd spent all day collecting handful after handful of that soft gray moss. He remembered building a huge mound, how he'd run and dive headfirst into it, over and over again. And then me, kneeling at the bedside of a miserable, teary eyed child, quietly teaching while tending his wounds.

"You're in this condition because you were meddling with things you don't understand. You've never seen moss before, so you naturally think it's okay to play with. Only it's not."

He sniffled as I smeared on the ointment. "Out here, you've got to learn to distinguish friend from enemy, harmless from deadly. Spanish moss, or Witch Hair, as my father called it," I pointed out the window to the mossy trees, "...is your enemy. You've never heard about Witch Hair, have you?"

I hadn't waited for a reply, "There are bugs on it so small that you can't even see them. But when they get into your skin, look out." I indicated one of the itchy red blemishes that was rubbed raw from his scratching. "Be careful in the swamp, Robbie, and don't be so quick to rush into something just because it seems a good idea."

The little red-headed boy swore he'd learned his lesson. His pale flesh was dotted with a generous sprinkling of freckles, and these had been paired with an almost even ratio of parasites.

Within Robbie's memory, I was speaking again. "I've got another story you might like. It's about a swamp creature that lives in the darkest, most removed area. The Seminoles, which were my ancestors, called it the Hallowed Dragon..."

The adult upon the jon-boat grinned, remembering my tales as he thought of the confirming bones—allowing for the possibility that certain of my other tales might also have some truth.

He recounted one to Sarah, as he drove ever deeper into the uncharted region of swamp, into a place where the Cypress drooped mournfully with their thick clutches of Witch Hair.



"Back when most of the Seminoles fled south into the Everglades, or were relocated to Oklahoma, some turned north into the Okeefenokee. One such tribe found a region of swamp that brought death to most, but for some reason tamed to their touch. They called it Dead Water and it became their home. For a while..

"According to Elliot, one of his ancestors was the only one from the entire tribe to come out of Dead Water alive. Her name was Methoataskee, and she'd had a Vision of a dark man. Blood was seeping from a wound in his side, nothing serious, but enough to leave a trail for the dogs that came howling after him. Not thirty minutes after she had the Vision, and had told it to her chief, it came true. The baying of bloodhounds, devil dogs, she called them, reached their ears, and she knew what she had to do.."

The Vision darkened again. I was traveling to another time. As the Vision resumed I realized that, this time, I had traveled back beyond my own birth.



"The devil dogs will have him soon. We must bring him in," Methoataskee said to her Chieftain.

He was blocking her exit, but had decided he would turn if she insisted. He knew her well, and that, if she couldn't do it now, she *would* depart later, when he wasn't around. He gave his edict, praying she would take it. "No. The whites have brought nothing but death. We have managed to escape their reach only here, under the protection of

the Hallowed Dragon. We dare not reach out from the safety we have found."

"I was given a Vision, my Chief. One that would prepare us to help and protect him." She set her chin in defiance.

"Have you considered it might have been a warning? So we could avoid this dark man, and the wrath that follows him?" The Chieftain lowered his voice, trying to hide his fear under harshness. "Know this, daughter, should you go to find the dark one and rescue him, you will have no protection or refuge with your people. I will allow you to leave, if you insist on going. But I will not allow you to bring this dark one into Dead Water."

So she set out alone. Having seen what the whites could do in the Seminole Wars, and the treachery with which they had treated the great chief Osceola, her people were not about to depart the refuge they had found. She came upon the dark one and helped him to the safety of her canoe. Then, taking the medicine bag that she had hastily prepared for him, she said a prayer over the man, and draped it carefully around his neck. She then paddled back into the darkness. Straight back into Dead Water.

The baying of the hounds grew fainter with each stroke of her oar. The dogs had reached Half-Moon, but would not follow them in. She could hear the men cursing their hounds, and then their own cries of confusion as certain memories were extracted, leaving them wondering where they were and how they had gotten there.

"You are safe with me," she said. The dark man only stared at her with his large brown eyes; he was carefully watching everything that happened—committing all to memory. She doubted if he could understand her language, but was sure that her tone conveyed the meaning. She smiled at him.

*Shhhthok!!* The arrow struck into the hull of her canoe. "Turn back!" It was her Chieftain, standing in his boat, surrounded by Seminole braves.

"Do not do this my Father," she pleaded as he knocked another arrow and raised the bow level with her heart.

He let fly.

At once the air went black with a shadowy mass, arching, speeding to intercept. The dark scales rushed, swift as the waters of the Altamaha, and the arrow careened off their glossy hardness then struck a nearby tree.

I saw as the Hallowed Dragon descended between them and spoke: "Is this how you steward the Haven I provide? Is this how you pass along the kindness I have shown?"

The Chieftain paled visibly and stammered, "The dark one is wanted by the whites. They—"

"No! Remain silent!" The Dragon swept an ebony finger, dismissing the attackers, and then turned to face the young woman. "You I will hear. Speak."

She obeyed, revealing all to the Hallowed Dragon. When she finished he turned back to the braves and said, "You are no longer my people. No longer under my protection. With this woman and man will I commune. Perhaps *they* can learn my ways."

Those images dissolved with another shift of the Vision. Forward, into the present again.



"And, with the Dragon's protection revoked, the swamp just seemed to turn on them. All were dead within a week. The Chieftain's daughter, Methoataskee, and Kwadwo—that was his true name, not the one the whites had given him—they took up residence at Half-Moon as husband and wife. They were forbidden to enter Dead Water ever again, with the exception of a monthly time of what they called Communion. The Dragon kept watch over them, but didn't shield them as he had the tribe.

"Anyway, that's why Elliot's so reluctant to come in here. He still holds to some of those old superstitions. But he does come in. I've seen him. Once a month, during the full moon, driving so fast and weaving like a madman, so I can never keep up with him. He denies it, of course, and strictly forbids anyone else to go into Dead Water, as if he has the right. Me, I've been in here plenty. But don't tell him that."



Robbie continued to ramble on about how he'd never seen anything all that particularly deadly or unusual about Dead Water, when suddenly, directly in their path, the waters parted, giving way to the glossy black, serpentine form which slowly emerged.

Sarah stood paralyzed, her mouth agape and her weapons useless for fear. Robbie backed down the motor in an instant and snapped his tranquilizer gun to his shoulder. He waited as the magnificent head, complete with those perfect teeth and arching twin horns, rose slowly into the air and turned. Robbie found himself staring directly into a pair of the brightest, most intelligent eyes he had ever seen on any animal. The hard scales did not extend to the face. He found what he believed to be a penetrable spot in the glossy black skin and took aim. As he pulled the trigger, I was aware of the words that sprung unbidden to his mind, quiet and serene, yet all pervasive:

*Are you willing? Are you even able to learn?*



For the next several weeks I watched—Sarah and Robbie several times together, growing closer. She seemed elated at how things were turning out. Finding the Dragon had somehow awakened Robbie to her hints that were not so subtle anymore. With the creature safely in the holding tank, she proposed a celebration that he'd accepted with matched en-

thusiasm. That first date had led to a second, and that one to another, until the night of the next full moon.



"I love you." There, she'd said it.

Robbie gave an almost smile and started, "Sarah, I-

She put a hand up. "No, don't. Just because I said it, don't feel like you have to."

*But Sarah, I do. I just never realized it, until now.* These were the things he said in the scenario of her mind.

The real Robbie just kept to his not quite smile and said, "I think a lot of you Sarah. But, maybe ..." She braced herself as he sighed and continued, "Maybe we should take a step back. I mean, I've got the team to oversee, now that the Dragon's been discovered and funding is finally come through. And you need to find a cure for that shell disease."

She tried to forced a smile, even as her heart broke. "Sure. I understand." Tears came to her eyes, as she dropped her lab notebook, turned, and rushed outside.

She didn't notice me, tucked into the shadows. Having just arrived, I hadn't meant to eavesdrop. I was on my way in when I overheard, and was merely waiting for the right time. Then I was suddenly privy to Sarah's thoughts, as reality became enhanced by Vision.

Watching as she fled into the night, I was now more angry than when I'd arrived.



I walked into the lab, despite orders, straight up to Robbie and confronted him with all that had been eating at me. I took his face in my strong, callused palms, in the way I used to touch that five year old boy, and spoke in that same patient tone. "Robbie, the Dragon doesn't be-



long to you. And as for Sarah, well, you shouldn't have led her on that way."

Robbie jerked his face away. Anger flashed in his eyes, but he didn't dare unleash on me. I might be old, but still, Robbie knew that he was no match for this toughened swamper. Instead he just resorted to the only thing he had left. "Security!"

Two guards, frills of the new found interest in Robbie's work, scurried up and popped tall. "Please see that Mr. Bennett finds his way out."

I left, heading for home. Then a mile down the road I pulled over as, once more, I was *seeing*.



Robbie returned to the aquarium and took readings on the huge reptile which hung suspended, its torso enveloped by a sturdy metal girdle, while electrodes, tubes, and probes ran to and from its body.

*I found it. I was the one that brought it down and towed it in.* Robbie's thoughts were followed by a series of unwanted memories. Myself, pleading, begging him to return the Hallowed Dragon to where he'd found it. He'd responded by insisting that I help sedate and secure it within the tank. To my shame, I'd done just that.

He looked up and caught the creature staring at him. Sarah's face was suddenly an unwelcome presence in his mind. *Can't help it if she got her signals crossed! I never promised her a thing. Never even implied—*

Sarah's image was replaced with that of the roses. Twelve in a porcelain vase, with a card signed simply—*Robbie*. He suddenly looked sick. He considered the hands that had pulled the trigger, that had tenderly touched her face, and had signed the very papers releasing a lifelong friend from employment. He reached up with those hands, buried his face in them, and wept.

I watched him cry, and then the Vision faded. I drove home and went to bed early.

By 3 a.m. I was dreaming.



"How long has it been this way?" Ike Danvers was a man with authority. Robbie immediately recognized it as a threat to his own.

He replied in an uneven voice, "Since midnight. It curled into a fetal position, completely destroyed the girdle, and tore away from the monitors and probes. The shell formed right after that. We think the creature's entered some sort of pupae stage."

Danvers took a step toward the tank and peered in. "So what's kept it in there? If it could just curl up and tear itself loose from the girdle, why didn't it try to escape?"

"Well," Robbie explained, "we've kept it sedated, that probably had a lot to do with it. The tearing loose was probably due to involuntary muscle contraction initiated by the metamorphosis."

"Metamorphosis, huh? You ever consider the possibility that this might be an adverse reaction to the stress of captivity? A response to all the probing and monitoring?"

"Well, yes, of course." Robbie was becoming increasingly defensive. "At first we thought just that, but we've managed to reattach some of the monitors and they indicate that there's some sort of drastic genetic recombination occurring, exactly what you'd expect to see among creatures undergoing metamorphosis—or maybe some sort of regeneration."

"Hmpff." Danvers walked over to Robbie and stripped the badge from his chest. "I relieve you of your duties, Dr. Burns. Go home."

Robbie stood there, dumbstruck for a moment. "What? By what authority? You can't—"

Danvers pulled out his orders and put them in Robbie's face. He motioned to Security, who immediately stepped forward. "We've been instructed to use force, if necessary," one of them said. Robbie looked at them and frowned. "I'm going," he replied, and stormed out the door.



Throughout the night I *watched* as the Dragon swelled to twice its size within its strange, spherical encasement, which then began to cleave until two very dissimilar spheres occupied the tank.

One continued to grow, drawing its needed materials from the water at first, since the scientists had infused the environment with nutrients, only guessing at what their captive might need. The other sphere collapsed and broke apart into a thin, membranous film, while curled within its center, and drifting in a small heap to settle on the floor, was the Dragon's prior skeleton.

The living sphere continued to grow until, at last it was drawing material from the very walls of its container. At first, no one noticed, so slow was the process. Then, the thick glass walls began to dissolve, as bit by bit, molecule by molecule, the glass was pulled away and assimilated into the hard, ebony scales of a renewed Dragon. Finally, when the loss was too much, the tank shattered from the weakening.

"Get those cables over it!!" Danvers was immediately at the Dragon, barking orders, tossing steel cables across its writhing, awakening, still transforming body.

At first the men rushed in, desperate to obey orders and contain the creature. But their determination was short lived. The creature continued to draw mineral and nutrient resource, first from the cables that they'd draped over it and then from the air, the surrounding machinery, and even from the flesh of the men themselves. They ran, screaming and bleeding, various, unbelievable wounds and stark holes upon their skin. The Dragon raised its magnificent head, breathed with new life, and struck out for the swamp, unchallenged.



And then came the aftermath. With millions in damage to the lab, and further funding denied, the project was abandoned. The other scientists moved out, taking all the equipment and relieving the shattered tank of its only remaining items of significance—a few thin remnants

of what might have been scales and the intact bare skeleton of a Dragon.



A month later Robbie returned to my cabin. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I've already forgiven you. But you *need* to apologize to the Dragon. And to Sarah."

"How do I apologize to a reptile? And how can I even face her?"

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Come with me."



All three of us headed back out for Dead Water, this time with Sarah and me in the lead. She was still visibly hurt and had only come at my request. It was a Ceremonial day. The Day of Communion. The Dragon met us within a small circle of Cypress trees.

"You *did* come. I almost believed you wouldn't, given recent events." The Dragon spoke directly to me.

Sarah and Robbie both started, and I wasn't completely at ease myself. The only time I was consciously aware of the Dragon's existence was on the day of Communion. At other times, it withheld the knowledge from my conscious mind—except in the form of folklore, which was then all I believed it to be.

The Dragon instructed the three of us to sit and stare deeply into His eyes. He spoke in a voice low and soothing, "I want to show you what has happened, and then we can rightly judge."

Thus had begun our collective Vision.



It was made known to us, instantly and without words, that this was before recorded history. When the white men had yet to leave Europe to conquer the Americas.

We saw a space vessel, as sleek and dark as its two inhabitants. Though their words were unspoken, we *could* hear them. They were conversing through an exchange of thought, telepathy. I wondered then, for the first time, if the Visions were simply some extension of this ability. We could not understand the native tongue of my Teacher, whom I'd recognized on sight (His counterpart's appearance varied only slightly), but we could tell that something was wrong.

It was apparent in their hurried thoughts and frantic action. Finally, catastrophe overtook them, a problem with their engines, and sent them tumbling toward the atmosphere of a tiny blue-green planet.

They crash landed. We watched as the scene shifted with the passage of a short time and came to rest upon the image of my Teacher, crouched beside his comrade, mourning. I watched him bury his friend in the dirt of Half-Moon and then slink off into the waters. Then the scene ended, as did our Vision.



The Dragon spoke. "Now you know what I am."

"I'm so sorry," Robbie mumbled through his tears.

I was no less ashamed of my role in the betrayal of one whom, for me at least, should have been a friend. It was apparent from Sarah's face that she felt just as bad.

"We all are," she said, and I nodded in agreement.

"And I forgive each of you," the Teacher said.

Then finally I spoke, "We also betrayed each other, but it was you who was injured most. They'll be back someday. Probably sooner than we think."

The Teacher turned and spoke directly to me. "For you this will be hardest to bear. But we really don't have much choice. You did miss the last Renewal."

I remembered being thrown out of the lab and knowing what was soon to occur. On every other occasion I had been with the Dragon

during Renewal, during Communion, and had been reborn alongside my Teacher. I looked at Robbie.

"It was my bones we found in the peat, Robbie. I've undergone that same regenerative process that the Dragon went through, once every month for nearly two hundred years." I fingered the medicine bag at my throat. With my memories blocked, I had taken it for the source of my longevity—my father had told me as much—but now I realized, as I had for one day of every month, that it was nothing but a decoy.

Robbie and Sarah gaped at me. I heard him whisper, "No wonder."

The Dragon spoke again. "For you there will be no more lessons. I have taught, and now it is up to you to learn. After today, you must live out your life, with no more influence from me."

I nodded in solemn agreement as the tears came. It was the highest price I could have paid, but at once I realized that the Teacher was right. It was evident from the gray streaks in my hair, and the tell-tale lines that had begun to crack my face, that the Dragon had only a short time until his regenerative abilities came to their natural end. Besides, I had to learn of my own accord. I had to become more than a dog waiting for a crumb from its master. I had to be a man. Once again mortal, and yet, somehow, more than human. He turned to Robbie and Sarah.

"With you I make my new covenant. Live your lives and return here when I call. And then we will decide the fate of two races, yours and mine. For I am not the only one." The Dragon knelt to the ground then and tore back a patch of earth. Nestled in the detritus was a clutch of some twenty eggs. I looked at my former Teacher and marveled.

"Yours?" A smile broke the sadness of my face.

The Hallowed Dragon--*she*—nodded. "The one you saw die was my mate, and we the last of our kind. These are the offspring that I laid, soon after burying their father. They need only my quickening, by the infusion of each egg with my blood, in order to hatch. Now then, we will get to the point. I have only fifty or so years to decide."

"What do you intend to do?" I asked.

Once again, (it was hard to think of the Dragon as female, having so long believed otherwise) *she* was putting off the inevitable. I understood this. I was the only one who could, and I grieved.

After a while, she spoke. "You came expecting to be judged. But today I judge no one." The pain in the Dragon's countenance was more than I had ever witnessed there. She looked to Robbie and Sarah. "The tribe were the first to truly disappoint me, as they were the first I dared to trust and reveal myself. Elliot's parents never disappointed, though the evil their world poured upon them convinced me mankind was not ready. Elliot has repeatedly told me there is no hope, and now I wonder if he isn't right."

I lowered my head, feeling her sorrow, a pain I had helped inflict.

The Teacher continued, "If you cannot learn, if even you two, after what you have done and witnessed, then there is indeed no hope for your race, and that will bring the end.

"I do not trust my own judgment in this, as Elliot has often told me that I am far too optimistic. I have to be; there is too much to lose. And so, *you* must return here to tell me if mankind is capable of living side by side with my offspring. If you answer as I hope you will, then will begin a glorious new age of Human and Dragon (She was accepting the name we had given her), side by side, and we will become brothers and sisters. If you determine that mankind is incapable of that, then ..." She raised her head determinedly, "Then an entire race will be put to death."

"Go now, until I summon you again. And there will be no withholding this time. All of you will remember."

She gestured to me then, and I went to her. "I love you, Elliot Bennett. I leave you

with this last lesson, the thoughts of your parents as they endured this world's cruelest moments against them."



I looked into Her eyes, into her mind, and was at once witness again to the rape and murder of my mother. But this time, instead of the vantage point of that thirteen year old boy, huddled behind the bushes, I could see through my mother's eyes and hear her thoughts.

*I forgive you*, as they had their way with her, tearing her in their bestial fervor. Using her body to slake their demonic desires. *Forgive, forgive*, the word was repeated in her mind like a ward against the evil they were forcing upon her. And her last thoughts a prayer to her God, a God that I, for years, had been unable to love, believe in, or understand. Yet as I gazed now into the soul of my mother, I yearned for such a faith. *Father, forgive them. Teach them to love.*

I was then with my father at the hanging tree. Helpless amidst the hooded specters in their white cloaks—not of purity, but blind rage and fear—taunting him, beating him, and then stringing him up, silencing that golden voice forever. I saw the flaming cross. An ancient instrument of death, redefined as a symbol of love, now perverted into one of hate. I saw through my father's eyes and heard the prayer echoing the one of my dying mother not fifty yards away. *Forgive them. Forgive them.*

I came out of the Vision and cried then for a very long time, holding tight to my Teacher, eternally grateful for the scars she had reopened, and in so doing, had somehow managed to heal.

As we held each other close, almost like lovers, I whispered into one of her beautiful, leathery ears, "I love you. I love you." Knowing that I was forgiven, and that I might be one of the last to ever speak those words to her.

Ten minutes later we were back in the jon-boat, and I had seen the last of my Teacher and friend. Robbie and Sarah were still visibly shaken, discussing the possible fate that awaited mankind.





And now I sit propped upon my deathbed and put pen to our tale, which I have no way of proving though I swear it to be absolutely true. Though none may believe, I will pour out my sorrow in this one last act.

I know they'll return to her soon. Her heartbeat and mine beat to the same rhythm—though there has, for many years, been no Communion between us. I know that, like me, she hasn't much time, and so, very soon, she must call them. Then Robbie and Sarah will go to her and determine the fate of a race, though not in the way they believe.

Perhaps though, I underestimate them. Maybe they have realized. (It's been so long since I've seen either one.) Perhaps they have come to understand what will indeed happen when they meet with her again.

She will welcome them and inquire of them. They will inform her of man's inability to live with her kind in peace. (That is, if they don't exhibit it outright. I pray they don't go with guns, to destroy her and her offspring in some useless pre-emptive strike.)

I pray that they realize, as I knew even back then, what she will do. I could have told them, but even then I yearned for them to learn the truth on their own. If they have learned to love, even a little, then they will know what she intends.

After their judgment of man's true nature, she will pull back the patch of earth where her offspring are hidden and use her powerful hands to do what only she can. She will take the eggs, one by one, and, for the sake of love, crush them and all hope of her species' existence.

For what else can she do? Their existence would become known, and should she choose to enliven them, her offspring would fight—or, if they are like her, refuse to retaliate. If they fought, they would conquer. If they didn't, they would die. Or worse, they'd be studied, picked apart, dissected and put under the examining eye of what we call science. For what we regard as a search for knowledge.

An entire race would still die, only with more brutality, and possibly, if her offspring should choose to fight, in far greater numbers.

So, for the sake of love, she will crush them, before they are ever quickened. She will drift away, to spend her final hours alone, grieving for her children that are denied even one heart's beat of life. Then she, the one who Communed with me once every month for nearly two hundred years, my Hallowed Dragon, because there is no reason left to live ... will die.

*The End*

The story behind the story: "*Hallowed Ground*"

Most of us have seen the boy and his Dragon story, but I like to think of this one as "a Dragon and his boy". Except the dragon, as you've discovered, is a *she*...and not exactly a dragon in the traditional sense.

More like Ancient Aliens meets River Monsters, the dragon is a swamp creature shrouded in secrecy. And the tale is one of betrayal and sacrifice. All this and more in one of the earliest short stories that I ever completed. A bit clunky in places, and preachy in others. But the overall tale is solid and one I wouldn't mind revisiting and expanding someday.

No promises on that point, though I do believe it's a good read, despite any flaws. After all, a Dragon in the Okefenokee, and a Seminole protagonist with an centuries old secret, how can you not love that!

Also of note, the parents of our narrator, Elliot, have authentic names for their ethnicity - Methoataskee means "She lays her eggs in the sand" while Kwadwo means "born on a Monday". Both point to the Hallowed Dragon as she literally lays her eggs in the sand and is reborn on Communion day, during a full moon (hence 'born on a Monday' - originally called Moon's day).

Anyhow, hope you enjoyed it. While it's not my personal favorite, it does hold a soft spot in my heart, so I included it anyway.

Peace,  
JSW

# The Lazarus Gap

Dar, read these. I'll be by later, about nine p.m.

—Joe

There were three attachments. Darvin Macallough touched the first icon, fluttering the screen as the entry appeared. Some sort of scientific abstract from the looks of it. Dar sighed and tried to keep at bay his usual misgivings.

*239843. Agent Muflard. (Preservation Council, Dept. of Biol. Res.)  
Dinosaur Replenishment Efforts, Earth.*

Our cloning technology perfected, we re-introduced certain of the reptiles into pre-industrial Earth, after mankind had begun the transition from hunter-gatherers to settled life. The results were catastrophic. Mankind quickly dubbed the creatures '*Dragons*', or other such vernacular terms of disparagement, and set about to exterminate. Of the few surviving species, Plesiosaurs are the most numerous; total population eleven. Though we realize Earth's Dinosaurs are again doomed for extinction, we will continue to monitor their progress, or, more accurately, decline, and update reports as necessary.

"Joe, you sick, deluded ... Is this is your idea of cheering me up?" Dar tapped with long, trembling fingers and set the net-pad down. "Swear I'm gonna kick his ass."

He remembered when they'd first met. During the Scotland mission, five years prior. They were on separate assignments back then and their respective zones had sent them to view the tragic discovery: three bloated Plesiosaurs, washed up on the banks of Loch Ness. A legend felled, not by knights on some killing crusade, but by heightened toxicity of its waters.



Joe was among those on the shore, covertly palming a DNA sampler in one field-tanned grip and his cell-cam in the other, moving cautiously among the Outsiders who held this particular stretch of land. Thick, jet-black hair whipped madly about that boyish face, as he somehow managed to be everywhere, examining through those intense blue eyes.

"Bet they taste like chicken," Dar had offered. Several Outsiders had already started carving from whatever good flesh remained. The masses would eat well this night.

Josiah Duncan smiled, a broad toothy endeavor, recognizing first the password and then his somewhat infamous colleague. He whispered, "Yes, Doctor. ...*Macallough*, isn't it?"

Dar nodded, silently damning the Everglades incident, his reputation apparently preceding him again. At least the man hadn't addressed him by rank. An overheard greeting of 'Commander' could get them both killed out here beyond the walls of a compound.

Joe Duncan simply looked skyward and, for what wouldn't be the last time, expressed that irritating, unfathomable hope, "You know, the universe is a huge place; maybe *somewhere*..."



Dar stirred from his musings as the Com-screen buzzed and flickered. Its octagonal surface displayed a red Omega symbol and additional data: **Lieutenant Mike Haverson. North Border, Sector 4E.**

"Access," Dar spoke; a troubled face filled the screen. "Mike, what's up?"

The North Border Officer cleared his throat. "A mob. They've taken hostages, an entire team of Guardians."

"Keep the situation in hand till I get there."

"Yes sir." The screen blanked.

Dar sighed. Hastily, he jerked his officer's jacket over his tunic, grabbed his side-arm and strode back to his hovercraft.



"Report." Dar jumped from his craft, starting for the 4E Wall.

His Lieutenant matched stride. "We sent a team when the crowd started forming. But it wasn't enough. The mob grew increasingly violent and captured all twenty."

They hurried to the top of the Control Tower. The Lookout, a single green arch marking his lower rank, saluted the them and stepped aside so Mike and Darvin could see.

Below, about 100 meters to the North, a ravenous horde of Outsiders railed. Screaming, surging, many throwing rocks, though a few were armed with plasma rifles and fired at the walls with those.

Mike drew Dar's attention to the bound Guardians on the mob's far side. "They're being held in an effort to keep off reinforce—"

"The beams," Dar interrupted.

"Sir?"

Dar unzipped his tunic, exposing the scar that etched its way down his chest. "'45 Riot. Plasma charge. I lost the last of the Everglades in that one and damned if I'm gonna let history repeat itself."

"Understood, Dr. Macallough." His Foreman turned to the main console, entered the password, and awaited commands. Dar keyed the microphone:

"IN 60 SECONDS THE BEAMS GO ACTIVE. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KEEP BREATHING, MOVE BACK NOW. THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER WARNINGS."

He turned to Mike. "I'm taking the console and full responsibility."

The man stepped aside, as Dar put his finger on the switch, counting down the seconds. He glanced at the crowd. Many moved back, but not all. He was relieved to see that the hostages were beyond reach of

the beams. Being Guardians, they knew their duty. Still, he was glad he wouldn't have to sacrifice.

Dar looked to his Lieutenant again. "When the crowd clears, I want those officers out of there."

Mike nodded and went.

A minute passed. Dar hit the switch. He looked up even as the young, Academy-green Lookout turned away. White-hot beams sizzled back and forth in their random, snakelike patterns, and the screams of the dying reached their ears.



239387. *Agent Muflard. (Preservation Council, Dept. of Biol. Res.)*  
*Gigantipithecus Replenishment Efforts, Earth.*

We were, at first, optimistic, following the re-introduction into North America and the Himalayas. Especially encouraging was the fact that most indigenous human cultures revered, or at least respected, *Gigantipithecus*. That attitude, however, did not prevail. On Galaxian date 11873.387, the last American specimen, '*Chewie*', as the humans dubbed him, died within the Conservationist movement's Minus 8 time zone. While there are still thirteen Himalayan *Gigantipithecus*, this number is obviously too small to constitute a viable breeding population. Our estimates predict a sixty-year period, at best, before the Himalayan colony goes the way of its American counterpart.

Dar polished off his drink. There would be an inquiry in the morning, but in the meantime he had been free to return home, once the crowd had dispersed and the wounded taken to nearest Medical.

He'd returned to his bourbon and the net-pad. Minus 8 would be the woodlands of what was once the state of Washington and part of

Canada, though their region there was now much smaller. Not that it mattered. The day's incident had drained Dar's remaining ounce of hope. He was wallowing in depression now, and Joe's abstracts were just fuel for the fire, which he readily tossed in.

He thought about the myth-enshrouded creature. *Gigantipithecæ...blackii* if you broke it down to species. At last count there were only four in the Himalayas. Dar recalled—he was still at the Academy, working on his Masters, when the monitor in his barracks broadcast the hairy, all too human face, superimposed by the inscription: '*Chewie*' *Last known Sasquatch 1980? - 2038*

His memory shuttled back even further, to the first time he'd seen them. Humans had just begun walled conservatories, while the dichotomous forming of Guardians and Outsiders had yet to occur. They were still using zoos and were keeping the creatures there. Chewie was one of five captured; the youngest at what his anthropologist father estimated an already graying age of forty. William Macallough had been called in to study them, and, for the first time, allowed Dar along:

"Look at them. All penned up like that. The last of their natural habitat taken by humans and this is the best we can do for them?" The old man's voice was pure anguish, "Son, this is what happens when you run rough-shod over nature and her creatures."

Six-year-old Dar stared up into his father's red-rimmed eyes with newfound concern already brimming in his own. "What will happen to them now?"

Will Macallough prophesied, "Extinction—they'll all die."



Dar broke from the reverie, went to the enclosed patio and gazed upon his zone's last vestige of sanity: the one remaining shred of what was once Georgia, USA. The Wall encompassed what was left of the Okefenokee and the last patch of sandhill habitat known to exist.

Turkey oak and longleaf for twenty miles, and, within plain view, Xena, guarding her burrow and basking on its apron of sand.

There were fifty tortoises on his personal homestead, but Xena and Zaphod were special. He'd hand raised the two and, once ready for integration, they'd both chosen to burrow close to the house. Though he could identify all fifty on spot, they were the only ones he could approach at any time without spooking them down their burrows.

He admired Xena's gray-black dome and her strong, noble head. Her young, but somehow ancient and all-wise countenance. She was soaking up the sun's last rays and absorbing the heat from the fan-shaped apron of sand marking her burrow's entrance. Front limbs angled characteristically out to the side, while the back legs were outstretched behind in basking position. She was fifteen, should be sexually mature, but had yet to lay her first clutch. Which had him worried. With such a small population, every potential hatchling was needed.

He listened as an early evening wind stirred the needles on the pine and rustled the leaves of the oak. An Indigo snake, its species also all but extinct, moved gracefully through the wiregrass and across the sandy mouth of Xena's burrow, disappearing within. Day after day the trend continued. The World Outside edged its way ever inward, as species died by the thousands. And he wondered; how long until he was forced to give up the habitats that he was *foolishly* wasting on expendable, unnecessary animals. Dar sat there until the sun bled its way down and Xena retired to her burrow.

"*Grave*," he decided, as he turned from the window.

Returning to his recliner, he heard the proximity alarm buzz as someone pulled into the drive. Moments later the front portal dilated as Brenda coded her way in—silencing the alarm, and immediately removing layer one of her Medic's uniform. "That two-headed Snapping turtle is out by the road again."

"Tortoise, Brenda. Zaphod is a Gopher tortoise, *Gopherus polyphemus*," he informed her for the millionth time.



"Tortoise, right," she said, heading for the bedroom. She returned, dressed in her scrub-robe. "You should pen those things up or something."

He got up for a refill, choosing to ignore rather than argue with Brenda's ignorance. After all, it wasn't as if *he* knew how to conduct cellular repair, stimulate organ regeneration, or perform brain transplants.

"Dar, you're not drinking *again*?"

He measured a hefty dose and raised his cup in salute.

"What's the occasion this time?" Her tone was more concern than annoyance.

"You mean you don't know?"

She immediately shifted gears, a mixture of pain and sympathy evident in her voice. "It's the incident at North Border isn't it? Well, if anyone has reason to be turning up that bottle it's me. Sometimes I wish I could, you know. I just watched as a young man died on my table. The headstrong little..."

"Brenda," Dar interrupted, "I'm the one that killed them. I was there, turned on the beams myself."

At that, she was instantly there, draping him in her arms, kissing his brow in consolation. "Dar! You must feel terrible. I should've realized..."

He frowned. "Yeah, well let's just hope he don't have to send any more your way."

She was visibly shaken, as if the thought hadn't crossed her mind at all. "Oh, you don't think they'll be any reason now? Not after what happened today."

"Especially after today," Dar corrected. "We've avoided it for a long time, but it's plain that there's gonna be war. The Outsiders will never be content until they make all our lands as desolate as theirs. Up to now, our technology has given us the edge; but they've got us outnumbered, Bren. Sooner or later they're coming for us, the Walls will come down, and all I've ever worked for..."

"Know what?" As always, she was warding off reality with a smile. "I'm going to make you supper. You just sit right here and leave everything to me."

As she left for the Rationette Dar sighed, finally took a drink, and accessed the last entry:

*240058. Agent Muflard. (Preservation Council, Dept. of Biol. Res.)  
Latimerian Progress, Earth.*

Latimeria best represents the mission of the Preservation Council. Transported to the Indian Ocean early in Earth's industrial age, this species surpassed all expectations. When humans discovered it, our first concern was that, in their zeal for further study, they would drive the fish to re-extinction. Fortunately, this has not happened. This Coelacanth is reclusive enough to evade en masse capture. Also, the humans have been unusually conscientious with this species and even have a term associated with that period of time between its extinction and rediscovery. They call the elapsed time a *Lazarus Gap*, in reference to a human who, once dead, was later returned to life.

"Honey," Brenda returned from the Rationette. "I'm warming MRE-17. Black-eyed limas, fried feline, pomatoes, and creamed sativa."

Hybrid plants and artificial cat tenders, Dar's favorites. The fact that she was so thoughtful made him feel even worse. He glanced outside to Xena's burrow. Brenda was a good companion, despite their difference of vision. But, that was just it. They did have different visions, and that was not good. She just couldn't seem to grasp the importance of what the Guardians were trying to do. And she had only the merest clue of how hard the Outsiders had made life for themselves, or what it would be like for everyone else if the walls fell. Though Brenda loved him with all that was in her, some things she could never understand.

"Sit with me while I eat?" He leaned over, offering a half-drunken kiss, which she readily accepted.

She smiled and took his hands. "Once I gel off. It's been a long day and I really need to clean up. You can start without me if you want."

"No, I'll wait," he said, returning to the cabinet while Brenda moved on to the scrubroom.



Fifteen minutes later, Dar was still sipping when there came an insistent buzzing at the front portal. The globally synched chronometer, center wall of the den, transversed itself twice and then settled long enough for him to read, *9:00 p.m. Minus 5 Zone*. Joe was punctual if anything. Dar clambered from his chair to let him in.

Joe was grinning as he strode into the room. "So, Dar, you look at those abstracts?" The smile abruptly faded. "Dar? Hey, ...you don't look so good."

Dar waved the bourbon in Joe's face. "Hafa drink, ol' buddy?"

"Denucleated gametes!" It was as close as Joe ever came to cursing. "Are you *ever* going to learn?" He clamped Dar by the shoulders and sat him down.

"When they quit killin' off all other *speschees*, I'll quit gettin' *sschit-fasched*." He tossed back another swig.

"This is not a good time for one of your binges." Joe took the near empty canister and reshelved it. "How do you drink this *poison*?"

And that's when Dar remembered.

"You son-of-a-*bitsch*. Aint enough fer you to fill my head with yer *bullschit*, now you gonna take my booze?" He stood, swinging in Joe's direction.

In spite of Dar's increasing drunkenness, the blow landed dead center, turning Joe's nose askew with a resounding *Cra—ackk!* That's when he finally realized that everything in the abstracts had been, not

the symptoms of a sick mind, but truth. Preposterous, inconceivable truth.

For immediately a spongy, blue-green tentacle sprang from where Joe's nose had been. It dangled outward to within mere centimeters of Dar's, who let out a baffled, "What the..." and took two steps back, fists up like a skull-rattled brawler.

Joe backed up as well and put his hands to his face.

"Dar, I hoped you'd be sober when the time came." He paused to tug at his broken nose. "I'd mind-wipe and do all this tomorrow, but there's a mob forming. I'm guessing a hundred times worse than what you saw this afternoon—we've got to move now." The foremost tentacle was suddenly joined by two more, as Joe peeled back his human veneer. "So to cut to the chase: I've been communicating with the Council. Last night we completed our list of approved humans." He dropped to his hands and knees.

Dar back-staggered to the recliner and collapsed in a heap, as his friend continued to pull away his disguise. Finally, the uniform came off, and, as prosthetic arms and legs broke away from Joe's four main appendages, Dar could view him for what he truly was:

A roughly one meter tall, blue-green alien.

The arms and legs were, in fact, very different from human ones. Instead of five digits, each limb ended in six. Also, the hands and feet were undifferentiated. His head was somewhat smaller than that of a mature human male, sporting five dark but luminous eyes and assorted orifices. And, of course, there were the three tentacles, sprouting octopus-like from the center of what Dar supposed was still the face.

"And what *exactly* does that mean—approved?" Dar managed, alcohol numbing the incredulity he would have otherwise felt.

The tentacles writhed expressively, as the orifice below them, positioned right where it should be, spoke. "Are you willing to move to Gennao IV?" The creature that used to be Joe trotted to the front portal, opened it, and then gestured beyond with its tentacles.

Dar staggered over; drunk beyond any rational fear. Outside he saw a mini-ship; glossy-black and triangular, with a cockpit clearly designed for two. It was floating about a half-meter above his lawn.

"An interstellar hopper," the Joe-thing said.

Dar fought for coherence. "Those... *absch*tracts..."

"Authentic documentation. Oh and, by the way," the Joe-thing bowed its medusan tentacles, "...my true name is Muflard. Field Agent for the Preservation Council."

Dar waved a lazy, drunken hand. "Joe, Muflard, whatever, ... whoever the hell you are. *Juscht* tell me *sch*traight up. What's yer true agenda? What's this really all about?" A strand of saliva escaped his lips.

Joe-Muflard reached with a tentacle, carefully wiping his friend's drool. "Dar," he said, "Let's face it, our work here is finished. That's why I urged the Council to go ahead and start Relocation Efforts. Earth's genetic diversity cannot be lost. We've terraformed a lifeless planet and have been cloning and transporting species for habitation on *that* world."

Squinting at the Muflard-thing which still spoke with his colleague's voice, Dar said, "And you wanna take *me* there?"

"If you'll go. Of course, we could clone humans, but something would be lost. Your history; mistakes; the lessons you've learned—or at least tried to learn. Your entire first-hand knowledge. Basically all of humanity—your race would be lost. Clones reared on Gennao IV would be genetically human, but culturally they would never be of Earth origin. What's more, despite all your faults—all your recent setbacks, you're a leader, Dar. They're going to need that. Then someday, once your colonies are established, you can apply for Council membership and even do research if you want. Maybe even reconnaissance like me."

Dar continued to ponder, which was all the more difficult for his condition. "Leave home?" he muttered. "My work?"

"Which, as I said, is every bit as hopeless as we've feared. We can't afford to deceive ourselves any longer."

"Dar?" It was Brenda, returning from the scrubroom. The bourbon and Joe's strange transformation had completely displaced her from Dar's mind. She had on her scrub-robe and a quizzical smile. "Was that Joe I heard in here? Did you ask him to stay for..." She saw him, "*AAH-Hhhhh!*" fainted and dropped.

Joe-thing scurried over and produced a silvery, ovoid device, its surface littered with lights and buttons.

Dar snatched up a pillow for her head. "Get away from her with that!"

Joe-thing had pressed a series of buttons and was passing the device back and forth over Brenda's forehead. "Dar, I've known since I first met Brenda. You don't have to hide it from me." He touched her temple and the forehead panel opened. He scanned again. "Hmmm, her medical knowledge of humans is quite extensive. Much more specialized and detailed than our files. Wow, you've got the memory near capacity! I'm reading a well-rounded personality profile, but the emotional range is a bit lacking on anger. Diligent work ethic, various housekeeping sub-routines—what no environmental consciousness?"

Dar morphed the recliner into a couch, where he moved Brenda and cradled her head in his lap. "She's a lot like my Brenda was, on the outside anyway, before the cancer. But I wanted her t' develop her own interests, y'know. Be her own person. And well... specializin' in three fields just don't leave much room." He sighed and re-closed the CPU panel. "Guess I coulda freed *schp*pace from the sexual data-banks."

The Muflard-thing began picking up his discarded disguise, fake skin and all. "We need to hurry. She'll be awakening soon, and, well, it might be awkward. We can't take her you know."

Dar got up, cushioned her head with the pillow and weaved his way to the front portal. Leaning against the portal-frame, he focused his eyes upon the sleek, dark spacecraft. "Leave," he whispered.

The walls were coming down, sooner or later. If he abandoned Brenda, it would mean leaving her to a future that he knew to be hazardous, if not deadly. He considered trying to get Joe to speak to the Council again—perhaps Brenda could be upgraded, then he realized:

Could he have reasoned with the mob? The Council probably felt the crowd closing in, even as he had, and knew that they must act swiftly. After all, they probably had more than one planet to save. Probably hundreds, thousands even. If the trend ran true everywhere besides Earth, then the good guys were outnumbered and understaffed, forever running out of time and resources.

Dar chided himself mentally. These were nothing more than desperate, drunken attempts at rationalization. But then he looked at Brenda. Even if he were to stay, could he protect her from what he knew was coming?

He knew he'd forever bear the burden of his decision, but it wasn't like it would be the only stain on his soul. How many had been wounded or killed at the Everglades, and now today? If he stayed it would only mean more blood on his hands, in the war that was definitely coming. If he took his friend's offer, perhaps it could serve as a payment for his many sins. He could help build a world where life could be preserved and revered, instead of wantonly thrown away.

He felt an almost human hand take his own. "If you change your mind, Dar, I can't bring you back. The human body can only survive the clockwise direction through our Wormhole—for you there are no return trips to this Sector."

Dar thought about the Plesiosaurs. About Chewie, and the tortoises he was trying to save. He thought about the Rhinos. All that he had held dear and had watched, or was in the process of watching, die. Despite his booze-clouded mind, his judgment, suddenly, and unmistakably, cleared:

This wasn't home. It was hell. And it was time to get out. He staggered over to where Brenda remained peacefully zonked—a reaction

birthed of her programming. He reached, found the pin on the nape of her neck, kissed her goodbye, and pulled her power-grid—unique to her programming, the grid and Brenda were useless apart. He dropped the grid and crushed it underfoot. At least the Outsiders, when they came, would have no way of reactivating her. No way of harming her further.

"Let's go." He stood, took a tenuous step, and immediately became a drunken avalanche.

Muflard reached down and helped Dar to his feet. They were moving into the front yard and toward the still floating craft when, suddenly, Dar remembered.

"*Zsbaphod!*" He turned and scanned the ground frantically.

"It's getting late, Dar. He's probably down his burrow by now."

"Look fer 'im. I don' wanna go without *Zsbaphod*." He was shamelessly starting to cry. "And *Xsbena*, get her too!"

"Okay, you get in the hopper, I'll look for them." Muflard helped Dar into the seat and promptly strapped him in.

"You promise?" Dar asked, tears streaming.

"I promise." He shut Dar in.

A few minutes later Muflard was climbing behind the controls. He looked at Dar with those five luminous eyes and shrugged his forelimbs.

"No *Zsbaphod*?" Dar asked in a choking voice. "No *Xsbena*?"

"Sorry, Dar. I'm afraid hoppers aren't equipped with transport beams. I'll come back for them, though. Promise." Muflard piloted them up and into the night sky. Once beyond Earth's atmosphere and gravity, he reached over and set course for the Wormhole.

Dar pressed his face to one of the side-panes, strained his eyes at the darkness, and cried. The stars stretched out into blurs as, finally, bourbon and hopper did their jobs and took that cruel, uncaring world away.





Muffard was at Dar's side, shaking him awake. He held an earthen cup and a round sweet smelling something. Both in the same hand, via paired opposable thumbs.

"Here," he said. "I know it's not the tripled-distilled water and roasted grasshoppers that you're used to. But you're going to find your choices here are a bit more varied and a lot more appetizing."

Dar sat up, smelled the dark concoction and took the proffered food. He bit into the coated wheel and was shocked at the intensity of flavor. Spurred by the rich sweetness, his body began to rapidly awaken, as the memories of last night came rushing into focus. "It wasn't—isn't a dream?" He took another bite and washed it down. Then, for the first time, looked around at the simply designed, beautifully efficient architecture.

"Coffee and a donut, an old Earth recipe that I stole before resources became scarce and they were forgotten. And this...this is Genao IV," his friend said, happily waving his tentacles in what Dar later learned was a smile. "Your new home."

Dar finished off the donut and set the coffee aside. He was suddenly aware that he felt extremely odd, though not in a bad way. In fact, that was precisely why the feeling *was* odd. He actually felt better than he had in years. And, for the first time in months, didn't crave a drink.

Muffard helped him to his feet. "Outside. There's something I want you to see."

As they stepped into sunlight Dar lifted his hand to shield his eyes. He gasped as his fingers found hair, thick and lustrous, instead of a sparsely covered scalp.

"You can thank Brenda's databanks. The device you saw me pass over her CPU was used to scan and download," Muffard said, waving that foremost tentacle. "We used her knowledge to round out our own and have completely rejuvenated your body. Better than cloning be-

cause this way all your engrams—all that makes you uniquely Darwin Macallough is preserved.”

Dar could say nothing, so instead he simply looked around. The cabin in which he had spent the night was lakeside to an immense body of water, blue and serene. He gazed across to the other side, where the lumbering gray forms, which he hadn't seen in almost a year, were moving placidly along, their horned faces bobbing as they periodically grazed.

He whispered, "It *can't* be."

"Is." Muflard followed his gaze to where the Rhinos were walking. "And watch the lake. There!" He pointed, and Dar watched as the stirring waters gave way to two sleek, gray heads atop graceful, Plesiosauran necks.

"Unbelievable."

"And," Muflard jerked his rightmost tentacle at a nearby mountain. "Gigantipithecae—a clan just over that range, in the caves." He motioned again to where the Plesiosaurs were swimming. "The lake here is teeming with life, not only Plesiosaurs, but..."

"Latimeria?"

Muflard nodded. "This is actually part of a Trans-continental canal, like Loch Ness. So it's quite suitable for all sorts of species." They turned, walked around back of the cabin, and started down into a wire-grass-laden valley.

There, near the bottom of his new backyard, Dar saw a promise kept, a sight that vanquished all his fears. One head stared up with those serene, pea-black eyes, while the other buried in the grass, munching lazily in this newfound home.

Nearby, he recognized Xena; squatted over the nest-hole she had dug and depositing her first clutch of eggs. He noticed several others moving along the valley. Some already establishing burrows, while others migrated further into the sandy habitat, lush with longleaf, wire-grass, and oak.

“We realize the male has some sort of genetic mutation. But we don’t think it’s necessarily a bad one. Besides, genetic diversity *is* what we’re preserving.”

Dar stopped. The tears were flowing freely and it took him a moment to regain composure. “You’ve done so much. How can I...?”

“By being what you’ve always been ...Guardian.” Muflard waved tentacles at him again. “As I said before, communities always need good leaders.”

“Communities?”

“I said there was a list. And don’t take offense, but you weren’t necessarily at the top.”

Dar furrowed his brow and asked, “How many?”

“Enough for a viable breeding population. By the way, Dar, in case you’ve forgotten—real flesh and blood females are far more complex than synthetic ones. If you find a new mate, she might not always be as agreeable as your android.”

“No. I suppose not.” Dar looked out across his new homestead, then back at his friend. “But they’re much more exciting as I recall. Much more...unpredictable.” He paused, wiped a tear. “Muflard, after my wife died, I thought I could never risk losing so much again. But you’ve given me a new life, another chance; do you think maybe...”

Muflard waved his tentacles. “Take your time, Dar. You’ve got plenty of it.”

Darvin smiled and followed Muflard back up the hill. He had a feeling that he was going to like Gennao IV.

He already had a name for the valley.

*The End*

The story behind the story: "*The Lazarus Gap*"

When I was in college I had a friend in my dorm who was a Geology major. I was a Biology major. His name was David Astel. Well one day he came in and said "Man I've got a great story title for you."

I've been writing since I was a kid, but was really putting energy into short stories in college.

"Lazarus Gap," David went on to say. Then he explained that his geology professor used the term to describe a creature believed to be extinct because of fossils discovered in strata millions of years old.

Now I'm not about to get into the age of the Earth debate, but the term as used by his professor was in reference to the Coelacanth. This fish was considered to have been extinct for millions of years, then in 1938, fishermen trawling the mouth of the Chalumna River in South Africa caught one. Come to find out there's more of them out there, two distinct species in fact. Both are protected of course, but the cool thing is, they are identical to the fossil record.

I found the whole idea intriguing, so I set out to write that story. With the title handed to me, I crafted the tale all around it. Using the scientific abstracts in journals I was required to use when researching papers, I had a template for Agent Muffard's own research summaries. Throw in Bigfoot, Nessie, and extra-terrestrial beings and "The Lazarus Gap" was complete.

Thanks David, for that seminal idea. You get credit for handing me a really cool title. Hope my story did it justice.

Peace,  
JSW

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Please do consider **leaving a review**. Even just a sentence helps out so much. Reviews help readers decide whether they'd like to try out my fiction, and they help indie authors like me with better visibility.

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And also please consider checking out my author website **Fiction-WorthReading.com**.

I hope to hear from you. Thanks for reading and for supporting independent authors everywhere.

Sincerely,

J. S. Worth

**About the Author:**

Hi, I'm John Stacy Worth. I write from a Christian world view, but as I once told my wife, "...This ain't your Mama's Christian Fiction."

My fiction is more like, "Did you ever wonder what a Behemoth was, and how you might kill one?" Or, more importantly, "What's Leviathan taste like?"

And questions such as, Can a vampire find redemption? What were the Nephilim really like? And, whatever happened to that flaming sword guarding the entrance to Eden?

My books are now available online. I also promote my fiction at [fictionworthreading.com](http://fictionworthreading.com).

And hey, if your mama is that rare and precious type that occasionally wonders "What's up with Nessie?" or "You know, I believe that Big-foot critter might be real...", send her my way.

This might be your Mama's Christian Fiction after all.



