



Issue Two

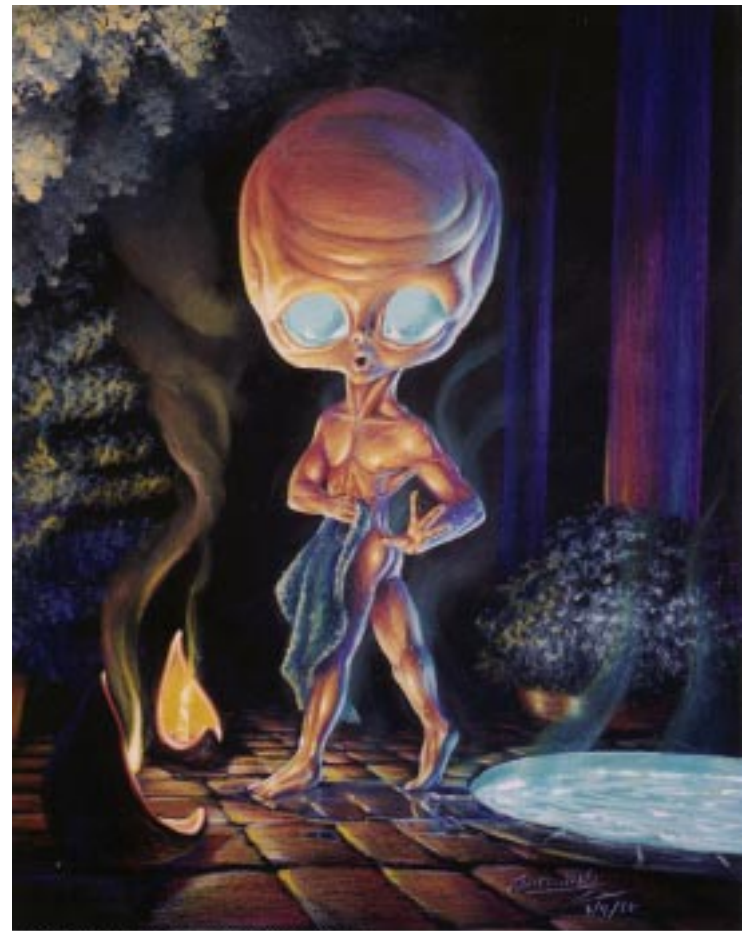
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This issue is dedicated to my family .

*Without their daily insanity, life wouldn't
be worth living.*

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SWEET HOME

by Robin M. Mayhall

No question, I was one of the lucky ones. I came out of Downtown Shelter C one hundred and eighty-two days after the last bombs dropped, and I ran into a good group just outside of town only three days later. They were three single guys over budget, and I happened to be on my period, so all I had to do was drop my pants for a couple of the ladies, and I was in.

The other women were happy to have some of the pressure taken off them. In three days I learned pretty quickly that one of the main things everyone worried about was whether anyone was going to be able to have kids again after the bombs. Reed, the jintu of this little enclave, was happy to have me around, and two of the single guys were even happier. I sure was happy to have the protection and security that a good stable enclave afforded. In fact, it looked like everyone was

pretty damn happy, except for the third single guy, who wasn't happy about anything at all.

I didn't blame him. He was in chains.

Later on that first day I asked Rachel about it. She was the jintu's wife — his real wife, I mean; Reed and Rachel were married before the war and managed to stick together because they lived on a farm and had their own shelter. They had a six-year-old daughter they'd been able to save, too. Reed was the leader of this little pack, partly because he was a farmer and already knew a lot of the stuff we'd all have to learn to survive, and partly because he knew of a big farm nearby that was capable of supporting a good-sized enclave. It was a lot bigger than Reed and Rachel's farm, and Reed remembered it as having some kind of state-of-the-art wells that might still have clean water. The farm was where the enclave were headed when I ran into them.

Anyway, I figured Rachel would know what was what with the guy in shackles. She told me his name was Kevin, and they had rescued him from certain starvation in the county jail when they stopped there to pick up weapons and ammunition. Apparently the sheriff had been good enough to let the guy into the shelter before saving his own ass, but the county shelter wasn't particularly well-supplied and he'd been barely subsisting. Rachel said the group debated furiously about whether to take Kevin along, with a little more than half insisting that they couldn't just leave a human being to starve, and a very vocal minority saying they couldn't saddle



themselves with some criminal who would do who knew what to them in the night.

The guy made it worse for himself by lying right off the bat. He said he'd just been thrown in the drunk tank after a few too many in the local bar, but Reed found the records that showed he'd been arrested as a murder suspect. Then Kevin broke down and told a long and rather unbelievable story about being framed because he was just passing through. He swore he was innocent, and in the end Reed decided that they couldn't leave him to die. We had a new world, as hokey as that sounded, and everyone had a chance to make a new start. Even a criminal, if he really was one, deserved that chance. They decided to bring him along, but Reed found some old-fashioned-looking shackles and chained him up for the time being. Until he earned their trust, Reed said.

I glanced at the guy over Rachel's shoulder. He was sitting on the far side of the fire looking pretty glum. Other than that I didn't think he looked so bad. He was the best-looking by far of the three available men in the group, not that I was looking to settle down right away, even though that was pretty much expected. He'd let his black hair grow long during his incarceration, and he had blue eyes and nice long eyelashes. He just sat there, not saying anything, sort of enduring what must have been a pretty humiliating situation. I shrugged. Rachel mimicked my gesture. I thought she kind of liked Kevin too.

She took me around and introduced me to everyone else. Her daughter Roma seemed like a sweetie. There were three couples, only one of whom were together before the war broke out. Justin and Meredith were married before the war and owned a pet shop together. Stan and Erica met in the shelters, and Tim and Sarah had only been together for a couple of

weeks, having met when they joined Reed's group. Like I said, there were three single guys — Kevin, whom I already mentioned, Neil, who was nice enough but somewhat bland, and Mark, to whom everybody deferred a little, even the jintu, because he was not only the oldest, but a doctor. I couldn't believe the luck.

Luck ... yes, I guess I had it. We found the big farmhouse after two more days. It was still unclaimed, and it was perfect. Big enough that we could all have our own rooms, if you counted sticking Kevin in the basement. I felt a little sorry for the guy. But the farm was great. The equipment and vehicles were all there and untouched, just a little rusty from sitting around for more than six months. The farm even had a couple of big tanks of fuel and a generator, so we could have electricity in emergencies. I wasn't sure what Reed and Rachel would define as an emergency, since they were obviously of hardier stock than I was.

In fact, I started to feel a little bit useless as everybody unloaded their gear and got to work. I was a writer, editor and internet junkie in my former life, which didn't prepare me overly well for postapocalyptic survival. I started to thank my apparently extremely lucky stars that I had youth and fertility going for me, since everybody else seemed to know what to do almost instinctively. The women attacked the house while the men started on the really heavy manual labor, like gathering and cutting up wood and seeing what they could do about the mechanical stuff. Even Kevin was put to work on the generator. He was a civil engineer, and it occurred to me that that little fact might have weighed more in Reed's decision to bring him along than any overwhelming humanitarian urges.

Well, obviously I knew how to clean house, so I was able to help with that. It was even a little fun. I guess it was therapeutic for all of us to make that house shine from basement to rafters. Part of the feeling came from the knowledge it would be our little castle for the indefinite future. But we also — well, I guess I should just speak for myself — felt that it was a way of scrubbing off all the crap of the past and putting it behind us. One of the most interesting things about the whole group was that nobody seemed particularly bitter about finding ourselves in this situation, not even Kevin. Nobody went around pissing and moaning about the war and why us and all that stuff. We were the lucky ones — we were alive, and we had found a great location to start thinking about the future.

I was on my hands and knees furiously scrubbing a baseboard in the front room when I heard Kevin walk in. He was like a belled cat with his wrist and ankle chains. I didn't even look up until a moment or two later when I heard Rachel call out, "Oh, my God!" I scrambled to my feet and ran into the kitchen, expecting ... well, I guess I expected to find Kevin menacing Rachel with a knife, or something, but instead he was holding up two perfect cabbages in his manacled hands.

"I found a whole patch of these while I was walking around the house looking for a toolshed," he explained.

"These are fabulous!" Rachel exclaimed. "Fresh cabbage soup tonight! Thanks, Kevin." She took the cabbages from him. He turned around and shuffled right back out the door, giving me a brief glance on his way out. Rachel laid the cabbages reverently in the freshly scrubbed sink, then placed her hands on either side of it, shaking her head. "I can't believe it," she muttered.

"Do you think they're si-ka to eat?" I asked her.

"Why wouldn't they be?" she asked me sharply.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "I was just wondering. I don't know how much contamination there was, or how long it's supposed to last."

"I don't either," Rachel said, "but it seems like if we can walk around and breathe the air and sit on the grass, then we can eat the cabbages."

I shrugged. I wished Mark was there to give us some sort of medical opinion, but I knew his practice before the war probably didn't give him a whole lot of experience in radiation poisoning. I returned to the front room, but instead of going back to my dusting, I sat down heavily on one of the big, comfortable chairs. Up till now I hadn't even thought about the fact that we survivors might die anyway. I know that sounds incredibly naive, but on the day the bombs started dropping, all anyone could think of was his or her own immediate survival. That had continued in the shelters, and even after. No one really knew when it was safe to come out, so we blindly obeyed the instructions inside the shelters and waited six months. We didn't have enough food or supplies to last us much longer, anyway, and I guess I reasoned that since no bombs had actually hit my hometown directly, somehow I was si-ka.

Now I started thinking about high school and college biology classes and all the discussions about weather systems and groundwater and evaporation and rain. I wondered about the radiation from all the places that *had* been hit directly, and whether it was seeping into the ground and poisoning the air all around me even now. I got up and went to the window,

pressing my fingers against it — I'd have to clean it in a minute anyway — and looked out at the peaceful setting. The grass was thriving, its color a vivid green tinged with purple. Reed and Stan were splitting wood, and I could see Tim almost waist-deep under the hood of a tractor. God. We'd seen animals, hadn't we, and they hadn't had three heads or anything....

"Dana?" Rachel called.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Could you go out and find Kevin's cabbage patch and bring me a couple more?" she yelled from the kitchen. "I want to go ahead and start some soup so we can eat as soon as it gets too dark to work."

"Sure," I yelled back, actually *not* sure whether I wanted to go outside. I felt a little shivery about it. But I set down my dustrag carefully and went out the front door into the sunlight. I walked around the side of the big house and noticed that there once were carefully-arranged flowerbeds along every side, which even now made a nice touch of purply-green and might bloom in the springtime. The generator was in its own shed at one side of the house and I could hear Kevin banging around in there. I approached a little warily and stood just inside the door. He was crouched down next to it trying to get his hands around something, but with the manacles on, he couldn't quite manage it.

"Goddamnit," he muttered.

"Um," I said by way of small talk.

He glanced up sharply; I had startled him. "Sorry," I

added quickly. "Rachel was wondering if you'd tell me where your cabbages are, so I can bring her a couple more of them."

He didn't answer for a long moment, and frankly, he spent the time looking me up and down. I made an effort not to shift from one foot to the other like a teenager. "Sure," he said finally. "If you go around back of the house—" he had to raise both hands to make the gesture — "it's at the other corner. I think there might be other things in there too, but I couldn't dig very well with these, and I didn't feel like dealing with it."

"I don't blame you," I said sympathetically.

"Just so you know," he said seriously, "I didn't kill anybody. I was put in that jail on false charges, and that's the truth."

"Si-ka," I said. I felt uncomfortable. He seemed intensely sure of himself, and that made me want to believe him, but I knew a lot of the other people in the enclave didn't trust him. I started to leave the shed, but he stopped me with another two-handed gesture.

"Hey," he said, a little less intensely, "if you see Reed, will you ask him to come here for a bit? I can't do what I need to do with these things on."

"Sure," I said, and backed out hurriedly. I went around the front of the house and told the jintu what Kevin had said. I figured the generator was important enough that they'd either unchain him for a bit, or if nothing else, make somebody else work on it. Then I went around to the back corner opposite the generator shed and found the dilapidated garden patch that Kevin had discovered. It was inside a little fence, lucky for us,

since the greedy little cloven-hoofed shan were one breed of animal that had survived the bombs, and they loved nothing better than the tender shoots of a newly sprouted garden. There were two bedraggled rows of cabbages, several more of which were as ripe and ready as the ones Kevin picked, and he was right — there were rows of other things that I suspected might be carrots and potatoes. Maybe some fresh herbs as well. Rachel would be beside herself.

I got down on my knees and started rooting around carefully, eventually coming up with two potatoes, a handful of carrots, and two more cabbages. Actually, there was plenty more, but I was hesitant to use it all up on our first night, especially in cabbage soup. The two potatoes would stretch the soup just fine, and then we'd have potatoes another night with something else. My mouth literally started to water as I thought about eating something that was at least partially fresh and not from a can, even though most of the shelter supplies were really pretty good.

Much celebration ensued when I brought my finds into the kitchen. Bland Neil turned out to be somewhat of a gourmand, and when he went back out to the little garden plot he identified all sorts of herbs, some of which he picked and added to the stew Rachel started. Pretty soon the kitchen smelled like heaven, and as the suns began to set — big red Alpha courted closely by tiny white Beta — the others started drifting into the house as if pulled by the aroma. All except Kevin, who sat out on the front porch alone watching the suns until they went down altogether. Even then he sat out there in the dark while the rest of us were lighting hurricane lamps and setting the big farmhouse table — a table! Dishes! We were all excited, festive. We cheered when Rachel brought the steaming pot of soup to the table, and damn, it was good. I would have

loved a big hunk of crusty bread to go with it, and I resolved that that would be one of my projects — to figure out what we would need to grow and do to make bread.

I sucked on my soup for a while and then raised my head long enough to look around me. “Hey,” I asked. “Where’s Kevin?”

“Still out on the porch,” Neil answered.

“Doesn’t he get any?” I asked, feeling a little incensed. After all, Kevin found the damn cabbages.

“He usually eats after the rest of us do,” Reed spoke up. That made me really mad. So much for giving people second chances, and all that stuff.

“How are we going to learn to trust him if we don’t give him a chance?” I asked hotly. Nobody answered me. Most of the group was looking at me as if I were speaking a foreign language, but Rachel was looking at me in a speculative way that gave me pause. What was she thinking? Was I about to get myself thrown out of the best situation I could have hoped to find?

“If you ask him to come in,” Mark finally said mildly, “he’ll decline.” I felt my cheeks redden. I hadn’t been with the group long enough to figure out all the inner dynamics, and suddenly I could see I had made a really silly mistake. Mark rescued me by adding, “But if you’d like to bring him a bowl of soup, he would probably appreciate it.”

I nodded in a flustered sort of way and got up from the table. I went into the kitchen, thankful to lean over the hot pot

of soup and give myself a bit of an excuse for my red face. After my embarrassment receded a little I reached for a bowl and started ladling it full of the delicious soup. I was interrupted by Neil, who followed me a little belatedly into the kitchen. “Dana, you don’t have to do that. Just let Kevin be,” he said, coming to stand close to me.

I shifted away from him as much as I could for the counter next to me. “Why?”

“He’s trouble, trust me,” Neil said. “Look, Reed read all the documents in the sheriff’s office. Kevin’s story didn’t check out.”

“Si-ka,” I said noncommittally, and put down the ladle. I wasn’t about to let Neil put any macho power play over on me. If anything, he made me more determined to show a little human kindness to Kevin. I elbowed my way out of the screen door onto the porch and paused behind Kevin, who was sitting on the steps with his back to the house, just looking into the darkness of the front yard. “Hey,” I said, feeling a little awkward. “I brought you some dinner.”

He turned around, showing only a hint of surprise, and reached for the bowl with both hands. “Thanks,” he said, sounding genuinely grateful.

“Do they always make you eat after they’re done?” I asked him.

“Not always,” he said. I was struck again by how little bitterness he showed. He seemed merely determined to do whatever it took to prove he wasn’t what the others thought he was. I sat down next to him and watched him as he ate. It was a

slow process with the manacles on his hands. I wished I could get the keys and set him free — but the irrational wish subsided after a moment. I knew I didn’t really trust him, either, not yet at least. I thought of what Neil said about Reed checking out the jailhouse documents.

“Tell me the story,” I asked impulsively.

Kevin glanced at me curiously. “Well, I was on my way from Beatty to Elceinte on a business trip,” he said slowly, naming two small towns in our region, fairly far apart. “I arranged it so I could take a detour into the hill country. I used to love going to some of the little towns there, eating in the cafes and checking out the antique stores. I collected those handmade wooden animals — you know the ones, stylized, brightly colored...”

I smiled and nodded encouragingly. Collecting almost childlike wooden animals didn’t seem like a murderer’s occupation to me.

“I got pulled over in Chase City,” Kevin went on. I nodded. I was familiar with the town near the former president’s birthplace. It wasn’t too far from the capital, where I’d been living and working at the time the war broke out. “The deputy sheriff took one look at me and threw a fit. He stepped back, pulled his gun, and demanded I get out with my hands up. It was like being in a movie. He handcuffed me and started reading me my rights. I asked him what I had done. I mean, I had thought I was speeding a little. You know how those small towns are notorious for pulling you over if you go three miles over the speed limit.” He paused, and I glanced at him. He wasn’t doing it for dramatic buildup. He was thinking about it, reliving it in his head. I felt a surge of sympathy for him,

followed closely by a small voice that whispered, “If he’s a killer, he’s also probably a good liar.”

“Anyway,” he resumed finally, “the bottom line is apparently I look like a guy who was wanted around there in connection with a murder. A really bad deal. Some high-school girl was beaten to death with beer bottles. I didn’t have much of an alibi, having been on the road for several days and not really in contact with anyone. They were checking out my story when the bombs started to fall.”

“And the sheriff put you in the shelter before he bailed,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just me and a few books and a big pile of canned goods for six months.”

“It must have been bad,” I murmured, forgetting for a moment how absolutely horrible it had been in the public shelter downtown — the crowding, the smells, the fighting over food, the factions that formed....

“Not so bad,” he answered, perhaps reading my expression as I thought about it.

“Is this way better?” I asked, gesturing toward his hands.

“Oh, yeah,” he answered enthusiastically, smiling a little for the first time since I’d joined this group. “Are you kidding? It’s heaven just to see the sky and trees again. I figure you’ll all get over distrusting me after a while, and in the meantime I get to be waited on by pretty girls.” His smile faded as he said it, and in the next moment, as we sat close together in the still-warm darkness of the late fall evening, I truly thought he was

going to lean forward and kiss me. But he didn’t, and the moment passed. He ate a spoonful of soup and went back to studying the darkness.

I sat still too, letting my heartbeat get back to normal. I was feeling a little silly for letting the romantic setting go to my head. When it seemed like an appropriate amount of time had gone by, I stood up and dusted off the back of my pants, making a mental note that somebody needed to sweep the porch tomorrow.

“Thanks for the soup,” Kevin said before I could come up with a graceful exit line.

“Sure,” I answered, and backed into the house, feeling like an idiot. I guess a hundred and eighty days spent in the human zoo of the public shelter had blunted my social skills somewhat. That was my only excuse. Luckily Kevin was in the same boat, or at least, he didn’t mind my foolishness too much.

I’ll spare you the big falling-in-love montage — you know, the kind they used to have in the movies, where the hero and heroine were shown walking hand in hand on the beach, frolicking in sunlit meadows, cuddling in front of fireplaces, or whatever. I’m sure you get the picture without it, and besides, we didn’t have beaches and fireplaces. We did have a lot of tender moments, but I get a little embarrassed talking about it. Let’s just say that Kevin and I did end up together, and the others accepted him as well. Maybe for my sake at first, but eventually for his own sake, the way he wanted it. He really was a good guy, you see.

I more or less believed his story from the beginning, and I think the others came to believe it as wholeheartedly as I did

— all except Neil, the only person who took Kevin’s new status and our relationship with bad grace. He didn’t say anything openly, but I got the distinct impression that Neil decided I was his by default, since Kevin was under suspicion and Mark was a good deal older than me. That was exactly the type of macho attitude that assured I _wouldn’t_ go for him, but of course the rules were a little different in our brave new world. No, Neil never did anything openly ugly, except for objecting strenuously the day Reed decided to take off Kevin’s shackles for good. But he made his displeasure known in a lot of little ways, by generally acting pissy to both Kevin and I, and making Kevin’s life as difficult as he could.

I moved into the basement with Kevin. I think the others automatically assumed that it was the worst living space in the house because it was dark most of the time. It only had two little windows up high at ground level. But it wasn’t so bad — we always had plenty of candles, which were very romantic for a new couple, I have to say, and very impractical for getting any kind of real work done. For that we had to go upstairs or out on the porch. We did have more space than anyone else in the house, and it worked out for the best because little Roma got to have her own room. That made Reed and Rachel happy, because they were trying for another baby, and it had been hard working around Roma. As for me, I was blissfully happy.

I probably haven’t given Reed much credit in this story, but he really did try to be fair, and he wanted everyone to be as happy as possible. So he split up the work of the farm as best he could according to everyone’s skills, giving everyone both indoor and outdoor assignments and making sure that it wasn’t always the women doing dishes and the guys plowing. I did end up doing more than my fair share of dishes, since I didn’t seem to have any skill that could readily be put to use around

the house, but when it came to outdoor work, Reed paired me with Kevin. Working with him on household repairs and other building projects, I developed a previously unrealized talent for carpentry and woodworking. And we got to spend almost as much time together as we wanted.

I built an enclosure and started experimenting with different types of wheat, just as I had told myself I would that first night in the house when I wished for bread. There were a few helpful books around the farmhouse, and over time we were able to make a few trips to nearby towns to get more books, seed, and other supplies we needed. I also built a really nice little arbor at one corner of the house, with a bricked path that led down the side toward the vegetable garden that Kevin first discovered. Stan and Erica lined the path with gorgeous flowerbeds. They were professionals in their “former” lives and really enjoyed working outdoors now that they had the chance. I really dug the way they seemed to make the best of the whole end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it situation. Anyway, the whole thing made a fairly useless but really nice addition to the house, and of course it wasn’t totally useless; beauty is never useless, nor is pleasure. The human spirit has to be fed and nurtured as well as our bodies, and I think we all felt it was important not merely to survive in the aftermath of the bombs, but to _live_.

One night, about six months after Kevin and I got together, the whole group of us had just sat down to dinner when Reed sort of cleared his throat and stood up. Rachel stood up too, and the way they looked at each other, I guessed what they were going to say. “We have an announcement,” Reed began. His voice, I kid you not, was actually trembling.

“It’s good news,” Rachel added, as if she wasn’t sure we’d all agree. “We’re going to have a baby.” Well, she shouldn’t

have worried. Dinner was all but forgotten in everyone's excitement. We nearly fell over ourselves to hug her and Reed and Roma and congratulate them. Everyone was so happy — I guess we all had been wondering, inside if not aloud, what would happen to our race if the bombs affected our ability to reproduce. Nobody knew if there was enough radiation to affect our fertility. The Centers for Disease Control and other such government agencies were all wiped out by the bombs, and even Mark could only speculate, not being a specialist in those particular areas.

Privately, Mark told me that he thought we would be si-ka. He and I had struck up a sort of friendship. He was really nice, and smart, which meant a lot to me. Stan and Erica liked him too, for the same reasons. The others in our group weren't as educated, and though education was as education did in our current circumstances, it was nice sometimes to sit around and shoot the breeze on various esoteric intellectual issues, just to exercise our brains. Mark said he didn't think the radiation that was left was enough to make people sterile. He felt that if we could drink the water and not show immediate signs of radiation poisoning, then we were si-ka.

I took his word for it and rested easy. And obviously he was at least partly right. Both Reed and Rachel were fertile enough to conceive, at least. We would just have to wait and see what happened with the baby. I thanked my lucky stars that we had Mark, then glanced at Kevin. He was looking at me funny.

I raised an eyebrow at him. I realized right away that I was in for another round of the kid discussion. He wanted them, but I wasn't sure. He had wanted kids before the bombs — he told me he had always planned to settle down one day and have a family, while I had never been sure I even wanted to get

married, much less have kids. I compromised by not using any birth control. What more could I do than that, anyway? But I wasn't showing any signs of getting pregnant and that was just fine with me. I made it clear to Kevin that I wasn't anyone's brood mare, and I wasn't going to be pressured into pregnancy just to assure the survival of the species. Not that I thought our survival depended on me and me alone having a child. On the other hand, I really wanted to make Kevin happy, because he did so much to make me happy.

Later that night, alone in the dark of our basement, I suffered through the kid discussion for a while, then told him I would agree to talk to Mark about what Kevin and I could do to increase my chances of getting pregnant. Kevin was really happy. Looking back, all my feminist big talk about making my own choices aside, all I can say is that I'm really glad I was able to give him that bit of happiness.

The next day I was out messing around with my wheatfield — as everyone insisted on calling my eight by eight patch of struggling stalks — when I heard the distant sound of arguing. Raised voices, two men shouting, other voices yelling at them to cool it. I recognized Kevin's voice and headed back toward the house at a jog, not really thinking it was anything serious, but worried enough to check out what was going on. I neared the house and could make out Neil and Kevin up on the roof, where they were repairing the old chimney. They were yelling at one another, and just as the house rose up between me and them, I saw Neil shove Kevin backward, hard. Kevin stumbled and dropped out of my line of sight. A heartbeat later I heard a horrible, heavy sound, the sound of him striking the ground.

I screamed his name and broke into a real run, not something graceful but a stumbling, shambling gallop that brought me around the corner of the house and into the front yard. Chaos reigned. Rachel was holding Roma in her lap; the little girl was sobbing. Mark and Stan were crouched over Kevin's body. Tim got between me and them, bless his heart, and tried to hold me back, but I was just out of control. I fought him like a rabid wildcat and shoved past him and the others until I could fling myself down at Kevin's side.

"Kevin!" I sobbed. I was gasping for breath. My chest was on fire. I grabbed Mark's arm in a grip that probably hurt him, though I didn't realize it at the time. "Mark ... Mark ..." I tried to tell myself that two stories wasn't so far to fall, but I had heard that terrible sound, and I guess my heart told me the truth before Mark spoke.

"I'm so sorry, Dana," Mark said. I lost it. I threw myself on Kevin's body. I buried my face in the front of his shirt. He was still warm, of course — it was a hot day and he had been working hard. He smelled like sweat and sawdust, with a faint undertone of the detergent that had been used to wash his shirt. I just held onto him and cried, unable to believe that after all the crap we had both gone through, after such a short time together, he was dead.

I heard more shouting and raised my head, seeing the world blearily through a film of stinging tears. Reed was manhandling Neil across the front yard past where I sat holding Kevin in my arms. Neil was a lot bigger than Reed, but Reed was on fire — I'd never seen him so furious. He was full of the righteous anger that burns hotter than the white dwarf of our solar pair, and Neil was no match for it. "You get the hell off this land, you son of a bitch," Reed snarled, shoving Neil forward a

good half dozen steps, "and if you ever set foot on this property again, I'll shoot you down like the dog you are. So help me," he finished, in a voice so deep and deadly that it even scared me in my totally out-of-it state.

Neil was trying to protest that it wasn't his fault, that Kevin started it, that he hadn't meant to push Kevin off the roof, all sorts of other excuses. I don't know where he thought that would get him; he wasn't going to be welcome in our home anymore, under any circumstances. But the others told me later, when I was able to talk about it, that Neil started the argument over something completely asinine, and pushed and pushed until he physically pushed my lover to his death. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Neil murdered Kevin. I felt overwhelmed with guilt that I hadn't seen how serious was Neil's enmity toward Kevin, that I hadn't confronted him earlier and somehow dealt with the issue before it came to a head. Reed tried to tell me there was no way I could have seen it, but somehow I felt like I could have.

We buried Kevin in my wheatfield, which was si-ka because I had lost interest in the project. I lost interest in most everything for a while. I guess it's normal to go through a severe depression after losing someone you love, and I sank pretty low. Food didn't taste so good to me; the suns didn't seem to shine so bright. I went through the motions of my daily chores, barely holding up my end of things. Everyone was great about letting me get away with it for as long as I needed to. Eventually, little by little, the fog started to lift. At first the change was so small it was almost imperceptible, but after a while I realized that I was feeling a little better, and then even a little better. It didn't cause me physical pain to look at Kevin's shirts hanging in the closet. I found myself noticing projects that could be done around the house. I started lingering on the

porch every so often after dinner to look up at the stars and talk to Mark, who was absolutely great. Our friendship really grew during this time, becoming something that I valued very much.

Maybe that's why I felt the worst for him when Rachel's baby died. I know how that sounds. I felt horrible for Rachel, of course, and for Reed and Roma. But Mark blamed himself and really suffered over the whole thing. I tried to tell him that if he hadn't been with us, Rachel would probably have died too. The baby came early and was breech, not to mention deformed. Rachel bled like crazy and Mark literally saved her life. I'm no doctor, but I did see the baby, and I doubt it had a chance to survive no matter what. It just wasn't right somehow.

Mark did an autopsy and found that the baby had internal deformities to match its pitiful outward appearance. He was forced to conclude, on the basis of the limited evidence he had, that the child had been affected by radiation. He wasn't sure exactly how, and he couldn't say whether the other women in the group would face similar fates, which was hard on everybody. Erica was four months pregnant. Sarah had just missed a period and was hoping she was pregnant, too. Both of them had minor fits after Mark revealed his findings, and I didn't blame them. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to carry a baby and not know if my pregnancy would end the way Rachel's had.

"Do you think this is the way it's going to be?" I asked Mark, two nights after he saved Rachel's life. We were sitting on the porch as we often did, looking up at the violet sky sprinkled with vivid stars.

"What do you mean?" he asked, though I am almost sure he knew what I was asking.

"Do you think," I asked more slowly, not certain I really wanted to know the answer, "that all babies born after the bombs are going to be like that? Deformed and messed up, doomed to die?"

Mark sat still for a long moment before finally answering, "I just can't say, Dana. There's no way for me to draw a conclusion like that on the basis of one dead baby. Rachel is within the range of childbearing years where a woman is more susceptible to problem pregnancies. And she could have a family history of problems, even though she has Roma, who appears healthy enough. Finally, it could be that this defective fetus was just a very tragic coincidence." He had lapsed into doctor-speak for a moment, but he sighed when he finished his sentence and broke the authoritative spell.

"I guess we'll know more when Erica and Sarah have their kids," I murmured.

"Yeah," he answered.

"Still, you have to wonder. I mean, look at me. I seem sika, but I didn't even see a blip on the charts in six months."

Mark glanced my way. "Again, there could be any number of explanations. Maybe Kevin wore his underpants too tight."

I smiled, glad that I was able to smile at anything having to do with Kevin's memory. But the smile and the gladness faded as I thought it all over. Mark was right. We shouldn't jump to any conclusions just because Rachel's baby died and I hadn't gotten pregnant. There was no reason to suspect Erica and Sarah wouldn't be just fine. But I was scared anyway. Scared

and angry. I was almost surprised at the bitterness in my own voice when I spoke again. “Wasn’t it enough?” I asked, more loudly than I intended. “They sent us away, as far away as they could with their technology, and stranded us in a solar system where we didn’t even belong with no hope of getting home. Why did they have to come back and try to finish the job?”

“You know why,” he said. “They do use radios. They were able to detect our signals; they knew we were still out here thriving.”

“What did they expect?” I demanded. “We’re descended from the best and the brightest — the intellectuals, the scientists and engineers, the doctors, teachers, professionals ...”

“And they’re descended from the superstitious, the small-minded, the fearful and terrified,” he reminded me.

“It was a thousand years ago,” I hissed.

“We haven’t changed much,” Mark said. “Why would they?”

“They were our fathers and mothers, for God’s sake!” I burst out.

He put his hand over mine, gently. “It was for God’s sake,” he said softly. “Those who believed technology was evil overcame those who believed it was good, and we were on the losing end of the battle. Our foreparents managed to thrive here and carry on civilization the way they thought it should be. But I’d say it’s still up in the air whether technology was such a good thing. After all, it was our own leftover technology they used to come back and hit us again.”

“So now we’re just going to die out,” I whispered. “And they’re going to win.”

“Not necessarily,” Mark said. I think he meant to be comforting, but what he said sparked something inside me, something that perhaps had not been fully awake since Kevin’s death.

“Do you think,” I asked him, “that we could find an answer to what happened to Rachel’s baby? A real answer?”

“It’s possible that a team of researchers with the right equipment could find some answers in time, but who knows if we have that time?” he said.

“What do we have to lose?” I asked him.

“We?” he asked. “You mean, you and me? You’re kidding me, Dana. We’d have to go to the city and find a lab with the most sophisticated equipment ... find trained researchers willing to help ... all to unravel a mystery we aren’t even sure exists in the first place?” He snorted, then looked at me a little more closely and realized I wasn’t kidding. “Oh, come on, Dana. What we have to lose is all this.” He gestured around us, taking in the peaceful farm and our comfortable existence with one metaphorical sweep of his arm. I followed his gaze and swallowed a small lump that formed in my throat. He was right.

“But if we don’t go ... if someone doesn’t go, Mark, if someone doesn’t try, we could be gone in one generation,” I whispered, almost painfully.

It was a real sacrifice for him to go. I knew that. I think it was even harder on him than it was on me, because the farm held bad memories for me as well as good ones, where for Mark there was almost only good. I think it was the impact of Rachel's child's death that decided him in the end. And maybe the fact that I was going had a little bit to do with it. I don't mean that he felt protective of me or anything. Mark wasn't like that, which was one of the things I liked about him. But like I said, we had become close friends. I guess you could say that in these last couple months we've formed an understanding that if I ever change my mind about trying the relationship thing again, he'd like to apply for the position.

In the meantime, we're living and working in a research hospital in the big city nearest our farm, a town that, as luck would have it, boasted a famous medical science center before the bombs dropped. We've already gathered a few helpers from the neighborhood, and all of us are learning basic microbiology faster than you might have thought possible, due to Mark's teaching ability and our devotion to the task. I don't know if I really think that a handful of laypeople can diagnose and find a treatment for radiation-related infertility in time for women like me, or even girls Roma's age, to have a chance to have kids of our own. We can only try.

It gives me something else to think about rather than lying awake wondering why our own ancestors wanted to wipe us out of existence.

Maybe one day, if we survive, my daughter or granddaughter will find a way to travel "home" to Earth and ask them. •



AN OLD FLAME

by Lynda Beauregard

“Sir. Sir?”

Gareth surfaced from his reverie with a jolt and turned to face the flight attendant. “Yes?”

“I need you to raise your seat back and fasten your safety belt, sir. We’ll be landing in Buffalo soon.” She spoke slowly, as if he were a child, and flashed him an artificial smile. He reacted automatically by nodding and following her instructions. Satisfied with his appropriate response, she flounced away to find other degenerate passengers.

Gareth sighed and stared without seeing at the papers he held loosely in his hands. The Borden account had gone exceedingly well. The client was very satisfied with his designs, another child of his mind was destined to be built, and another large sum of money was being transferred to his bank account. So why wasn’t he elated, riding high on a wave of triumph? Why did he feel defeated instead? Gareth closed his eyes wearily. He knew the answer but hated to admit it, even to himself.

The plane began its descent through the thick storm clouds that surrounded it as Gareth shuffled the papers together and stuffed them into his briefcase. A flash of light made him glance out the window and watch as lightning lit up the clouds like fireworks. Even the weather seemed more excited about life than he did. He closed his eyes and leaned back, steeling himself for the part of flying that he hated most - landing.

It went better than he expected. Despite the rough weather, the pilot brought the plane down smoothly, with only a few bumps. Gareth held his breath as his body surged forward, straining against the safety belt as the plane quickly decelerated. Images flashed through his mind of planes that had veered off the runway, or fallen off at the end because they didn’t have enough room to stop, or dipped a wing and went cartwheeling away, always ending in a ball of flames. His plane performed none of these antics, smoothly rolling to a near stop, then slowly taxiing toward the airport. Gareth opened his mouth and let the air out, willing his heart to return to a normal pace. He shook his head. Silliness. He’d been flying at least once a week for three years now, and never had a bad incident. But terrifying images of flames still haunted him every time, for no apparent reason. He was beginning to think he should see someone about it.

Gareth collected his things and waited patiently for the flight attendant with the plastic smile to give him permission to stand. He was one of the first off the plane as usual, always anxious to put another flight behind him. He had another flight to survive before he was home, but first there was a three hour layover to look forward to. Gareth’s thoughts wandered away again as he joined the mindless throng that trudged and pushed its way through the terminal.

Why was he in such a hurry to get home? His 40,000 square foot house would be empty, lifeless. Allison wouldn’t be there. She wouldn’t be returning from her business trip for over a week. Funny how she never told him where she was going

anymore, or with who. Gareth simply refused to think about it much, finding safety in denial. She threw offhand comments at him from time to time, saying that he didn't love her, didn't pay enough attention to her, never brought her presents. Gareth always stood dumbfounded, flinching as the accusations hit him. Of course he loved her! He gave her every free moment he had! She was the one that pushed him into becoming a famous architect. He had been perfectly content, but she wanted more. And he used his hard won wealth to buy her anything she wanted. Why was she so unhappy with him? What could he do to make her smile again, that special smile that spoke volumes?

An overhead sign loomed into view and Gareth detoured into the newsstand it advertised. He'd better find something else to occupy his mind over the next three hours, or he'd drive himself crazy worrying over Allison. He wandered past "I LUV NY" buttons, T-shirts, and postcards to find the newspapers and glanced at the headlines. 16 year old killed in accidental shooting. 152 die in Haiti in freak storm. Global warming on the rise. Medicare cut protesters storm the capital. Gareth rubbed his forehead and turned to see if the stand held anything less depressing for him to read.

"May I help you, sir?" A dishwasher blonde with cigarette stained teeth was at his elbow. Her words bespoke assistance, but there was a definite undertone of "buy something or get the hell out, buddy."

"Do you have anything in here that's not bad news? Something that doesn't discuss death and destruction, perhaps?" He doubted that such a thing existed at a newsstand, but he thought he'd try anyway. The blonde crinkled her forehead in deep thought and exasperation. He was obviously being difficult. She glared at him when she thought he wasn't paying

attention, then strutted over to the NY propaganda and thrust a book into his chest.

"Here. You can learn all about our lovely state. \$9.95 plus tax."

Gareth peeled the book away from his suit and glanced at the cover. Typical tourist fare. New York City skyline, classy museums, sleepy New England towns. He was about to toss it back to her when a small picture on the corner of the cover caught his eye. It was a castle, situated on its own island, dignified, deserted and alone. Kind of like me, he thought. He peered closer. There was something familiar about it. Something that reminded him of a happier time. He smiled at the foot-tapping blonde.

"I'll take it."

He found the gate for his next flight without too much trouble, and settled himself into an uncomfortable chair away from the other travelers. He wondered briefly if they made the chairs so uncomfortable on purpose, so that no one could possibly fall asleep and miss their flight. They probably thought that was a good thing, beneficial to their customers. Gareth shrugged out of his suit coat, loosened his tie, and thumbed through the book until he found a bigger picture of the castle. He began to read.

By the end of the first paragraph, Gareth remembered why the castle looked familiar. Twenty five years ago, it had been a tourist attraction, complete with tour boats and junky trinket shops. His parents had taken him to see it during a road trip to Toronto. He remembered touching the cold stone walls, dutifully walking behind his parents as they oohed and ahed,

wishing he were back out in the sunny gardens that surrounded it. He also remembered thinking what a neat place it would have been to play in, if it weren't for all the big people wandering around it.

Fulton Castle. Frank Fulton had been a multi-millionaire at the turn of the century, and the heart shaped island was his personal vacation spot. He decided to build a Rhineland style castle for his wife Elizabeth on it. He spent \$2.5 million over four years, a lot of money back then. Shortly after the exterior of the main building was completed, Elizabeth became ill and died. Frank was devastated. He ceased all work, sending the 300 workmen and craftsmen home, and never set foot on the island again.

The castle stood deserted for over seventy years. The elements took their toll, and the castle was turning to ruin. Then the government acquired the property and turned it into a revenue. To be fair, they did use a portion of the ticket sales and trinket profits to attempt a clumsy restoration. But a government just isn't capable of the care and devotion that such an undertaking requires. When ticket sales waned, the operation shut down, and Fulton Castle was silent once more.



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Gareth stared at the pictures, mute testimony to Frank Fulton's love for his wife and shattered dreams. The castle itself fascinated him. The craftsmen had used techniques and technology that was purely experimental then but were still being used today. It even had an elevator! It was a perfect meld of past and future. And it was calling him.

"Attention all passengers of Flight 836 to LaGuardia. This flight has been over booked. If you are interested in taking a later flight, please come to the counter. We will be happy to book you on the next available flight and give you a voucher for \$100 off your next ticket. We apologize for the inconvenience."

Gareth scowled. Damn the money-grubbing airlines, anyway. The people who didn't get seats would give him dirty looks as he walked through the gate, as if it were his fault. And even though he'd be in first class, he'd still be stuck on a hot, smelly plane filled with crying babies and sweaty bodies. He glanced down at the picture of Fulton Castle again, then off into space. Or would he?

"Excuse me, miss?" The woman behind the counter tilted her head at him, a hopeful look on her round face. She wouldn't be disappointed. "I'm willing to give up my seat. I.....I'm not in any hurry to get home."

The airline clerk gave Gareth an odd look, then thanked him profusely. "All right, Mr. Lindsey, the next flight into LaGuardia leaves at 8:16. Would you like me to book you on that flight?"

Gareth hesitated, then shook his head. "No, I think I might stay the night and....take a look at something. I'll come back in the morning and make arrangements for another flight."

She tried again to pin him down to a specific flight, then gave up and issued a voucher for his fare plus \$100. He took it from her, nodded in acknowledgment of another appreciative verbal barrage, and walked briskly away.

Gareth throttled down the motor and let the small rental boat putter serenely around the perimeter of Heart Island. It was still technically government property and not open to the public, so he purposely neglected to read the signs poking up out of the water, enabling him to truthfully say he hadn't read

them if he got caught. The only sounds were the low thrum of the motor and distant bird calls. Fulton Castle was as deserted as he'd hoped it would be.

He circled the island once more, coming around to the faux Arch d'Triumph that Fulton had built as a pretentious entrance gate for the launches his guests would have used to get from their large yachts to the island. Gareth's small boat sailed into the shadows of the arch with no difficulty. He killed the motor and let it coast slowly into deeper shadow, where he tied it off and stepped carefully onto the crumbling promenade. While the arch was never completed, what there was of it was massive enough to be impressive. Gareth smiled, imagining what it would have looked like if work hadn't been interrupted. Fulton may have been crazy in love, but he definitely had style.

Gareth stood and stretched, trying to decide where to start his explorations. A short walk to his right would bring him to the Tower, which looked interesting. Frank and Elizabeth had lived there during the four summers of construction on the main castle. It vaguely resembled the defense towers found on the Alster River in Germany, but the structure was far too irregular to have been ever put on paper. The Tower looked as if it just grew on that spot, without direction or plan. Gareth remembered touring some of its bizarre rooms, including the bowling alley in the basement. It was in good shape the last time he'd seen it, and probably wouldn't take much effort to make habitable again. Gareth stored this information away without pausing to consider why he was thinking along those lines. He decided to check out the Tower later, and headed down the pathway that led inland to the castle instead.

Fulton Castle perched on a ridge of land near the center of the island. The pathway leading up to it offered several

views of the imposing edifice. Gareth belatedly remembered the servant's tunnel that led from the power house to the castle. He wouldn't have worried about being spotted on the way up if he'd taken that route, but the power house was on the other side of the island, near the point of the heart'. Gareth shrugged and continued his stroll up the pathway, hoping the trees and brush would hide him sufficiently from anyone who happened to pass by the island.

The pathway ended directly in front of the main entrance. Gareth tilted his head back and let his jaw drop. He didn't remember it being so big! The tour book stated that the castle had 120 rooms, with six stories from foundation level to the highest tower room, but the description didn't do it justice. Crumbling and decrepit, it was still overwhelming. Gareth tiptoed to one side and mounted the steps to the circular balcony, afraid to make a sound and disturb the solemnity. He rested his hands lightly on the stone balustrade and gazed out over the island, a king surveying his kingdom. The view was breathtaking. It was with great reluctance that he turned away to find a broken window he could climb in through.

Gareth spent the rest of the day idly wandering through Fulton's unrealized dream. The floors were littered with trash and the graffiti covered walls looked more like a New York subway than a multi-millionaire's future home. Most of the windows were broken, and the beautiful woodwork on the floors and paneling was destroyed by water damage. Birds nested in the ornate carvings of the ceilings. Pools of questionable liquids formed in depressions of the tile floors. Mice darted in and out of the cracked and rotted wood of the billiard table in the front salon. But all the sights and sounds were subordinate to his visions of what could have been, aided by a yellowed floor plan he found in a smashed display case.

As twilight settled in like an old dog on an overstuffed chair, Gareth found himself sitting by the edge of the half dug indoor pool under the balcony, watching water drip relentlessly from the ceiling, shattering the calm serenity of the dark pool with each drop. A light rain spattered against what was left of the windows. The incredible weight of stone above seemed to press against him, but something else weighted his shoulders as well. Sorrow, deep sorrow. The feeling was so intense that he couldn't determine if it was his own or originated from the stones themselves. Knowing the history of this place, he was inclined to believe the latter. But there was a hint of promise, as well. For Fulton Castle, and for Gareth Lindsey.

Gareth was awake and dialing numbers furiously from his hotel telephone at 8:00 the next morning. The local realtor thought he was a prank caller at first. His accountant clearly thought he was insane. It took two more days before a dent was made in the governmental red tape and Gareth could get down to the sticky business of buying property from the government. They seemed reluctant to part with it, despite its albatross status. They didn't want it, but they weren't sure they wanted anyone else to have it. In the end, money talks, and Gareth had money. The price of Fulton Castle and Heart Island was prohibitive, but not insurmountable. And if this worked, it would be worth any price.

When all the dickering and dealing was complete, Gareth returned to the island. He felt less like an intruder this time. He didn't feel as if it belonged to him, and he wasn't sure if he would ever feel that way, but it was definitely a part of him. He stood next to a badly deteriorated marble statue in the Italian garden, delighting in the feel of the wind as it played

with his conservatively cut, light brown hair. Birds flitted from tree to tree as he leaned against the statue, while the formulation and growth of incredible plans occurred at a prodigious rate inside his head.

The birds' busy twittering filled his hearing, so it was some time before he realized that someone was crying, not far from where he stood. Gareth narrowed his eyes and peered through the foliage. What now? A teenager from one of the bigger islands, distraught over adolescent anxieties? Heart Island was his now, or nearly so, and he wasn't about to tolerate trespassers and vandals. He pulled his cell phone from its case, his finger ready to dial for official help, and crept quietly through the overgrown garden. The sound was definitely coming from the area of the fountain pool. Gareth made a mental note to investigate repairing the fountain as he pulled aside the branches of a forsythia bush, ready to confront the troublesome teen. Stern words bubbled up his throat, then died there unuttered as he spotted the source of the sound.

The figure that knelt on the ground and leaned against a pitted stone bench was no angst-ridden teenager. It was a full grown woman with tiny, pale-skinned hands covering her face and coal black hair piled high. The sunlight's glare off her white dress made it difficult to see details, but her figure appeared to be anorexic thin. Trespasser or no, the woman's heart-wrenching tears quenched the fire of outrage that coursed through Gareth's veins. He put the phone away and approached her tentatively.

The crunch of his shoes on the bedraggled gravel walkway alerted her to his presence when he was still 20 feet away. She spun toward him and he caught a glimpse of a delicate, fine featured face before it disappeared behind hands

held up to ward him off. He held out his own hands in supplication.

"It's all right. I won't hurt you." Gareth did his best to sound unthreatening. "I'll stay right here, okay?"

The tiny hands sunk a few inches, and a pair of startlingly deep blue eyes appeared above them, watching him cautiously. Gareth lowered himself to the ground and shifted around a bit, trying to find a spot in the gravel with no sharp stones. He never took his eyes off the mysterious visitor.

"Are you from around here?" He asked. It sounded like a safe enough question. A shadow seemed to pass before her blue eyes, then cleared away. But she didn't answer him. "Um, okay. What's your name? Do you need help?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head, slowly, methodically, as if she wished she could ask for help, but didn't dare. Frustrated, Gareth started to rise.

"No!" She cried out, her eyes wide and watching him again. "You.....you cannot help me. Indeed, you should not try. You have no understanding of the cost."

Gareth froze in the half crouch he'd achieved before she cried out. Her speech sounded strange and archaic. And her words fairly ached with fear, sorrow, and regret. He had just decided to approach her anyway when the electronic chirping of his cell phone shattered the tense silence between them. Gareth glanced down, grabbed the offensive phone, and angrily flipped out the mouthpiece to answer it. He threw an apologetic glance at his visitor, but she wasn't there to receive it. She'd disappeared into thin air.

“Where the hell did she go?” He muttered as his eyes darted from one end of the pool garden to the other.

“Where the hell did who go?”

Gareth flinched and hurriedly raised the phone to his face. “No one, Allison. I was just talking to myself.”

“Uh huh.” His wife’s voice dripped with derision. “Sure. Why did you leave a message for me to call you? You know I’m busy right now.”

This was not going as well as Gareth had imagined it would. “Oh. Well, if you’re busy, you could call me back later, I suppose.” He rose from his crouch and walked over to the bench, still watching for its former occupant.

Allison didn’t bother to suppress her sigh. “I’m always busy, Gareth. What do you want?”

Gareth squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his forehead as he sank down onto the bench. Was he making a big mistake? “I have a surprise for you, Allison. Will you have a few days free when you come back?”

“I don’t think so.” She answered coldly. “What kind of surprise, Gareth? This isn’t going to be a repeat of your pathetic anniversary antics, is it?”

That stung. Their 5 year anniversary was six months ago. Gareth felt the strangeness growing between them even then, and he planned an elaborate trip to Venice, hoping to regain some lost ground in such a romantic location. He made arrangements with her firm for other lawyers to divvy up

Allison’s workload for a week, but made them promise not to tell her a thing. Then he packed her bags while she was at work and loaded them into the trunk of his car. When she got home, he offered to take her out to dinner for their anniversary. She gave him a bored look and tried to decline. He managed to talk her into it anyway, and off they went. She was surprised when they arrived at the airport instead of a restaurant. And angry. She was outraged when he told her of the arrangements he’d made. She went with him to Venice, but by the end of the trip, he almost wished she hadn’t. Allison managed to make every minute of that trip a miserable one.

“Maybe we better talk about this later.” Knowing Allison’s moods well, he could tell this wasn’t a good time. “When are you going home?”

“What do you mean, when am I going home? Aren’t you there? Where are you?” Allison’s voice was getting more accusatory with each word. “You’d better be working on that Philly project, Gareth. You can’t afford to lose that one.”

“I gave the Philly project to Larry, Allison. I need some time off.”

“What?! Gareth, you -”

“We’ll talk later, Allison.” Gareth ended the call and quickly turned off the phone. He knew she’d call back, and he didn’t feel like listening to her barbed comments and complaints at the moment. Allison was right - he was very bad at paying attention to her. He let the phone drop from his hands and brought them up to his face. After a few moments, his own tears joined those of the mystery woman on the graveled walkway.

Gareth encountered the mystery woman again, the very next day. He was exploring the myriad rooms of the Tower when he found her sitting quietly on a weather beaten chest near one of the few intact windows. The light from the window cast her in shadow, but he recognized her outline. She jumped a little when he entered the room, as if he startled her, but she did not seem to be afraid.

“Hello again.” Gareth said quietly. It occurred to him that he was talking to her as if she were a small animal he was trying to coax closer with food. “You must like it here.”

The woman shrugged in an eloquent, refined manner. “I fear I do not have much choice.”

Gareth’s eyebrows crept together as he tried to decipher that comment. “You have to be here? Are you some sort of caretaker or something? If you are, I’m afraid you...” His voice trailed off as he sensed that she was smiling at him, a secret smile, full of mysteries. She raised one slim hand and gestured around the debris filled room.

“I must be a sorry caretaker indeed,” she said in a playful, lilting tone, “to let this dwelling fall into such a disgraceful state. No, I am not the caretaker. This is my home, of a sort.”

“Oh.” Gareth felt a frown pulling down on his face. “Well then, we have a problem. You see, I’ve just bought this place, and I’m going to fix it up. I’m going to make it beautiful for my wife, just like Frank Fulton planned to do for his wife.”

The woman’s hand fluttered to her throat like a startled bird. There was a leaden moment of silence in which Gareth wondered what he said wrong, then she spoke. “Your intentions are to bring your wife to this place?”

“Yes.” Gareth answered quietly. “If she’ll come.”

The silence stretched out between them once more. Gareth waited quietly, breathing in the dust and memories of the room. The woman didn’t seem inclined to talk any more, but she wasn’t making any motions to leave, either.

“What is your name?” He asked her again. He saw the outline of her head bow down, then she held it high once more.

“My name is Elizabeth.” She announced with dignity.

“Like Fulton’s wife?”

“I am Fulton’s wife.”

Gareth suddenly felt cold all over, as if the temperature of the room had abruptly dropped by 20 degrees. He laughed nervously, folding his goose-pimpled arms across his chest.

“Heh. You had me going for a minute there.” He couldn’t keep his voice from cracking. “No, really, who are you?”

“I told you, I’m Frank Fulton’s wife, Elizabeth.”

This wasn’t funny anymore. “Elizabeth Fulton is long dead. She died over 90 years ago.”

The woman inclined her head in acknowledgment.
“1904, to be precise. To be even more precise - April 18th, at 3:46 in the afternoon, on the parquet floor of the grand entrance hall of the castle.”

Gareth shook his head. “It was April all right, so you, I mean, she should have been in New York City, not here. Why would she be here before summer?”

“Mr. Fulton wanted to see how the outer shell weathered the winter storms, and to show me what he hoped to accomplish with it that year. Or at least, that is what he told the police.” She sighed wearily. “No one found it odd that I would fall ill in such inclement weather, although some looked at Frank askance for not taking better care of me. So it was perfectly believable that I should suddenly become faint, lose my balance, and tumble over an upper railing to my death, three stories below.”

Gareth shuddered. “Did he - ?”

“Yes, of course he pushed me.” She answered matter-of-factly. “He needed my inheritance. Unbeknownst to most, he was doing very badly with his stocks. He hid his losses well. Even I was unaware of his difficulties. He continued the construction of this place, even though he had no funds to finance the work. He was so intent on its completion! I know now that he never intended it for me. Tribute to undying love, indeed! He built this castle to enhance his own pretentious image of himself. It was nothing more than a showpiece. I was the expendable factor. And he was under the assumption that he could profit from my demise. So yes, he is responsible for my death.”

“Now wait a minute,” Gareth thought he saw a hole in her story. “If he killed you for your money, just so he could finish the castle, how come he ceased construction and never set foot on this island again?”

A wry laugh trickled from her shadowy form. “Because I got my revenge from the grave, dear sir. He did not discover until it was too late that upon my death, all my inheritance went to a very worthy university. It was his own fault - he never investigated the arrangements. And not one of his esteemed lawyers could do a blessed thing about it. He did return to this island once, but he never told a soul about it. It was not manly to admit being frightened near extinction by a ghost!”

“So.....you really are...?”

“Yes, I really am Elizabeth Fulton.”

“Wow. Oh, wow.” Gareth sank down onto a rickety chair and tried to process this latest bit of information. His mind stubbornly refused to cooperate. “So, you can’t leave here now?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No. Here I must remain, until...”

“Until what?” He couldn’t see her eyes, but he got the impression that she was gazing on him steadily.

“Until it is time for me to depart.” She answered finally. And promptly disintegrated into thin air. Gareth stared at the dust motes falling through the space where she had been and tried to suppress the shudder that seemed intent on shaking him

to pieces. He waited a few more moments, watching carefully for her return, then made his way shakily back down the stairs and out into the warm sunshine. He didn't stop shaking until sometime after his third martini, back at the hotel bar. He didn't get much sleep that night. He kept dreaming about fire.

“Where in God’s name are you taking me, Gareth? This wind is turning my hair into a rat’s nest, and I don’t even want to think about what the water spray is doing to my suit. Let me guess -you’re taking me to some secret island hideaway, right?”

“Something like that.” Gareth slowed the boat a little to please her. She glared at him and smoothed back her long blond hair with perfectly manicured hands. He wished he could reach out and touch her hair, but he had to play his cards just right. It had taken a little over a week to get her to come. If she didn't like it, there would be hell to pay. It wasn't going well so far. All he could do now was hope and pray that she'd change her mind once she saw the castle.

Heart Island swam into view in all its isolated splendor. From this angle, only the terra cotta roofed towers and upper reaches of the castle peeked above the surrounding trees. Allison was silent, which was a good sign. It meant she was at least interested enough to stop complaining for a minute. He imagined the stern lines of her face softening as he lazily circled the island, but he didn't dare look over his shoulder to confirm it. He didn't want to take the chance of being disappointed. Not yet.

He piloted the boat into the arch and tied it off at a mooring he'd rebuilt over the last week. He hadn't done very

extensive work, but he had cleaned things up a bit and made the Tower habitable. Some of the nearby islands had proven to be excellent places to find antique furniture, and he'd kept himself busy furnishing some of the Tower rooms. He hadn't convinced himself to spend the night there yet, despite the fact that he'd seen nothing more of Elizabeth Fulton. He still got the chills every time he thought about her.

Gareth found himself wondering about that as they walked in silence toward the tower. Why hadn't she put in more appearances? Could it be that bringing another woman to this island made her go away? Perhaps by making the false intentions of this place true, he had broken some sort of curse. Whatever the reason, Gareth wasn't complaining. Elizabeth Fulton was a lovely creature, but he much preferred a living woman, thank you very much. Even if that woman was Allison.

The coolness of the Tower's stone interior was welcome after the short walk in the baking sun. Gareth ran his hand along the uneven walls and smiled to himself as his eyes slowly adjusted to the dim lighting. Maybe, just maybe, Allison would like it here. As soon as he could see the details in the rough stone before him, he turned to gauge Allison's reaction.

He should have kept staring at the wall.

“You're kidding, right? You don't actually expect me to spend any time here, do you? This is so, so primitive! My God, there's probably rats in this place! No running water, no electricity, no phone. Are you trying to torture me, Gareth? Is this a dungeon you want to hold me prisoner in?”

Gareth backed up against the cool wall, holding up his hands in a futile attempt to protect himself from the verbal

assault. Allison went on for several minutes, her voice rising more and more. She finally ran out of breath just before she reached the range that only dogs could hear. Gareth took the opportunity to get a few words in.

“It’s not that bad, Allison.” He kept his voice low, comforting, cajoling. “It does have power and running water. It has its own power house with working steam generators on the other side of the island. And they put in plumbing and water softeners several years ago, when it was a tourist attraction.”

“A tourist attraction! This is a tourist attraction! Gareth -”

“Allison, please, just give it a chance. Besides, this is only temporary. Come on, I want to show you where you’ll be hosting formal dinners and inviting all your friends to stay for the weekend.”

That idea seemed to cheer her up a bit. Allison loved to entertain. That was another reason he wanted this place. Surely Allison would love a castle where she was queen, lording over her subjects with proper disdain. Gareth wouldn’t mind if she had 20 people here every weekend, if it pleased her. It was far too big for two people, anyway. He smiled and took her hand, leading her back out into the sunshine and up the pathway to the castle.

Allison started complaining about the climb about halfway up, but Gareth just made comforting noises and kept going. He couldn’t wait to see her face when they came around the last bend. Fulton had planned out this place well. Even Allison would be impressed. They rounded the last batch of trees and stood gazing up at the castle before them. Gareth risked a quick peek over his shoulder. Allison’s jaw hung slack, and for once she was speechless. Success!

“There are 120 rooms in all.” He explained as he led her up the staircase to the entrance. “With 365 windows that give excellent views like this.” He gained the top of the stone stairs and turned her around. Allison still wasn’t saying anything. She just shook her head in wonder. Gareth took her hand again and led her through the huge front doors and into the grand entrance hall.

It looked a lot better than the first time he’d seen it. He’d swept out the trash and debris, and moved all the rotted furniture into a storage area in the foundation level. He whitewashed over the graffiti that covered the walls, since the materials beneath were ruined anyway. A contractor had already begun the extensive job of replacing or repairing all those windows. It was still far from habitable, but at least it no longer resembled an abandoned downtown warehouse.

“There’s an elevator that takes you all the way up to the highest tower room, Allison. An elevator! See here, there are two front salons, one for the men, one for the women. And look at this ballroom! There are more than 30 bedrooms in this place, Allison. With a bathroom between each set of two. Yes, bathrooms! Fulton was way ahead of his time. And wait till you see your bedroom on the third floor, Allison. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He led her up the grand staircase. Fortunately, some of the tourist revenues had been spent to reinforce it, enabling the gawkers to safely attain the second and third floor. “There are eleven buildings in all. The Tower is where the Fultons stayed while construction was underway. The lower levels include a another ball room and a bowling alley. The upper floors have bedrooms, a library, and a billiard room. The Power House is connected to the island with a stone bridge, and it has a clock

tower with chimes. There's a dock over there too, for supply delivery. Fulton made an underground passage from the dock to the storage rooms in the castle, so the goods could be transported safely in bad weather, and unobtrusively too. There's an incredible garden right off the castle's ball room, with a fountained pool and Italian marble statues that the government found in crates, underwater in an old boathouse."

They were passing a window, so he stopped to point out the view. "See that over there, across the water? That's a yacht house, Allison. They kept three yachts and a houseboat in there! Those doors are so big, they had to use an engine to open them. And look down there. There's a gazebo, and look at the hennery. Elizabeth Fulton loved birds, so her husband built that massive birdhouse to attract them."

Allison was making little sounds now, but she wasn't up to words yet. Gareth kept going. He was afraid that if he lost momentum now, he might blow the whole thing. "Here's your bedroom, Allison. Look at the size of it. And check out this closet. They called it a wardrobe back then. It's big enough to be another bedroom. This door leads to your own bathroom. It connects with my bathroom, and my bedroom is on the other side. The rich always had separate bedrooms, but they made a passage between them so they could go back and forth without anyone knowing. As if married people shouldn't sleep together!"

Gareth faltered at that point. He and Allison were married, but he couldn't remember the last time they'd made love. The sleeping arrangements of this castle seemed tailor fit to their present relationship. Allison could avoid him all she wanted here. Gareth felt his heart start to sink. He quickly led her back out onto the balcony over the main entrance and furiously kept talking to hide his unease.

"There are more verandas than you can count, and pathways leading all over the island. We could spend our summers here, away from the heat and stink of the city. It's our own little kingdom, Allison." He paused before he took the plunge. "Do you like it?"

Allison's mouth worked silently for a moment, then she stopped, stared at him, and managed to speak. "Do you mean to tell me you bought this place?" Her voice was dangerously low. Gareth shifted from one foot to the other nervously.

"Well, yes darling. I want to make it what it was meant to be. I want to give it to you. I love you."

"You what?!" She screeched. "You LOVE me? I don't think so! If you loved me, you would have discussed this with me. And I would have told you that I definitely DO NOT want a crumbling trash heap on a decrepit, stinking island. What am I? Rat bait? What were you thinking, you idiot! How much money did you throw to the wind on this ridiculous daydream? You better be able to get your money back. I don't want this! I want a nicer place in Manhattan. And while I'm at it, I want a divorce!"

Now Gareth was the one whose mouth was working silently. His eyes were wide as saucers, and he could hardly hear Allison over the blood pulsing against his skull. He was nearly certain that the floor had somehow disintegrated beneath him, and he was falling, falling. His vision narrowed as red, pulsing flames crept into his line of sight.

"You pathetic excuse for a man." Allison was still screaming at him, spittle dripping from her lips like venom. "You didn't actually think you could buy me, did you? You

don't have that kind of money. And I want a real man for a husband, not some retarded, daydreaming eunuch. I want a divorce so I can marry Eric. That's right, Eric, my accountant. We've been screwing for over a year, but you're too stupid and self-centered to notice! If you payed any attention to me at all, you would have known. But now it's too late. Eric's got money, I don't have to drag him kicking and screaming toward a successful career, and he's more satisfying in bed than you ever dreamed you could be, you disgusting little prick!"

Gareth was completely blind now - the flames had overtaken his vision. He could feel his pulse pounding in his ears, the roaring of his own breath as he struggled to breathe. His fingers closed into a fist and his hand raised up and back, seemingly of its own will. Then it flew forward and connected with something that felt like flesh. He barely heard the cracking of wood, a terrified scream, then a sickening thump. His knees collapsed beneath him, and his vision cleared enough for him to see the balcony floor rising to meet him. His head hit the floor, and darkness enclosed him.

Gareth Lindsey thought he was dreaming when he opened his eyes. Kneeling next to him was Elizabeth Fulton. She was more insubstantial now, but he could still see her better than ever before. Her slim body was poured into a constricting white linen dress that was typical of her time period, and her dark hair was swept up into intricate whorls on top of her head. Her expression was odd, as if she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She reached out an slightly transparent hand and started to push the hair out of his eyes, then checked herself and sat back.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Lindsey." Elizabeth's voice nothing more than a delicate whisper now, easily mistaken for the sigh of wind through the drafty castle. "You have done both a wondrous and horrific thing, all with one sweep of the hand."

"Whaaaaa..." Gareth was having difficulty getting his mouth to work properly. "What...what do you mean? What have I done?" It seemed as if he should be remembering something, something important, but he couldn't think what it could be.

"You have set me free, dear sir. But I am afraid it has cost you terribly." She was growing more transparent by the second. He could just barely see the outline of her features as she cocked her head at him. "I am uncertain whether I should bless you or curse you. No doubt you will work that out for yourself."

Gareth felt a sickening feeling of dread rising in his chest as bits of his memory started to snap into place. He sat up suddenly, and stars whirled around his head in reaction. "Allison. Allison! Where's Allison?"

All that was visible of Elizabeth's body was the outline of one slim hand, which gestured elegantly toward a broken area in the balcony railing. Gareth scuttled on his hands and knees over to it and cautiously peered down the three stories that separated him from the grand entrance hall floor. Stars spun around his head once more, and he desperately fought back the urge to gag.

"NO!" He leapt to his feet and catapulted down the twisting staircase. He managed to get down it in one piece,

despite the fact that he'd stumbled at least six times along the way. He came to a screeching halt as his feet hit the weathered parquet floor. Bright red blood spattered his newly whitewashed walls. Her long blond hair mercifully covered most of her face, but her eyes were staring up at him, staring.....forever. Gareth screamed again and ran outside, where he promptly emptied his stomach. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be happening. He groped for his cell phone and turned it on. He couldn't get a dial tone, and he stared at the phone unthinkingly as the low battery light blinked mindlessly at him. Gareth came back to himself, swore, and threw the phone into the trees. Then he took off running.

By the time he'd reached the boat, sense was slowly trickling into his panicked brain. He leaned against the rough stone of the arch, breathing heavily. He was too late. No one could help her. No one could help him. He was too late, always too late. He'd ruined everything. Allison. Allison was dead. Flames were roaring in front of his eyes again. She was dead, and he'd killed her with his own hands. His heart constricted and he fell to his knees with his hands pressing against his chest as though he'd been shot. She may not have felt much for him, but he loved her. God, he loved her. And he killed her.

Gareth raised his head and stared at the castle with glazed eyes. He wished he'd never seen the cursed thing. It seethed with death and despair, just as much now as it must have while Frank Fulton gazed down at the broken body of Elizabeth. But Elizabeth was free now. Would the curse continue? Was Allison doomed to haunt this island until some other fool killed his wife?

No.

The sun was nearly below the horizon by the time Gareth finished his tasks. All the half rotted, torn draperies were piled on deadwood that Gareth had stacked in several rooms. It took some ingenuity to drain the fuel from the boat and transport it up to the castle, but Gareth wasn't as stupid as Allison thought he was. He stood in the cold silence of the castle, listening to the sound of the wind in the trees, gulping down the last of the champagne that he purchased just that morning to share with Allison. When the world tilted dizzily and the flames seared his vision once more, he stumbled from room to room, setting the piles aflame. Then he lowered himself to the bed of somewhat clean linen he'd collected and pulled Allison's broken body into his arms for a bloody last embrace. The flames roared up around him, but this time they were real. He closed his eyes.

The flames of passion enfolded him, and he set himself free. •

Author's note: The inspiration for this tale was Boldt Castle, perched on a heart shaped island in the middle of the Thousand Islands area of New York state. It was built by multi millionaire George C. Boldt for his wife Louise at the turn of the century. Construction ceased when Louise died in 1904, and George never set foot on the island again. Louise died in New York City of an illness. Or did she?

GATE KEEPER

by Amy J. Valleau

“So old man,” Ed Stockton clapped his hand on Darin Argincourt’s shoulder. “Where’s that lovely little lady of yours?”

“Good question,” Darin murmured as his dark eyes swept across the room. He had become bored with the whole event and Stockton was hard on his patience. He was a valuable business contact but Argincourt had taken notice to Stockton’s fascination with his wife.

A little smile played on his lips. Kathleen had been making her way through the crowd. He had to admit she was stunning in the long silk dress of midnight blue. She was perfectly made up with her coffee colored ringlets pulled back away from her face. Her large brown eyes darting around as if she were looking for escape. Darin nodded politely and excused himself from the conversation. Not that it had been holding his attention. These affairs were long and tedious for him. The only pleasure he enjoyed was watching eyes follow his beautiful wife. The corner of his mouth quirked a little to the side. He did enjoy the irony of the situation.

He picked up her long fur wrap and went to stand behind her. He watched the muscles tense in her neck even as he approached. She didn’t need to turn to know he was there.

“Ready darling?” He purred in a low voice.

She nodded readily and eagerly begged her apologies. The doorman held an umbrella as they stepped out into the pouring night. A flash of lightening darting across the sky with the following boom of thunder. Kathleen visibly jumped.

“It’s just a storm,” he murmured next to her shoulder. She looked off into the night.

“If you say so,” she whispered. This made him turn his dark eyes out to the night. He stretched his senses and then shrugged. Kathleen was more sensitive than he in these matters. That is why she had been chosen as the Gate Keeper. And why he had chosen to control her.

The valet rolled their car up. Darin could hear the low powerful thrum of the motor. Steam rose from the hood as the cold rain pelted from the sky. Darin opened the door and helped Kathleen as she slid into the seat. She pulled the seat belt over her shoulder even while he was closing the door. The doorman waited expectantly as Darin pulled two crisp bills from his pocket and handed one to him and the other to the valet. Both men bowed in unison as they backed away to the building. Darin trotted around the car and got in on the driver’s side.

“There,” he said. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“I hate those things,” Kathleen refused to turn her head in his direction. He felt a little pang of guilt. He did know how she hated to go out in public. But it was good for his image. It was her role as his wife. What she had to do. As quickly as it had come he dismissed the unwanted emotion. She would adjust.

The rest of the drive passed in silence. What else was there to be said between the two?

The garage door opened as they pulled up to the large sprawling manor house. Darin got out of the car. He paused a

moment as if he were going to say something to his wife. Her brown eyes briefly met his and then flicked away as she hurried into the house. It would get better given time.

Kathleen was no where to be seen as he made his way to his study. Probably locked herself in the bathroom again, he snorted to himself. He pulled at the bow tie around his neck and unbuttoned the top button. Truth was he hated those things as well. But working as a consultant was a good cover and no one would question his wealth or his connections. The less asked the better. He seemed very content and pleased with himself. With Kathleen firmly in his control there was little he couldn't do.

"She's not yours, you know." A voice came from behind him. Darin felt no threat. This was his territory after all. A small woman stepped out of the shadows.

"Angela," he smiled. He offered a little bow as he tossed his jacket over the back of a chair. "You old witch. What are you doing sulking in the shadows?"

"Trying to stay out of your light," she snapped as she moved forward and settled heavily into the chair nearest the fire. "I came to tell you. She's not yours."

"Who?" Darin's eyebrows rose together.

"You know who," she scolded and then sighed heavily. "Kitty."

"Ah... yes." He went over and poured himself a drink, considered a moment and then poured two. "That."

"Yes 'that.'" She huffed impatiently.

"You're getting tired," his voice held sympathy.

"Don't you wish," she said. Then she took the drink from his hands and tossed it down her throat expertly.

"It won't be long now," he voice held the first real tremor of excitement.

"Long enough," she heaved out of the chair. "Don't forget what I said."

"Don't meddle in my affairs old woman," Argincourt's voice was soft and held a hint of danger.

"No," she looked him firmly in the eye. "Don't you meddle in MINE."

**** **** ****

"Who was here?" Kathleen met him at the top of the stairs. Her long brown hair curling around her shoulders. Darin felt a surge of desire and smiled at her. Noticing Kathleen dropped her eyes refusing to look at him.

"No one," he said. Darin pulled an arm around her slim waist and pulled her down the hall towards their bedroom. He could feel her body stiffen as they got closer to the door.

"Darin please," her voice low. "Not tonight."

"Tonight," he asserted firmly. He smiled down into her face. "I miss your touch."

Her face colored even as her ears turned bright red.

"Come on," he teased. "You're not shy."

"I just," she jumped as another roar of thunder shook the house. He moved his hand and cupped her chin. He could feel

her heart pounding through the thin nightgown. He touched his lips to hers. Again she protested but didn't move away. "I can't."

He moved his lips to her ear. "You will."

He felt the surge of power as it went through the house. The lights flickered once and then went dark. Staining he could hear chanting as if it were very far away. Anger flared brightly enough to almost light up the room. Kathleen's eyes went wide with fear and then rolled back in her head. Argincourt cursed as he caught her limp body before it could hit the floor. He kicked the door to their bedroom open with disgust and gently laid her on the bed. Going to the window he looked outside. Standing in the rain was the old woman with her arms lifted to the sky. He could hear her loud chanting even over the rain. He shook his head in disgust.

He would make sure she paid for this interference.

**** **** ****

Kitty? The voice called out of the fog. Kathleen pulled away from it with fear. Who would call her that hated name?

Kitty can you hear me?

Go away! Kathleen roared back. _Leave me alone!_

Oh Kitty, The voice pleaded. _Hear me._

No! Kathleen put her hands over her ears as she shook her head wildly. _I won't!_

Kitty darling! The voice was getting closer. It was warm and full of love. _You must. Everything is in the balance._

What do you mean? Kathleen looked up as the old woman toddled into view.

Everything, she took her hands into her own. _Hangs on you._

**** **** ****

The only sound she could hear was the click of her worn out heels as she hit the pavement. The shoes were about ready to give out already having walked their last mile long ago. Then the sound scratched even more on the sidewalk as it wrenched off her foot with a twist and snap.

"Ouch," Kitty gasp as she tried to regain her balance teetering on one heel. She put her cigarette in her mouth and took a deep drag even while she bent over to inspect the damage. "Dammit. My last pair."

She looked around trying to figure out exactly where she was. It looked a little familiar but she was still hanging in the fog from the night before. She liked it in the fog. She needed to be there. Only then did she find relief from the voices and unwanted emotions that seemed to come from nowhere. As a child her mother and father had sought professional counseling. But the only place she found true comfort was in the addiction LSD. And addiction she gladly supported trading her body for cash. Or drugs.

"Kitty," she heard the voice and tried to focus on the face in front of her. "Are you all right?"

"I," she stumbled over her words. "Sure. Yeah. I'm fine."

She pulled the other shoe off and tossed the pair in the direction of the street. Then she pulled her tight shorts out of her crotch. She scowled at the owner of the voice.

"Do I know you?" She asked.

“You did when you were a little girl,” the woman said. Her features were still blurred. Kitty swayed on her feet for a moment. Then she looked across the vacant lot. She spotted the gate.

It wasn't anything special. Just a plain ordinary cyclone fence gate. It stood between two pools. But that's all there was. Just the gate. No fence on either side. It slowly came to Kitty's mind she knew this place. She had been her a long time ago. And for a little while she had been able to play with the innocence of a child and the voices silent around her.

She took a step toward the gate. One step. Two steps, the third would take her off the sidewalk. A horn beeped and she paused turning. A Trick? A man waved to her from a truck. Thoughts of the gate quickly left her. The dark haired man got out of the truck and opened the door for her. She didn't hesitate to get in. He turned towards the woman.

“Hello Angela,” he said pleasantly.

“Darin,” the woman returned with no emotion in her voice. Kitty thought it strange that the woman knew the man. She turned to look at him as he got behind the wheel of the truck. What was even stranger was that she knew him too.

**** **

Darin watched his still wife for a long time. He sighed deeply and pulled himself out of the room. So it was time all ready. He should have known that Angela's appearance wasn't to wish him well. Still he had hoped for more time.

He took to the stairs quickly going down them two at once. Through the large house he found his way through the kitchen. Then the basement door. He hesitated for a moment pausing with his hand in mid air. For a moment he considered



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the consequences of what he was about to do. But only for a moment. He pulled the door open with determination and descended down the dark stairs.

The storm still rumbled through the house but it seemed muffled and farther away down in the depths of the cellar. The workshop was towards the back of the house. He opened the door and fumbled in the dark to the bench. Blackness was all around him and he couldn't see a thing. Finally his hands reached the matches they had been searching for. A spark of light brilliantly for a moment and then dampened down. He looked around trying to protect the flickering flame with his other hand. Spying a candle he moved over and lit it.

The workroom had been his father's before it had been his. The walls lined with jars that wore tiny labels. The elder Argincourt had been a practitioner of the dark arts. Sort of a family business. Darin had taken to it right off with an inborn ability that surprised all his peers. It had frightened his own father.

Too bad about father, he mused to himself as he continued to make the preparations for the spell.

“So you call upon me again?” The voice dark deep but full of humor. The faint scent of sulfur hung in the air.

“I need your help Kwhol,” he stated. “It’s Angela. I need her out of the way.”

“Not possible,” returned the voice. “As long as she’s the Gate Keeper I cannot touch her.”

“She’s weak,” Darin scoffed.

“Then YOU deal with her,” the demon retorted.

“I’m trying,” Darin muttered. He brought a hand to his head and rubbed. “There has to be a way.”

“The little one,” came the query. “She is yours?”

“Yes,” Darin said firmly.

“You sure?” Darin felt his ears turn red. He was not going to be mocked by one of his minions.

“If you have done your job right she is,” he snapped and then he blew the candle out in disgust. If his familiar wouldn’t help with the old hag there was no point in using his energy to communicate with it.

**** **

“Don’t you see?” The old woman demanded. She looked at Kathleen angrily as her long white hair blew about wildly in the wind. “You have been chosen to be the next Gate Keeper. It is your destiny.”

“I can’t,” Kathleen shivered as the cold rain pelted against her skin. “Darin..”

“Argincourt has been a pain in the ass since he was seven,” the woman replied testily.

“He is my husband,” Kathleen said.

“He’s a leach,” Angela raged. “He’s still the little boy who pulled the wings off from flies to see what they would do. THEN he would set fire to the poor creatures. Beastly child.”

Kathleen smiled indulgently. Yes, that sounded very much like the man she married.

“He’s evil,” Angela snarled. Kathleen looked at her as if she’d been struck.

“How can you say that?” Kathleen demanded.

“I am his grandmother my dear,” Angela lifted her head a little. “I know these things. The blood runs true.”

Kathleen rocked back on her heels and looked at the old woman. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered in the cold. There was a part of what the old woman was saying _was_ true. That chilled her deeper than the rain.

“I love him,” Kathleen said helplessly. Angela closed her eyes and raised her hands to the sky.

“All is lost,” the old woman moaned. Kathleen reached out and touched her shoulder and looked at her with large earnest brown eyes.

“Not yet,” she said.

**** **** ****

“Not like that,” the dark haired boy pulled the shovel away from the girl. Her long brown locks in twin ponytails on either side of her head. They bounced and curled when she turned her head.

“Gimme that back Darin!” She yanked it back. “I’m doing it right.”

“No your not,” he said with calm superiority. He pointed with a stick. “See? My army is on the march. You need a moat to protect your castle.”

“Protection?” The girl’s large brown eyes blinked curiously. “From what?”

“From me,” he pointed a chubby finger towards his chest.

“I don’t need protection from you,” she giggled. “You’re my friend.”

“Well yeah,” he wrinkled his forehead. “But this is _war_!”

“Darin!” The sharp command made him drop the bucket from his hand. His father stood on the sidewalk with a perfectly groomed black suit. Nana Angela stood and crossed her all the time arms glaring at the man.

“I have to go,” Darin said quietly.

“I know,” the girl child returned softly. She took the

bucket and started to carefully fill it with sand. She didn’t look up at the boy.

“Will I see you again?” He asked. He could feel a cold grip of fear. As if seeing her again were the most important thing in the world. The girl named Kitty looked up. Only a hint of a smile on her delicate features.

“Yes.”

Darin shuddered with a sudden chill and ran to his father. His little heart beating harder than it had ever before. There was a large and almost painful lump in his throat.

Yes, he would see Kitty again. Something about that frightened him to the core of his being.

**** **** ****

Frustrated and weary Darin Argincourt made his way back through the large house. He paused on the stairs. It was... empty somehow. He felt his stomach tighten as he took the stairs two at a time. Bursting upon

his bedroom he found Kathleen gone. The bed still warm where she had laid.

“Damn it,” the words hissed though his lips. Going to the closet he grabbed the first pair of pants he could find and pulled a heavy sweater over his head.

The Gate. She was going to the Gate. He could feel all of his carefully made plans start to unravel even while he skipped down the stairs. The keys were in the ignition and he turned



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over the engine. The wind was picking up and he could see several branches had been blown off the trees.

Heedless of the speed laws he pushes on through the rain. Towards the other side of town. He turned onto a quiet side street. The water hissing around his tires. He pulled up to the vacant lot and threw the car into park before it had come to a full stop. It lurched him violently from the car. He picked himself up and ran around the car.

“Stop!” Angela held up an imperious hand. He snarled in her direction even while he pushed his way by her.

Standing in front of the gate was his small delicate wife. He could see the Althma in her hand and glanced back at his grandmother. She seemed more than a little pleased with herself.

“Kathleen!” His voice barely heard above the wind and rain. She turns and puts up a hand. In front of his is an invisible barrier. He fell to his knees. Kathleen eyes looked him with pity. And a hint of regret.

“Don’t do this!” Darin chokes out. He can smell the sulfur from where his was. He knew that Kwhol and his kin were massing on the other side. Ready to cross over. It had been his bargain. He would control the gate, let them into this realm and for that service he would be their master. But it wasn’t time yet. And by the determined look on his beautiful wife’s face, she had no intention of letting them pass. He closed his eyes in pain.

“It’s time,” Kathleen came close and lifted his face with her hands. Even as he looked into her depthless brown eyes he knew he had lost. She wasn’t his to control. She was going to stand against the wrath of hell.

“But I love you!” He blurted out. He was genuinely surprised at his words. And even more surprised that he really meant it. Kathleen smiled and nodded. For one brief moment he felt whole and complete. She leaned down and touched his lips with her own. Darin’s body still overtaken with the magical paralysis.

“It is because I love you I do this,” she took the knife back into her hand and stepped in front of the gate to meet the demon that Darin made the bargain with.

A flash of lighting lit everything up bright as day.

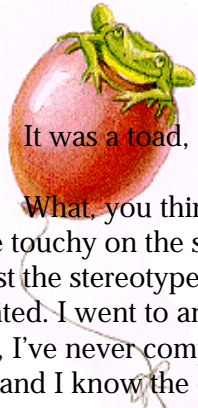
“You will not pass,” she says in a cool tone and with a blinding flash of light there is nothing.

Even the rain had stopped. The silence was nearly deafening to Darin’s ears. He felt a wrench deep in his chest. Turning he found Angela laying on the ground. Still. Too still. Kneeling beside her he reached out and put his fingers to her lips. Not a breath stirred. He groaned and looked around the empty lot. The gate still stood there. Not one demon had passed through. He dropped his head as tears trickled down his cheeks.

And not one ever would. Kitty would see to that. •

OF WISHING WELL (and other abstract philosophies)

by Mary Jo Jeffers



It was a toad, actually.

What, you think I'm being picky? Well, pardon me if I'm a little touchy on the subject. But I've battled long and hard against the stereotype: Just because I'm from the south, I'm sub-educated. I went to an accredited college, I graduated cum laude, I've never compared the sound of a tornado to a freight train, and I know the difference between a frog and a toad.

As a matter of fact, I'm something of a connoisseur, if you will, on toads. No, I don't eat them, or go around labeling them with non-toadish sounding Latin names, but I've housed my share of the bumpy amphibians. Since I was five, we've played together. At least I called it playing. Until that night I had the dream where the tables were turned.

But the point is, I was sitting on the stoop outside my front door one cool June evening, when a toad came hopping up my sidewalk.

Why me, one might wonder? I'm never the ninth caller; my lotto numbers don't pop up. But luck is just like that. Like looking down beside you and spotting a four-leaf clover. Or glancing up at the night sky at just the right time to see a falling star. (Or, if you're a perpetual downer: out of every human being in the country, there will still come a day when you will feel a splat and look down to find bird poop on your shoulder ... or worse.) Sometimes, some things just happen. And in the spirit of such pervasive, profound truths, this toad was hopping up my sidewalk like he had an appointment.

Feeling an affinity with my old playmate, I picked him up in my warm hands and stroked his head and neck. I figure, how many people out there actually take the time to give a toad some good, old fashioned loving? And besides, I enjoyed it and thought maybe he would, too. I intended on letting him go before I went inside to watch "Sabrina." No more mayonnaise jars for me; not after that dream, and all.

It was about that time when he asked me about the wishes for letting him go.

No, I didn't look around immediately for a pre-adolescent ventriloquistic genius. That irritates me in movies; it just delays the inevitable. Of course it was the cat or the alien or the rocking chair or the toad or whatever that spoke, or there wouldn't be a movie. And we're not stupid so get on with it, right?

Besides, I believe in magic. Who wouldn't if he's seen what I have? I know there are those who roll their bespectacled eyes, for one extreme wing or another. Those who've probably never even seen a tornado except on video who immediately assume I am that same 'type I refuted earlier. Then there are the goth-types with their "DooM" cheat-sheets, their weekly D&D internet MUSH sessions who think that just because I pick up one toad and have a conversation, I think I'm suddenly an expert in their occult technopagan webworld.

But I don't need caped net-skaters with a bad, black dye job to agree with me in order to feel justified. I know there is the

Divine; and an unholy Underworld; and in between the two is the supernatural. I don't know any other way to describe that invisible curtain of dream-shadows that divides our perceived reality from ... the other side.

The ostentatious neo-druids believe with enough discipline, meditation, and absence of red meat, they can channel some of the "supernatural" to empower themselves and control their environment. Then they will find what we've all been searching for. ...Personally, I say these folks either read or dream too much. We're controlled by our environment. Whether we choose it to be the material world, the supernatural, or some higher echelon, it is nevertheless our environment. And it's not that the weak-willed let it control them. It's just that said-chosen-environment doesn't give a whit about efforts at empowering. It controls; and we're its willing slaves, no more effective than a weather vane in the middle of a tornado.

How do I know? Well, it was just a hypothesis before. Now, however, what with my new position and all, it's a theory. I call it Gail's Theory of Environmentalism. I don't have a cult or anything. But I keep gaining believers.

Now that you know where I'm coming from, and my credentials are there on the wall, where was I? I was giving what I thought was a poor toad some good old-fashioned loving, when it turns out I'm actually giving a not-so-poor supernatural worker a cheap thrill. Cheap; ha! Their recruiting methods leave a lot of room for improvement, let me tell you. ...But I'm not bitter.

That being neither here nor there, the toad asked me if I wanted the three wishes now. I told him I hadn't expected anything for the head rubs, and that I didn't know he was that

type, but hey, if he was offering...

"Are you willing to put in the investment?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah, I guess," I said. "What does that include?"

Which was, of course, my fatal error. If I'd been thinking straight (I said I believed in magic; that is still a far cry from dialoguing a potential business transaction with a toad, all right?), I would have asked what means he by "investment" before I agreed to it; you know? I've seen enough infomercials. I've been sucked into my share of pyramid schemes after all. What was going through my head, anyway?

Well, if the truth be told, it was probably already whirling around all the possibilities behind those wishes he was dangling in front of me. An old trick, but effective. And really, I don't even think it was meant as a trick. I think he'd just been at his job too long; from burn-out, you know. He lacked enthusiasm for certain, cutting to the chase that way, but then maybe he'd had a long night and who am I to judge?

"Financing is available," he said and I cringed. Wasn't that always the case? But this sounded like yet another one of those opportunities too good to pass up, and so I asked on:

"What're you needing then, for these wishes?"

I think he shrugged. Toads have odd ticks sometimes and they're hard to translate. Not to mention it helps if you have shoulders to shrug, but he said, "Sorry. I don't have the clearance to give that out. 'Not in my job description. That's still classified information. There's a whole list of regulations, though, on the bulletin board at the central office."

“In the supernatural realm,” I said, and he confirmed. “But I can’t just cross over there and check your bulletin board, now can I?”

“Well, not with that attitude,” he said and a little light started showing in those glassy, amber bug-eyes.

“Well, right,” I pressed a little, “but I mean without the right herbs, and lunar phasing, and all, and I must assume this is a limited time offer—”

“Yes, yes, you’re right. So, is it to be the wishes or not?”

“You didn’t appreciate the head rub?” I asked.

“I asked, didn’t I?” he pointed out. “I didn’t have to bring up anything about wishes.”

“All right, all right, then.” I smiled at my own brilliance, “I wish for three extra wishes.”

“Eep, well,” the toad said again with that light in his eyes flickering. “That is the performance of an illegal function. Sorry. That wish is now void. You’ve got two left.”

I felt the heat behind my cheeks, “Now, wait just a minute! How was I to know—”

“I told you the regs are listed there, plain as the face on the moon. You have the option, of course, to lodge a grievance if you want, but I can tell you the Bureau of Enchanted Adjudication is already backed up a full stonehenge cycle and half, and that’s just to get a liaison over here to talk to you...”

I started to get that feeling. That feeling that I was in too far over my head to even realize what muck it was I was trying to swim through. Too far in to turn back now. “Who do you work for?”

“I’m part of the supernatural workforce, a branch of the Department of the Inexplicable, the MMID Agency: Metaphysical Manifestations of Innermost Desires.”

“Um...” I grimaced, “sounds like the Government.”

He gave a shake of his lumpy, tan head; this time the gesture was unmistakable. “There’s so little difference between here and there, the lines are even blurry. It’s frightening, really.” There was a moment of agreeable silence, then he shifted uncomfortably in my hand, “So, what’s it going to be, a complaint process or try again with the other two wishes?”

I knew I didn’t know enough about the supernatural bureaucracy to think I had half a prayer at getting out of litigation with my immortal soul, much less the lost wish. So, I tried to quickly reconcile it in the dim Intensive Care Unit of my pride along that last pyramid scheme I lost money in, and chalk it up to a learning experience.

“Well, I ...”

“Wait, let me guess.” He was a master at his profession, that was clear. He could see the moment in my eyes when I’d stopped teetering and fell like everyone always fell. “Beauty and wealth,” he sounded so bored, “am I right?”

I gave him a look. In truth, the wealth-thing had popped into my mind, but I never would have considered ‘beauty.’ Not

until he'd suggested it. But my mom had unknowingly aided me over that hump in life, when during those impressionable, pre-teen years, the innocent question arose: "Mom, am I pretty?"

Mom loved me, but she was known for her brutality in wielding the truth. I received the unanticipated, and thereby memorable, response: "Dear, you have a lot you can work with." Whatever she meant by that, I'll not be sure. But neither did I ever waste energy striving to be model-material. So it was that way now, a fairly easy temptation to resist but it started me thinking. What would I want for myself? One wouldn't wish for, say, an extended life, or even immortality, without eternal youth, and/or eternal health, and then there's the three wishes — or in my case, two — used up right there. And I could just imagine the horrors of never aging another day again, how that could be taken, all the tricks of the mind and body I might never learn. I kept remembering all the tales I'd read about how carefully one has to word commands for demons or risk being bound in turn, and my brain kept turning, twisting, getting mired in "but's" and "what if's" and phrases and inferences and ambiguity. ...I wondered if it wouldn't be easier to go through with the BEA complaint, afterall.

And then you know? I decided I didn't need all this pressure. Life is short; that's just the way it is. Our environment rules that aspect of our existence, too. It seems to me Nature would have a way to take care of any anomalies in its realm, anyhow, one way or another. If the truth be known, that's probably what the Supernatural works off of — even depends on — to stay in business. But as far as this side of the shadowy curtain, it's the simple things that make life worthwhile. At least, why shouldn't it be? So, I told myself, why not just shrug it off. Stop trying to out-think an agency which has had countless

millennia to perfect their laws and regulations, and me never having been particularly known for my ginsu-sharp wit anyway.

"Well ... what do you want?" I asked.

"Er. What?"

Ah, now there was an expression I remembered with fondness; one I'd been used to seeing on a toad. The blank, rather dull look of incomprehension. But for my friend, it was only momentary. I believe he presumed this to be some sort of mortal's pale attempt at a trick, but he was an honest fellow. "Well, I'm in the less-than-splendid twilight of a mediocre career. I suppose," his amber, bug-eyes looked around, "I would want to go ahead and retire. A quick one with full benefits. None of this downsizing rigmarole or impossible reassignments to frigid outposts. Travel around, visit the children, have a safe lily pond to return to." Both his eyes refocused on me, "Why?"

This time I offered him a shrug, but he had given me an idea. "I guess I'd just wish for enough happiness to spread throughout the world."

"Er..." he hesitated and one could almost see the wheels turning in his bumpy head. "So. Is ... that your answer?"

I was starting to feel more confident again and smiled, "I wish you your retirement the way you want it."

"Really?!"

If you've never seen a toad excited before, and I'm not talking like on the Discovery Channel, you've got to see one

who's staring straight into the face of a lucrative retirement. And of course I didn't know it at the time, but I'd also made a vocal, future-advocate of my "Innermost Desires" whenever my request had to go up for a Extrasensory Court ruling, where it is currently tied up in red tape (actually, it's not red in the supernatural world, its more of a purple; and it's sticky, like a combination of spider thread and silly string, but you get the picture).

Why did it move up the line? Unbelievable. Or maybe not. I guess maybe I knew a little more about Government operations than I thought; subconsciously anyway. And isn't that what the supernatural thrives on? The subconscious is probably like a huge, uncrowded playground. Or a sure-thing for any supernatural entrepreneur. When it was first heard — that is what has become known as "The Blanket Happiness Wish" — it sounded simple enough but then like a crystal onion, layer after layer of questions were peeled back until 'they' were entangled in the very "what if's" that had started me worrying.

Committees were formed at the various echelons of MMID to study how this new "wish" was to be addressed, and formally put into policy. A Cross-Dimension Environmental Impact Study had be conducted to see what, if any —and of course some were found— effects this might have on other Natural world wishers. Would this severely limit the breadth of future wishes? Would past wishes become threatened or endangered? What would happen to the delicate magic-science eco balance if unexplained phenomenon of the past began ... evaporating?

Then there's the class-action suit brought on by the bargaining unit wage-getters under the Consolidated Associa-

tion of Mystical Personnel. With me working here ("here" being the "natural" world), spreading around rampant happiness (like I would), how would that affect the twilight zone workers? Would that cause more bloody cuts in an already shrinking mystical workforce? Or put more jobs in hardship positions? Like I said, their recruitment efforts could've benefited from some serious employee-oriented training.

Of course, I'm not concerned too much about the outcome. Goodness, I'm racking up some killer karma afterall, as much as I can under this temporary appointment. And I think I've held up my end of the 'bargain' with my investment; I'm still not very thrilled over the frog suit, though. My toad friend has apologized over and over, but it is still policy, and I did agree to it before finding out exactly what it'd be. While in this mitigating limbo, I was given temporary, limited freedom to exercise my wish. There is a deadline and they know it and I know it, so I feel sure an answer will come before the end of the century. There was even murmuring of my getting that third wish reinstated as part of a settlement, but what would I do with it? Besides wish for an updated copy of those stinking rules posted on MMID's bulletin board.

Oh, they'd hate that! A mortal having a copy of the regs right here on the Natural side! No doubt there'd be another court case. But I digress.

So, what was it you were saying again, sweetie, darling? About a handsome prince? •