

Semaphore Magazine

December 2009



edited by
Marie Hodgkinson

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Editorial

By Marie Hodgkinson

The holiday season always brings its share of hurdles, and this year it has brought 2009's final issue of *Semaphore* – a day late. My apologies to anyone who turned up on the first expecting a new collection of stories, but the offline world (and the online one, I'll admit) forced me to push the deadline back a smidgen. Without telling anyone.

But you know now, right? And you have the issue now, so really, it's all good.

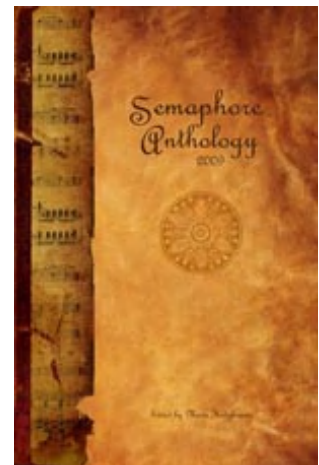
This issue is gorgeous inside and out (er, pretend that it's an actual hard-copy book, for that description to work), with cover art by the excessively talented Kirsten Brown, and short stories and poetry by Carol Reid, R. J. Astruc, Fábio Fernandes, Patty Jensen, R. G. Gregory, G. O. Clark, and returning guest author Sherwood Smith. I hope that you'll enjoy them all – and remember to let me know what you thought of this issue's contents by [emailing me](#) or filling out [this quarter's survey](#).

This year's Anthology is also now available for purchase, at \$NZ20.00/copy plus postage. Just send me an email if you're interested in purchasing one.

Enjoy your reading,



Marie Hodgkinson



conversation

By R. G. Gregory

*the time you was born said my dad
your mum and me we ran
a little general store
in albert road*

i know that dad

*before you was born said my dad
close to christmas
your mum was reaching up
for a can of beans*

i know that dad

*on the top shelf said my dad
her foot slipped
off the ladder and the can
of beans dislodged*

i know that dad

*and knocked her said my dad
on the head - well she came
right off and landed face
down on the floor*

i know that dad

*she had a bleeding crown said my dad
and it went on bleeding
right through the new year
to when you was born*

i know that dad

*and you was born said my dad
face down with a bleeding crown
and you've been bald on that spot
ever since*

i'm going out dad

*well at least said my dad
you can count yourself gifted
you can claim you was born
with heinz-sight*

goodbye dad

Learning the Pipes

By Carol Reid

"You're a fraud, Miss Cathie," Nanny said. "Finish up that bit of soup now and wash your face."

Cathie's eyes stung from crying. She was certain she would die from dehydration, very soon. All the tears she had shed since Thursday evening! Horrible Nanny.

"She'll have none of your histrionics," Father had said. And off he'd gone to Glasgow.

Cathie was certain that Nanny had never even heard of histrionics. Nanny was an ugly, flat, grey stone. Cathie set her mouth in a determined line and folded her little hands in her lap.

"The cat will be glad enough to have your leavings," Nanny said at last. "Go on then, tip your bowl into her dish."

Cathie slowly poured the remaining broth into the bowl at the garden door, rinsed out her own bowl and daubed her face with icy water from the spigot. She went up on tiptoe and looked through the leaded pane at the long green rectangle of lawn and the drystone wall to the west that separated their land from the vast, mist draped field in the distance.

Nanny crept up behind her. Cathie could smell the damp wool of her overcoat and gloves.

"Come on then, get on your boots. I'll walk with you to the end of the drive."

Cathie slipped into her beloved red plaid coat and blue rubber boots. Her lesson book lay in the thin layer of dust on top of the piano, untouched since the Saturday before. She tucked it quickly into her satchel.

Mr. Barrett was quite fed up with her. She knew it would not be long before he spoke to her father and said that Cathie was not making the effort required for any kind of progress with the piano. Cathie had decided that she did not believe in practice. Making her fingers work the scales a hundred times a day would never turn her hands into Mr. Barrett's hands, which plucked the notes from the keyboard as easily as the birds plucked berries

from the trees. There could be no other reason for his ability than magic; a magic that adults kept secret and paraded cruelly in front of the noses of poor wee children as herself.

“Never mind your pet lip,” Nanny admonished her. “Your father paid good money for the lessons.”

They had come to the foot of the long drive. Cathie pinched Nanny's hand, then turned and made a cross-eyed curtsey at the old horror. Her giggle died in her throat at the sight of Nanny's grimace and upraised fist. Cathie tripped backward and the back of her head connected hard with the rocky ground. Nanny groaned and covered her face with her hands as Cathie scrambled to her feet and ran into the lane, toward Mr. Barrett's property.

~

The wind came up in big, pillowy gusts that chilled her ears. She had lost her woollen scarf the day before – that is, dragged it behind her playing with the cat and left it in the mud. She cast a glance behind her but Nanny was nowhere to be seen. Her eyes watered and her scalp tightened in the cold.

She skipped along, shivering, humming whatever tune the wind seemed to be keening through the heavy branches. She reached the top of Mr. Barrett's pathway and stood still, attending to the tattered grey clouds that scraped the treetops and a low whistle that was certainly coming from the shadowed woods. Her neglected lesson book hung heavy as a sin in her little satchel. She dropped the bag onto the damp ground and dawdled into the copse of creaking trees.

The darkness there was not as oppressive as the heavy grey sky and the earthy air was a comfort to her eyes. The music took a rest and she listened to the tender sighs of the forest about her. Fairies, she thought. How lovely it would be to catch one and keep it in a jar!

“Go on,” she said to whatever was there.

A surprised cry came from behind a tree and a small white face ducked out and peered at her.

“Who are you?” she said, taking a cautious step backward.

“Donald Cove,” the boy replied, then puffed out his narrow chest and said in a stronger voice, “Well, I'm the ghost of Donald Cove. My uncle killed me and threw me in the well.”

Cathie took another step back. The boy was thin and dirty and very pale, much worse off than any of the boys at school.

"How did you get out?" Cathie said.

"Was a dry well, shallow and dry. I clumb up the stones and came back up above ground. Was not so hard. Who are you, then?"

"I'm Cathie Mudrie. I was to have my lesson down there with Mr. Barrett but I've not done my practice."

"I think you must be a ghost too, else you couldn't see me."

"Wouldn't I know it if I was?" Cathie snapped at him. She felt an odd prickling under her skin and a swimming in her head, as if she might faint away.

Donald blew a few notes on his pipe, which did sound very ghostly to Cathie's ears. But she could smell the old boots on his feet and musty, faded mothball scent that reminded her of hunger. She gave her head a scornful shake.

"I think you might be daft," she said.

"Well, do they take any notice of you at home?"

Cathie could not remember the last time her father had taken any notice of her, not really. Long ago her mama had gone down to Glasgow to finish her studies, something that was owed to her, her father said. Once in a while he would tinker with the big black Daimler until it was in good running order. Then he would visit Mama in her rooms for a night or two and return more distracted than ever and even less approachable.

"Only Nanny," Cathie said in answer to Donald's question, "and she's awful."

Donald leaned back against the tree trunk and nodded knowingly.

"That's because you're haunting her. Are you a great torment to her, then?"

For the first time in ages Cathie felt a real smile threaten to split her face. "Oh, I am," she said, "but why would I haunt Nanny?"

"Well, it was her that killed you, wasn't it?" Donald said as he took up the pipe again.

Cathie remembered Nanny's upraised hand and a blast of cold wind at her back as she ran down the lane.

"She must have knocked me on the head and broken my poor neck!" Like the robin the cat had lain at the doorstep, little head drooping and

tucked into the rusty feathers of its breast. "Or fed me poisoned soup!" she cried indignantly.

Donald nodded again and played another snippet of melody, as if there needed nothing more said. Like a puzzle suddenly solved, Cathie understood why her fingers felt useless and leaden on the piano keys, why she had no liking for the broth or oatcakes or sweet soft apples that Nanny set at her place at breakfast, why her tears moved no one, why her complaints remained ignored and swept aside.

The tune from Donald's pipe hung listlessly in the air between them, the lonely tones fading and disappearing before they were properly heard. The air was growing colder and new stirrings of unease fluttered across Cathie's heart.

"Do we just stay here in the cold, then, with no one to hear us?"

"We can do just as we like," Donald answered. "We can sleep in the trees and drop chestnuts on whoever passes by, or whisper as they go along in the dark."

"Can I learn the pipes too, then? Would you teach me that song?"

"Oh, I could, but it's useless to try to make them hear it. It's only we ghosts who can hear the music."

Cathie shrugged and circled the tree, picking at its rough bark.

"Is there nothing we can do to make them notice us?"

Donald laughed harshly. "Notice?" He pushed up his dirty sleeve to reveal a thick crust of scab and a mass of bruises.

Cathie put her hands deep into her pockets and looked down at the ground.

"But they can't hurt you now, Donald," she insisted. "There must be something we can do!"

Donald shook out the pipe and dried the mouthpiece on his collar. He gestured to Cathie to come along and they trotted out of the wood onto the twilight lane. She left her satchel where she had dropped it. Someone would pick it up and take it home to her father or the gypsies would come and take it for themselves. She cared little, either way.

She took the lead as they neared her property but came upon her house like a stranger. It was a structure like any other, dark except for a soft glow in the kitchen window. The packed gravel was silent under their ghostly feet.

The long nose of her father's car poked out of the garage. Home now, was he? If only he had stayed home and kept her safe from Nanny.

Cathie and Donald crept up to the parlour window and she saw his eyes grow wide. Inside, Nanny was bustling around the bookcase, dusting the leather-bound volumes with a chamois cloth. He slipped into the space between the boxwood and the glass and she heard a sigh escape his lips.

She saw what he saw. A blue vase of mums on the polished table, a glass fronted cabinet filled with pretty china cups and glittering crystal sherry glasses. Lovely, fragile things she had been forbidden to touch. She saw in Donald's gaze what she was meant to do.

She was through the big oak door in a moment, sweeping the vase off the table, flinging open the cabinet doors, knocking everything she touched to the floor, a wet, shattered mess. Whatever landed intact she grabbed and threw at the walls.

She heard shouting. Her arms burned and ached from her efforts. She was panting, gasping for breath when a deep voice called her name. She went on, careless of the litter of crystal shards. Her fingertips dripped blood.

Then his arms were around her, holding her rigid. With each utterance of her name her rage softened and abated. She saw that she was in her father's arms. His dark eyes, immeasurably sad, focused only on her face. The blood from her fingers stained the white cotton of his shirt, yet he held her still, murmuring, "Oh my poor girl, my poor darling."

She must have fainted then or fallen into a fevered sleep and in her dream she was leaning into the foul opening of an old well, calling Donald's name, begging her father to come and pull the boy to safety. She dreamed that she opened her eyes and saw Nanny weeping. Imagine, a stone leaking tears!

Late in the evening, when she awoke, she was allowed to eat chocolates in bed. Her father spread out a lace-edged linen napkin on the top sheet and sat in a chair beside her. She dozed and awoke many times in the night and each time she opened her eyes he was still there, softly snoring.

Once or twice came a fleeting thought of the boy in the wood and whether men should be sent to look for him or perhaps look for his body in the wells. The drowsy thoughts drifted and waned and she put them aside. But when the dawn broke, the sight of her own fingers bound with soft cloth brought on the memory of the boy's scarred arms.

"Father!" she said, jolting him awake. "Please, you mustn't leave me with awful Nanny!"

He held her hands gently, then stood and drew back the bedroom curtains to let in a little light.

When she was calm enough to listen, he assured her that Nanny was quite gone, poor woman. Hearing Cathie's fevered cries, she had told a wild tale of her own young son, said to have run off many years ago after being sent to work for his uncle, a rough customer name of Tom Cove who held a scrap of land on the other side of the village. She had walked out in the wee hours, with not even a coat for warmth.

"Was it her old yarns fleyed you to such a state? I'm afraid the old biddy was off her head, Cathie girl. I thought best to let her go."

Cathie fell back against the mound of pillows and shook her head at the offer of another chocolate. As the sky outside slowly paled to morning she saw that in a corner of her bedroom window a circle of mist had formed, and within that circle, a greasy imprint of a small, open hand.

And Now Abideth These Three

By Sherwood Smith

Cynthia leaned her forehead against the cool window glass, watching the traffic inch forward in Mother-May-I steps on the street below. It was time to leave, and she was a little excited, but mostly afraid.

Her mother yelled from downstairs, "Cynthia! Are you ready?"

Cynthia opened her door and her mother charged in, heels clacking. "We've got to run, we'll be late! Now let me see you."

Cynthia obediently turned around. The outfit was brand new, bought for this birthday party, exactly the same label the other girls were all wearing. It had taken her mother two weeks to find an outlet selling seconds at discount. They couldn't find the flaw in the blouse, or the jeans.

They got into the brand-new Lexus her mother had borrowed. "Your present is on the back seat, Cynthia."

"It's not jewellery, is it?" Cynthia asked.

"No." A quick, suspicious look. "You said they aren't giving jewellery any more."

Cynthia tried to sound careless. "It's totally tacky. Only boys can give a girl jewellery, now that we're in middle school. Boys or relatives."

Her mother never argued with school pronouncements of what was, or wasn't, tacky. "No jewellery, no hair things, no school things...it's getting harder to find something they'll like." She sighed, rattling her bracelets.

They don't like anything I give them, Cynthia thought, but of course she didn't say it out loud. Her mother went to some expensive store to ask the snippy ladies what well-to-do preteens were buying in this or that item, and then shopped tirelessly for hours to find the same thing, or nearly the same, for a decent price. Then she used boxes from the best stores, carefully hoarded, and expensive wrapping paper, only gotten out for the school birthday parties.

And no matter what Cynthia gave any of them, she never saw it again.

As they neared Beverly Hills she felt her stomach tighten. She'd managed to skip three parties so far this year with sickness excuses, but there was a reason she didn't want

to skip Wallace von Diefenburg's party. The reason was in the garden. She could ignore the girls if the garden, and the pond, were still there.

Cynthia shut her eyes against the sun glaring through the windshield, thinking about the pond behind Wallace's mansion, and how important it was to see it again. If it wasn't there... Well, she thought, if it isn't there, at least the Christmas lights will be on, and I can take off my glasses and the lights will be pretty snowflake shapes. Pretend magic is better than nothing.

Her mother said, "You know, it's not too soon to talk about your birthday. March is right around the corner."

Fear burned in Cynthia's middle. "Dad wants me again this year."

"Again?"

Her mother slammed her hand flat on the steering wheel, being careful not to ruin one of her long painted nails. She always dressed up before the parties, just in case a mother might come out to ask her if she wanted some coffee. They did, sometimes, to each other, but never to her.

"Talk him out of it, okay?" she said. "Tell him how important it is to your future. You have to socialize with these girls, and that means entertain them. Take your turn. We'll rent a good place at a decent address. Get it all catered."

"I'll try," Cynthia said, but it made her angry to lie even that much. Instead, she'd make sure her dad would take her the whole weekend of her birthday, even if it meant spending it babysitting her little half-brothers as part of the deal.

Anything was better than a repeat of her own party in third grade, her second year at that school. Cynthia hated to remember it, but it always came back to her mind, like a bruise that would never go away. Of course they didn't have the party at her apartment on crowded, noisy La Brea, because the other girls all had nice homes in Beverly Hills, Pacific Palisades, or Malibu. Her mother had rented a fancy ice cream parlour near Rodeo Drive. Cynthia had to sit there at the head of the long table set for twelve, wearing a Sleeping Beauty crown with fake jewels, and watch the two girls who came poke at their cake and exchange looks and giggles of embarrassment.

"They don't like me," Cynthia had cried when she got home.

Her mother said firmly, "What have you done to make them dislike you?"

"Nothing! Nothing! But I'm different."

"No you aren't. You all wear the same uniforms, and if you don't tell them where you live, no one will know you're not from Beverly or Malibu or the Palisades."

"But they do know," she'd cried.

"Here's the street," her mother said, breaking into the bad memories. "Help me find the number."

Cynthia obediently scanned the curbs. Many of the mansions had no other sign of residence. You just seemed to have to know where they were.

Long green lawns and beautiful landscaping flowed uphill from the quiet street. "It'll be worth all the sacrifice, when you live in places like this," her mother said, slowing down as she peered at the mansions barely visible behind trees and wrought-iron fences.

Cynthia's hand rose to her mouth, unnoticed until her mother slapped it down without looking. "No biting! Pretty nails are a sign of a girl with poise and breeding."

Cynthia twisted her hands in her lap as the car rolled slowly up the last hill. The really big mansions were up high. You couldn't see any of them from the street.

Cynthia looked out the car window, thinking of the things she didn't tell her mother. How Ashleigh Sullivan bit her nails right down to the nubs. How Emma Herrera threw up in bathrooms after she ate, just so she'd stay skinny, and her breath always smelled like vomit.

How the girls had secret nicknames for each other, and mean names for everyone else--how Cynthia was called Synthetica, never to her face, but she knew anyway. Wallace had made certain of that.

Cynthia saw the number, hesitated, but her mother had already recognized the huge gate.

"Here's the von Diefenburg girl's place." And her mother began the ritual: "Remember your manners, child."

"Yes, mom. Please and thank you, no seconds, smile, don't laugh with my mouth open, sit with my legs together, leave the bathroom as clean as I found it."

"And if anyone invites you somewhere after, you call." She handed Cynthia her expensive cell phone to put in the tiny purse she only carried to these parties. "I'll say yes, but I have to know, so I can borrow the car longer."

Cynthia took the present, thinking of Wallace's friends up there already, with their sleeping bags for the sleep-over. She hadn't told her mother--and wouldn't--that it was a school rule that the girls in every class had to invite the whole class to birthday parties, but only friends got invited to sleep-overs before or afterward.

"Have a good time. And smile," her mother said, eyes searching the driveway--hoping someone would appear and wave her in, Cynthia thought as she carefully closed the door to the borrowed car. Her mother's voice came faintly: "Remember! To make a friend, be a friend!"

Cynthia started slowly up the driveway. She didn't even have to buzz. Someone was on duty watching, for the gate swung open to let her in. For just a moment, she had

this wild idea of throwing the stupid present into a trashcan and sneaking to the fence and climbing over. She could stay in the garden all afternoon, and watch the pond--if it was still there.

But she had to call her mother to pick her up, and then she'd have to make up a million lies about the party. Her mother loved to talk about the parties all the long drive back to their apartment, hearing about every detail.

Cynthia walked up the long driveway to the house.

A maid in a uniform waited in the big vestibule. She looked Cynthia over from her hair to her shoes, then said with a pronounced French accent as she pointed, "Ze party's back dair."

"Thank you," Cynthia said, though the woman had already turned away.

Cynthia was used to the maids. If they didn't already know your name, they didn't bother learning it. They knew right away you weren't one of the girl's real friends, just a classmate for the birthday party.

Cynthia walked slowly through three huge rooms, looking at the antique furniture, the grand piano, the giant wall mirrors, the indoor plants. The tile under her feet was different from last time: they had redecorated again. Had they redone the garden as well? Fear made her stomach cramp.

She stepped down into the conservatory, and put her present on the side table with other gifts.

A fat girl in a very expensive party dress stood at the window. When she heard Cynthia's steps she looked up, her expression changing from hope to disappointment. Then, just as quick, she smiled a fake smile.

"Cynthia!"

"Hi."

Courtney Nabor acted glad to see her, but that was only because she was alone. That meant the maid had also said to her, "Ze party's dair," instead of greeting her by name and sending her up to Wallace's room.

Courtney fingered her hair then carefully tossed it back. Cynthia realized it had been cut and styled since she'd seen Courtney last at school, and she wondered if she was supposed to say something about it. Except she'd learned never to say anything about people's appearances--if you weren't popular, no matter what you said was wrong.

"Cody's still upstairs getting ready," Courtney said with another hair toss, and then giggled.

Cynthia nodded and smiled, though she was sure that Courtney could hear as well as she could the shrieks of laughter echoing down the marble stairs from above. Wishing

that Courtney would move away from the window, she wandered over to the table to inspect the decorations for later description to her mother.

Courtney said, still fiddling with her hair, "Everybody stayed up late last night, working on that stupid statistics thing for Social Studies."

Cynthia nodded again, guessing that some of the girls upstairs had already spent one night, and Courtney had found out by calling on some pretext or other.

"Cody says that Maddy will probably be here, if she doesn't have jetlag too bad," Courtney added, giggling again.

Cynthia was surprised. Madeleine Devereux, the richest girl in the school, almost never came to the birthday parties. In fact, half the time she wasn't even at school--she flew around the world a lot, and had a private tutor to keep her up with their class.

"Cody says--" Courtney turned quickly toward the door, but the newcomer was only a servant, who put a big chunk of dry ice in the punch.

That's the third 'Cody', Cynthia thought, knowing that Courtney wouldn't dare use the nickname to Wallace's face. Sometimes Wallace permitted wanna-be followers to use her nickname, but often she'd make her eyes big and say, "You talkin' to me?" while all her pals laughed.

Cynthia never used any names, never addressed anyone first. As Courtney wandered over to the table and started picking at the chips and dip, Cynthia wondered if she knew that Wallace's gang called her Whale Nabor behind her back.

Now that Courtney was busy with the food, Cynthia went to the window and looked out. Some of the dread in her stomach eased. There was the garden--it had not been changed. But a hatted head bobbed close to the pond. Digging. A gardener? As soon as he, or she, left, Cynthia could escape to the garden.

Clattering and thumping and high-pitched giggles preceded the arrival of Wallace and her shadow Ashleigh Sullivan, and their five satellites.

They were all in shades of blue. Courtney started cooing and cawing over how cool Wallace looked, and how cute her hair was. Wallace grinned and flounced to the head of the table. "Books isn't coming?" she asked, looking around, her blue gaze flicking Cynthia and away.

Cynthia said nothing, knowing she'd already been dismissed. But Courtney hurried in, her voice gossipy and eager: "She said she won't come. Neither are her three musketeers. Books said they'd rather be at the libe all day." She giggled.

Wallace and her gang snickered too. Taylor Tomlinson-Ferguson, nicknamed Books, was Wallace's rival in the classroom. Taylor cared passionately about grades, and Wallace ignored them. Cynthia didn't see any difference between the girls for meanness.

Cynthia wondered what Courtney had said about Wallace to Taylor in order to get that gossip. As if Wallace was thinking the same thing, she said, "Well, Maddy will be here any time. Send her upstairs, okay?"

The gang ran out again, the giggles giving way to screams of laughter.

Courtney's face was pale except for two red spots. Cynthia turned away quickly, pretending not to notice--pretending it was just a request, and not a horrible putdown. But it was a putdown, and Cynthia saw in Courtney's stiff smile that she knew it. They were not welcome upstairs, but Maddy was. Of course the maid would catch Madeleine at the door so they would never even get the chance to tell her anything, but the hint--*don't want you*--was there.

Courtney still grinned, but her eyes looked sick. It was those eyes that made Cynthia brave enough to speak first. "I'd like to look at the garden until they come back."

Courtney could be as mean as Wallace or Taylor, but she only seemed to do it when the leaders were there to approve. Now she giggled. "Why not?" Another giggle. "It's stuffy in here."

The hazy sunshine carried scents from the flowers, all nodding bright heads in the breeze. Courtney headed straight for the pond. Cynthia followed, her heart thumping against her ribs. Before, she had gone to the pond both times alone, once on a sunny warm day like this, and once when it was drizzling.

"Did you know that her grandmother owns this place?" Courtney said.

Cynthia shook her head, noticing the lack of 'Cody.'

"Her dad's been fired from two places. Not like they need the money, with this house to live in," Courtney went on. "Did you know it's practically the oldest house in Beverly Hills? But Wallace's parents don't own it, though they talk like they do. It belongs to Wallace's grandmother. Her name is Mathilde Oslossen. Mathilde! Oslossen! What dorky names! We don't know where they got their money."

They were very near the little bridge. The broad hat moving among the shrubs indicated the gardener still at work. As the girls reached the bridge, the hat lifted, revealing an old, seamed face. Two bird-bright eyes studied them, and then the gardener smiled.

Cynthia politely smiled back. Courtney turned away. "Ugh." She tossed her hair. "That gross algae! You'd think they could clear this pool out."

Cynthia looked down, holding her breath in case the figures were gone, that she had imagined them after all. Courtney certainly saw nothing. But when she stared down into the cool green water, there were the delicate fronds wavering up toward the surface, and dancing between them the fairies. Still here! And real. Cynthia leaned against the bridge rail, enthralled.

As delicate as figures on etched glass, the graceful little sprites swooped and whirled in the water, eyes slanting and laughter bubbles rising from open mouths. A bird divebombed the water, and the figures darted away, then regathered, swimming in dizzying circles. Tiny houses made of sand and bright pebbles and moss were cleverly hidden among the ferns along the bank. Trails no wider than a finger wound up and down little mounds, disappearing into tiny tunnels under sheltering fronds.

Cynthia drew in a deep breath. How could Wallace's family live here and not want to spend all their time at this pond?

"Watch how many times I can skip." Courtney picked up a pebble. She cocked her wrist back.

"Oh, don't!" Cynthia yelled.

Courtney gaped, almost dropping the stone.

"Don't you *see* them?" Cynthia asked, pointing at the pond.

Courtney hopped back up on the bridge, and wrinkled her nose. "Some kind of silver fish. So what?"

"The algae," Cynthia said quickly. "It'll stink if you stir it up."

"Ugh." Courtney dropped the stone. "Disgusting." She wandered back down the bridge toward the house.

Cynthia lingered, unwilling to leave the fascinating creatures unless she had to. So she was startled when a husky voice said right next to her, "Do you see them?"

Cynthia whirled around, found the old gardener standing there. "See what?" she asked cautiously.

"Them." A gnarled hand pointed down at the dancing figures. Rainbow patterns shifted across the water as they swam upward, touched the surface, then dove down.

"The fairies?"

The gardener cackled in delight. "You do see them!"

"I've seen them three times now," Cynthia breathed. "But--you mean everybody doesn't see them?"

The gardener pointed her trowel. "Your friend didn't, did she?"

"You mean Courtney? No, I guess she didn't."

The old woman laughed, then squinted up at Cynthia, her bright blue eyes and cocked head sparrow-like. "Who are you?" she asked. "One of the girls here for my granddaughter's party?"

Cynthia blinked at the old woman in the rough clothes and ratty hat, trying to equate her with the formidable image of a white-haired lady in diamonds and black lace,

with a cruel face like Wallace's, but old." "You must go to that school, then." The grandmother jerked her trowel over her shoulder.

"Yes."

"Never seen you around."

Not sure how to interpret this, Cynthia said defensively, "I've been here for two of Wallace's other birthday parties. That's when I saw them." She pointed at the pond. "I thought Wallace knew about them, but just didn't care."

"She hasn't seen them. At least, she couldn't when she was small. Now neither the kid nor those shrieking brats come out here." The grandmother still eyed Cynthia. Then she grunted softly. "Tell me. What's she like at school?"

The blue eyes were steady. Cynthia formed a polite lie in her mind, but when she opened her mouth, out came the word "Mean."

Mrs. Oslossen pursed her lips. "Thought so." Her tone was matter-of-fact, but Cynthia could tell in the way the old woman's gaze went aside and then down that she felt badly.

Cynthia mumbled, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't--"

"Never mind," Mrs. Oslossen said.

For a time they stood there on the bridge, watching the fairies in their continual whirl of activity below the surface of the glinting water. Big silver fish swam slowly among them, unnoticed, unnoticing.

"Which girl are you?" the old lady asked presently.

Cynthia hesitated. The way the question was phrased indicated that Mrs. Oslossen already knew the names of the girls in Wallace's class.

Cynthia thought about how Wallace probably talked about her classmates, if she mentioned them at all, and she said, "They call me Synthetica." She was glad her voice sounded as matter-of-fact as Wallace's grandmother had sounded after Cynthia called the granddaughter mean.

Mrs. Oslossen nodded, her eyes steady but kind. "It seems the only sin you've committed is pretending to be wealthy."

Cynthia stayed silent. She thought of Open House, the one night a year her mother came to school, and how she'd go from group to group of the adults with her big smile, talking loudly about the film industry, and trips to New York and London, new cars, and high-fashion label clothes. None of it was outright lies--Cynthia's father did work in the film industry, but he was just a sound editor, and Cynthia's mother did arrange trips to New York and London, but for other people at the travel agency where she worked, and

she certainly knew all about expensive cars and clothes. But everything was exaggerated to make it seem bigger and nicer and richer and more important.

“Ah,” the old lady said. “Yours must be the Stella Dallas mother.”

Cynthia’s lips parted. She was about to say that her mother was Toni Deal, then she realized that adults would have their own nicknames. Her face and neck went hot.

The old lady patted her arm with her brown, knuckly fingers. “A strange world we live in, child.” Her voice was warm with sympathy and humour. She held out her gnarled hand and gripped Cynthia’s. “I am Tilda Oslossen. Tell me your real name.”

“Cynthia Deal. Have--have the fairies always been here?”

“Near as I know.” Mrs. Oslossen waved the trowel in a little circle. “My grandfather built this place, long before it was fashionable. He planned the house around this pond. My sister and I both saw the fairies. My grandmother didn’t, nor my parents or either of my brothers. My grandfather did all the gardening, and when he died, it was I who inherited the place. Now I do the gardening. I can’t risk having some blind fellow trample one of the houses, or kill a family with his big boot.” She bent and plucked a pale pink petal from a rose, and dropped it. The petal drifted down, landed on the water, and tiny fairy children darted up and swam round and round it.

What will happen after she’s gone? Cynthia thought. She stole a look sideways. The old lady’s lips were pursed as she watched the fairies in the water. She’s thinking the same thing, Cynthia realized.

“My sister died young,” the old lady said. “Polio.”

“I’m sorry,” Cynthia whispered.

“So am I--still. It was her idea to travel over the world and try to find more places like this. We couldn’t believe it was the only one in the world. After she died, I lost interest. Maybe this is the only one, and not everyone can see it. Do you think it is?”

Cynthia shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said, then added in a burst, “I don’t want it to be. I want there to be lots and lots of them, and I want to find one that--” She stopped.

“That’s yours,” Mrs. Oslossen finished, her smile turning wry. “I work every day to keep their surroundings congenial, but most of them don’t see me any more than my family sees them. A couple of them do, I think. Sometimes I kneel on the edge, right over there where the flat rock is, and there are three or four tiny faces just below the surface, round and sweet as flowers, looking up at me. Like little children with their faces pressed against glass.” She plucked another rose, and tossed the petals down. “You can’t own them, any more than you can own your children. The most you can do is try to keep them safe, but it takes constant vigilance. And when we’re gone--”

A shriek from the house made her turn suddenly. In the big window they saw only Courtney, standing at the refreshment table, eating. More shrieks and laughter echoed down. "Mad-dy! Mad-dy!"

"Feel free to come back down after the ritual is over," the old lady said, and Cynthia realized it was time to go to the party.

Reluctantly she walked back up to the house. Inside, Cynthia found the girls all circling around Madeleine, their chatter and giggles punctuated with shrieks of admiration. Madeleine stood still, looking blank--she was clearly used to being the centre of attention whenever she reappeared in their lives. She was still as skinny and plain as ever, and her hair was still long. Cynthia envied that hair. She wanted long hair, but her mother made her cut hers in styles like the other girls wore.

Wallace oohed and ahed loudest over Madeleine's clothes and hair, though her smile looked fake and her giggles were the high, sharp kind that hurt your ears after a while. Above her grin her eyes flicked back and forth between the other girls, and Cynthia realized that Wallace was annoyed at not being the centre of attention at her own party, but of course on Monday every time Wallace opened her mouth her words would begin "Maddy says--" Especially if Madeleine wasn't there. Taylor would be furious, because Madeleine hadn't come to her last party even though she'd definitely been in California.

Finally the maid appeared in the doorway, and Wallace shrieked, "We have to go in the dining room now! Come on, let's get it over with!" She gave a loud, fake sigh--followed by louder giggles than anyone else's.

Madeleine turned with the rest. "I'm hungry. Is this a lunch thing, Wallace?"

Wallace tossed her blond hair. "Just sandwich stuff, but I can get you anything you want. Oh no!" she shrieked, stopping with dramatic suddenness and staring at the potato chip bowl. "Who oinked *all* the *chips*?"

The mound of potato chips was slightly dented on one side, but Courtney Nabor cringed as if she really had eaten them all. Ashleigh glared at her, hands on her hips, followed by Niles and Emma. Cynthia saw all eight girls snake looks at Madeleine to see how she reacted.

Madeleine walked right past as if Wallace hadn't spoken, bent over the table and piled chips onto a plate.

"Sit here, Maddy!" Wallace pulled out the chair next to her seat. Ashleigh tried to look unconcerned as she quickly moved her Coke.

But Madeleine had already taken a seat in the middle of the table. She bit into a sandwich and didn't seem to notice as the other girls quickly reorganized themselves so that Wallace and Ashleigh were sitting on either side of Madeleine. Emma and Niles

pushed past Cynthia and Courtney so they could sit across from Madeleine, and the rest took chairs at either side of them.

You can change *a* place, but you can't change *your* place, Cynthia thought as she sat in Wallace's old seat. Courtney went to the other end, tossing her hair and giggling obediently at everything Wallace said.

The maid came back in with more food, and spoke in a low voice to Madeleine, who looked up and smiled. Cynthia realized it was the first smile she'd seen from Madeleine--that Madeleine had spoken to the others with exactly the same sort of blank expression that Cynthia knew she wore herself.

Now Madeleine spoke in rapid French with the maid, who smiled back. The other girls watched in sudden silence; though they all took French at school, nobody could speak it like that.

The maid went away, and Wallace and Ashleigh started chattering about Paris, and Europe, and the talk slowly made its way to school gossip as the girls vied for Madeleine's attention, while Madeleine sat there and chomped steadily through her plate of food.

The maid brought her a crock of soup, and once again there was silence but Madeleine just said "Merci," and so the party went on.

After the cake, when they got up to go into the conservatory for the presents, Madeleine said, "Oh, Wallace, I didn't bring anything--we just got home yesterday. I'll have something on Monday."

"Oooh, I can *hardly* wait," Wallace gushed. "When we were upstairs, Tori was just saying, 'Oh Cody, you're so lucky, Maddy always brings the coolest things.'" Cynthia realized she wanted Madeleine to call her 'Cody'. "I *know* I'll love it!"

Cynthia's insides cramped with hot anger. She glared at Madeleine there eating her soup, imagining how Madeleine would tell some servant on the way home that she needed a present for Monday, and the servant would take care of it--maybe even deliver it. She thought about the weeks her mother had spent in trying to find what was just right, and then the hassle of finding something she could afford, and getting it wrapped right, and all along Cynthia knew that whatever it was, Wallace would hate it. And whatever the Devereux servants got would be hugged and cooed over and shown to Books like a trophy.

Cynthia felt a surge of hatred for Madeleine. She's plain and skinny and brown, just like me, Cynthia thought. She even wears glasses during Math and Reading. Just because she's rich, everybody thinks she's perfect.

Cynthia moved, trying to get away from her anger. She picked a seat by the window, as far from the other girls as she could. She couldn't quite see the pond, but it was comforting to know it was there, and strange to think about the fairies being a secret even from Wallace, who lived right with them.

"Excuse me," Madeleine said from the middle of the group. "Bathroom call."

Wallace and the rest giggled--of course--and as soon as Madeleine was out of the room, Wallace said, "I'll just get started. We'll save the cool ones for when Maddy gets back."

Cynthia's present was the first one she picked up. Usually it was one of the last. Cynthia stayed where she was, and listened to the rustle of paper, and the voices of the girls. Crows, that's what they sounded like. The giggles were more like machine guns, little machine guns that shot invisible needles instead of bullets. Wallace croaked in her phoniest voice, "Oh, thank you so very much, Cynthia. How very nice."

Cynthia stayed by the window. She didn't even know what the present was, and didn't want to. Not seeing it somehow made it less real, less a part of her, and Wallace's invisible needles dissolved in the air before they reached her. The other girls looked at her, then looked away again, as Wallace picked up Courtney Nabor's gift.

I'm free, Cynthia realized. They'll never notice me again.

She slid off her seat and walked to the door as the machine guns tittered away at the grinning Courtney. Outside, the air smelled sweet and fresh, and Cynthia ran happily down toward the bridge--and then stopped when she saw a scrawny figure crouching on the flat rock next to the pond.

Madeleine looked up at Cynthia. She pointed at the pond and said, "Come here, and tell me what you see."

Cynthia didn't move for a long breath. Two breaths. Why? she thought, angrier than she'd ever been in all the years she'd had to sit alone at that school and pretend not to notice the insults she didn't deserve, while the lucky ones like Madeleine got all the admiration they didn't deserve. Why did Madeleine have to see the fairies too? Why couldn't Cynthia have one thing, just one, that the rich girl couldn't?

Maybe I can take it away from her, Cynthia thought, and stalked forward. Her teeth felt cold--she realized she was grinning, a big fake grin just like Ashleigh and Wallace and all the others. "See what?" she said, and her head jiggled as giggles machine-gunned out. As if she had practiced all her life. "Oh! You mean the holograms. It's a garden fashion. Didn't you *know*? So easy, when you know people in the industry. You *didn't* think those were *real*?" Her voice sounded just like Wallace's, and the lie came out as if she'd practiced it, except her stomach hurt.

Madeleine's mouth went round.

Cynthia giggled louder, gasping giggles that made her shake all over. "It's fake! Totally fake! Fake, fake, fake!"

Madeleine's eyes narrowed like she'd been slapped--like she really felt those invisible needles. Hunching over, she stared down at the pond, her skinny body so still she had to be holding her breath.

Were the fairies gone? Cynthia wondered then if her lie might make them disappear forever--either that or she wouldn't see them, as a kind of punishment. She ran to the bridge and scanned the water, breathing fast.

The fairies were still there, swimming in their mesmerizing circles. Cynthia's stomach unclenched slowly as she watched tiny fairy children playing some kind of game under the rose petals still floating over gently rippling surface. Then she looked up, and saw Madeleine watching her. Cynthia stared back. The giggles had dried up, and so had the lies.

She couldn't think of anything to say, except, "They're waiting for you at the party."

One of Madeleine's bony shoulders rose sharply in a shrug. "No projectors."

"What?" Cynthia's brain felt like a rock.

Madeleine's brown eyes were blank as marbles. "No projectors. You can't have holograms--or movies, or anything else--without a projector. There isn't one here."

Cynthia felt heat rush up into her face, and her armpits prickled.

"You really see them too," Madeleine said slowly. "Nobody else does--I made sure of that last time Wallace had me over. Why did you lie about them being real?"

Cynthia looked down at Madeleine's face. Those waiting brown eyes, her skinny chin, the freckles on her nose, her plain brown hair in the single long ponytail down her back. Madeleine never giggled, never lied. She didn't have to.

"Because you're rich," Cynthia said. "You already have everything in the world. I--I didn't want you to have this too." Her face felt hotter than ever, but her stomach didn't feel as nasty as it had when she told the lies. "Anyway, Wallace's grandmother sees them too." Cynthia looked around quickly, hoping Mrs. Oslossen hadn't heard her lying. The bobbing sunhat was down at the other end of the garden. "Her grandfather saw them. Built the house for them."

Madeleine let her breath out in a long sigh. "One of my governesses saw ghosts," she said. "I never did. I told my father--a big mistake--and he sent her away. I wanted so much to bring her here."

Cynthia wasn't sure how to answer. She just stared at Madeleine, who stared back, her face still blank, her thin arms still wrapped around her bony knees. Cynthia realized the time was past for Madeleine to run shrieking back to the party, to tell the girls about Cynthia's lie and get them all to laugh--and she realized that Madeleine was talking to her like a normal person, just like she had talked to the maid, and to Wallace and the others.

"I'm sorry I lied," Cynthia said.

Pink spots glowed in Madeleine's flat cheeks. "They're creeps." She pointed up at the house. When Cynthia nodded, she said, "They're just as creepy to each other." She

got up and brushed her skirt off. "I wish I knew whether they don't see the fairies because they can't, or because they won't."

Cynthia said, "Wallace's grandmother and her sister wanted to travel around the world and see if there were any more places like this."

"There have to be," Madeleine said.

Which meant that Madeleine, the world traveller, hadn't found any. But maybe she wasn't allowed to look, Cynthia thought.

"No." Madeleine stepped up onto the bridge beside Cynthia. "There are. We just have to find them."

Cynthia heard herself saying to the grandmother, *I want there to be lots and lots of them*. She wondered if Madeleine, too, had read every book she could find about fairies, and had made up stories about them in her mind. She wondered if she believed in magic, if she looked for it even when she didn't believe in it--like pretending Christmas lights are collared snowflakes when you take off your glasses.

They stood there side by side and looked down at the graceful sprites in their unending water dance. It was getting hard to see them, for the westering sun was making a mirror of the water's surface.

Cynthia stared down at the cool dark silhouette of the bridge, and on it two identical girl outlines. Cynthia thought about her mother sitting by the phone, still in her nice dress, the borrowed car still outside, waiting in hopes Cynthia would be invited to someone's grand house for something besides one of the birthday parties.

"Want to come over to my place?" she said.

Legal Aliens

By Pally Jansen

The bell goes ding-dong over the murmur of the waiting room and a red number A54 flicks up on the wall display. A woman rises amidst the poor, the desperate and the hopeful. Whole families sit here for days, clutching forms most cannot read.

Behind his desk, Peter yawns and glances out the back window into the smoggy Jakarta air. He's tired and he doesn't know why. This day at the office seems to last forever.

He stares at the woman now approaching his cubicle. She's tall like a basketball player, bronzed like a Swedish tourist, and has golden tresses like a fairytale princess. Definitely not a local.

"Uhm," he says and clears his throat, and then again, "Uhm - how can I help you?"

~

Up north on the coast, and I mean really north, like Port Douglas, there is a place called Turtle Beach. It's not much of a town, just a few fishing shacks and a couple more flashy holiday houses - that's the fibro ones in case you were wondering. There's a general store, which sells life's necessities like bait, milk, bread, beer, and yesterday's paper, and that's about it.

If you'd go to Turtle Beach, which I know you won't, and if you asked for Tom Barretts, no one would show you the way to his house. 'Cos, you see, anyone who's important to him knows he never uses his name, and his shack is not worthy of the word 'house.' But if you asked for Goanna, the bloke who runs the general store will stop watching the cricket for long enough to tell you where he lives.

"Just down the beach, mate. Can't miss it." Guess you could have figured that out for yourself. Turtle Beach is that sort of place.

If you went down there, Goanna might just sit you down by the fire with a stubby or two, and tell you of the night he sat in that very same position, on that very same milk crate, when a woman ran out of the darkness where waves crashed on the sand. She was tall, slender, golden-haired and completely naked. She was also incredibly pregnant, and from the way she was talking, she was about to drop the kid.

Goanna ran off to his ute to call the ambulance on the two-way, and while he was doing that, she crouched on the sand and gave birth to a baby girl.

The ambulance came and that was the last he saw of them.

But I know you won't get to ask him, so he'll never tell you. He's not good with women and he's rather embarrassed about the whole thing anyway.

~

Peter stares at the woman, and drowns in her eyes. They're blue like the ocean. He swears he can see waves and fish, the ocean and coral reefs.

"Yes, you can help me," she says. Her voice reminds him of singing dolphins.

Peter blinks, swallows and blinks again.

"Uhm ... Uhm. If you want to apply for a visitor's visa to Australia, you need this form." He pushes the piece of paper over counter, not looking at it.

Her arms are pale and if she moves, it looks like the light reflects off her skin, like the scales on a fish.

~

I ask you: how much do you really know of our vast unpatrolled coastline? Do you know what's going on out there? Have you been to Horn Island?

No? I'm suggesting you should go there and talk to Peta Johnson. Yes, I know she's huge and very black, she swears like a trooper, and she smokes while filling drums with fuel, but if there is anything to know about boats in the Torres Straits, she knows it. She could tell you that one day, about twenty years ago, she spotted a dinghy adrift on the currents. Not being averse to finding, and selling, spare dinghies, she set out to retrieve it. Imagine her surprise when she found a woman asleep in the bottom of the boat. She was tall and had tresses of golden hair that shone like the actresses' on TV. She was naked and incredibly pregnant. Peta towed the boat to shore. While she waited for a doctor to come on the ferry from Thursday Island, the woman gave birth to a baby girl on the couch in Peta's living room. Peta didn't take the cigarette out of her mouth the whole time.

But I'm guessing you will never go to Horn Island and you will never hear that story.

~

The young woman laughs.

"No, I've been told I don't need a visa to come to Australia." Her sing-song accent is captivating.

"I don't know where you got that information, but all tourists travelling to Australia –"

"I need to apply for a passport."

"A ... passport?" Peter is sweating by now. Never mind Monica and the kids in his air-conditioned house in the expat compound; is there a way he can ask this heavenly creature for a date?

“Yes. I was born there.”

~

Well, I guess you know where this is going, but I feel I should tell you the story of Mike Sullivan, Sullo to his mates. He’s keen to talk, but he’s one of those bushies who have gone just a little ... overboard. He likes telling tourists to watch drop bears and hoop snakes and he manages not to bat an eyelid when they believe him. To their credit, some of the tourists get that he’s taking the mickey, but after telling those gabs, what hope does Sullo have to be believed?

So even if you went to Wyndham and took a joy flight in his sea plane, you would never believe his colourful tales. He would tell you the amazing story of when he flew out to deliver mail to some of the remote outposts on the Kimberley coast, and he spotted a group of people on the beach. He decided to put the plane down to see if they were OK, because that’s the sort of thing people do in areas as remote as this. But you’d fidgeting and wondering when he was going to come to the punch line.

Then he would tell you that those there were *naked* women on the beach, about thirty of them, lazing about the sand. Some were suckling tiny babies, some were very pregnant.

Like turtles, he would tell you. And you would conclude that this was the bit he’d made up, but like the bushie you were pretending to be, you would just shrug and tell him to pull the other one.

Of course, you *might* just check the birth registry for the town of Wyndham on 20 August 1989, and find that no fewer than thirty mothers registered their newborns on that day. Not bad for a town of only a few hundred. Then again, you wouldn’t believe it, so I’m wasting my time.

~

The woman pulls out a piece of paper, a Western Australian birth certificate. Peter squints at the rubbed print.

“Wyndham? There’s not a lot of people up there. What was your mother doing there? Where is she from?”

She just smiles, and he can feel himself drowning again. “It’s true that I can get a passport, right?”

“It is.” Peter opens a drawer and gets another form, substantially thicker. He pushes it over the counter and watches her hands as she takes it and clutches it to her bosom. Her skin shimmers. *Like a fish*.

“It will probably take you a while to fill all this out, but we’re open again tomorrow at nine. If you need any help ...”

“That’s not necessary. I have help, plenty of it.” She winks at him.

And then she's gone. Peter stares, but sees only the crowd of waiting Indonesians. He shakes his head.

"I need some coffee."

Edgar Can't Stand It

By Fábio Fernandes

The day Edgar was resurrected, there wasn't anybody at the Grand Central Station to greet him. Prior to his exiting the Revival Chambers, the amanuensis at the Information Desk informed him that he, as any reborn person, was granted a guide by the Resurrection Protocols. (Which protocols were those, alas, the bureaucrat was unable to explain to Edgar's heart's content.)

What he *did* manage to explain to Edgar, however, was that this guide would be summoned amongst a roster of other resurrected ones, more experienced in the ways of the future (*his* future/*their* present, the amanuensis promptly explained in a strange metallic voice, even though Edgar, still more than a little dizzy from his long, cold sleep, hadn't asked), on account of having being revived earlier. He or she should also come preferably closer to the reborn person's own time period, so to offer a less strange waking-up experience.

Unfortunately, it was not for Edgar to have such help. When he walked out of the Chambers into the Station proper, there wasn't even a concierge or a host or a maître d` or whatever you were supposed to have at a time like that to welcome you into the world of the future.

If indeed the world of the future that was.

Still befuddled, Edgar wouldn't know anything about *that*. After all, the last thing he remembered was lying in agony in a hospital bed in the Year of Our Lord of 1849, slowly slipping into unconsciousness - and then, oblivion.

And now, *this*? But, how?

"Cryogenics, sir," the amanuensis at the Information Desk had explained him in that most decidedly unbearable ringing metal tone.

"By Jove, I do know my Greek, young man," Edgar told the strange amanuensis, who didn't even blink at the riposte. In fact, Edgar could be able to swear that he didn't see that strange man of pomaded hair and all-too-composed features never blink even once during the course of their conversation. "What does cold have to do with all this?," and he gestured to all the other dull chrome capsules, all apparently containing other specimens just like himself.

The amanuensis didn't even flinch - and still didn't blink. "The meaning of cold in the process of cryogenics is, sir, if I may be venture forth an explanation of the process for you in a nutshell, that your body must have been preserved on ice as soon as it died so you could be revived at a later date, sir."

Then Edgar knew there was something wrong.

The prospect of being in the future shouldn't be a terrifying experience to him. After all, he had written a couple of stories of futurity in his time.

But they were just that— stories. And satirical ones, at that. He had never for a moment really cherished the thought of being revived in a future time. Not even in Judgment Day.

Thinking of which...

How could his dead body have been preserved on ice in his time? If it was so hard even to find a cold beer in a saloon or even in a respectable bar, imagine whole dead bodies!

A cold beer. He licked his lips. His throat was sore, and he was thirsty.

"My good man," he said then to the amanuensis, who remained exactly at the same position as before, looking at him with no expression in his weird, wax-like face. "I suppose you don't have something for a man who has just recently underwent the rigors of resurrection a nice, cold drink?"

Suddenly the wall by the side of the amanuensis desk slid open, startling Edgar. It revealed another ambient, apparently a vaster one.

"If you just step outside to the Station proper, sir, your Assigned Guide will be waiting for you, and will be able to provide you further explanations plus all the help you need. Next, please."

Then Edgar turned - and noticed for the first time that he was not alone in the large room.

Two or three feet behind him, a line began to form. Several men and women, all seeming groggy, some of them with mussed hair, yawning, and looking around warily.

Edgar looked around as well, in search for a mirror in which to check his own looks. To no avail, alas. The amanuensis still gave him that same dead look, this time adding a gesture to the door. "Sir, if you please..."

Edgar would have gladly put the young man in his place, but the people behind him were already starting to get restless. He could hear the shuffling and coughing, and the man just behind him, a tall, sombre, and very thin man dressed in a black suit, was already giving him a very harsh look indeed.

He decided he would fare better in a search for his Assigned Guide across the door.

He found himself at the top of a stairway, looking down at the Station.

Before that day, Edgar had never believed in any religion or special creed in particular, and therefore never gave much thought to the notion of an afterlife. But, if he

was to believe in his senses now, then such a thing existed indeed – even if it was apparently more man-made than God-created.

For the Grand Central Station was a portentous structure, larger than the largest train station he ever visited in his life. It extended as far as the eye could see, and it seemed to be all covered in metal instead of wood or brick. People walked hurriedly to and fro, almost all of them in pairs, wearing all sorts of strange clothing. In vain he searched for some familiar face, some acquaintance of days past, or, even, if it wasn't much to ask (be it to God himself or to the gods of Science) – his beloved wife Virginia.

But – alas! – there was no one.

Not even his supposed Assigned Guide.

He looked around one more time, strangely mesmerized by that picture. Was all this Station a mere scenery, a painted canvas, a *trompe-l'oeil* for the benefit of the newly-arrived to the spiritual plane of existence, those who refused to let go even of the mere idea of the flesh, and so had to be slowly and cleverly cajoled out of it and brought to appreciate the bigger picture of a higher plane, a veritable Miltonian Paradise?

Or – he thought, feeling an awful burning sensation in the back of his throat, the slightest taste of metal, and the ever-present thirst, still the thirst starting to really plague him – would it be Hell instead?

Edgar licked his lips with a furry tongue. Nobody had offered even a glass of water for him when he woke up. All he wanted right now was a good, honest-to-god drink. For his throat was very dry, and being thirsty was a *truly* scary prospect for him.

He searched his clothes for money to purchase a drink; it was only then that he noticed he was wearing his own clothes, not the mismatched ones with which he was found completely drunk in a ditch (oh, best not to dwell in such dreary, sad thoughts) before he was sent to the hospital, but his best Sunday clothes: black shoes, trousers, and jacket, a boiled white shirt, and a black vest, from where he fished out a silver turnip watch, shining as new. It was working.

He looked around for a bench where he could have a seat, for he suddenly found himself strangely overwhelmed with exhaustion, even though he was lying on his back when he was woken up from his slumber. He found none.

He stroke his moustache, trying to hide as an affectation something that was more, in fact, a nervous twitch.

The horrors.

The delirium brought by the demon of the bottle – and yet, what could he do but crave for a drink? He was alone in the world!

If *that* was the world, he reminded himself.

Increasingly nervous, feeling the muscles on his legs, arms, and cheeks twitch uncontrollably as if pulled by an evil puppeteer, Edgar started pacing around the wide landing so as not to let his mind wander too much.

The burning feeling in his throat was getting worse by the minute; hell, the minutes were getting worse by the minute! His mouth was dry as he could never remember it to be in his entire life.

He tried to keep his mind out of it. First he started measuring his pacing in iambic pentameters, but it was hard to change the rhythm of his steps to accommodate his rhyming. (He also started to compose a poem in his mind – suddenly he found out that he was craving as much for a pen as he was for a drink.)

During all that time Edgar could not help looking up incessantly at his watch – several times almost tripping over his shoelaces, for in no moment he stopped thinking of verses, and many an idea for a story or two occurred to him as well.

He waited for an entire hour, all this time seeing people exit the Revival Chambers and meeting other people just outside – their Assigned Guides, if he was to trust the amanuensis's words.

But that was not for him.

Edgar looked down again: the place was gargantuan – it was apparently a circular room of a great diameter, the format of which he could only guess by looking up at the vaulted ceiling, not dissimilar in shape of pictures he had seen of the Sistine Chapel as a young man. Without the Michelangelo paintings of Adam and God, of course.

But with clouds. Real clouds, white, fluffy clouds, moving idly against the cerulean blue of the huge arced space.

And birds flying high above in the vastness of the ceiling.

Dark birds.

Ravens?

Edgar noticed he was sweating profusely now. He picked up a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his jacket and dabbed his brow, face, and neck.

God, he *was* thirsty.

~

After a few more minutes, he mustered all his courage and decided it would amount for nothing to be perched atop the stairs to the Revival Chambers like a crow (or a raven, but he tried not to think of it) on a fence, and he descended the steep stairway to take a tour of the Grand Central Station by himself.

He insisted in looking around for some place where he could buy a drink – or some heavenly fountain where some good angel (just in case he was wrong about that being the future) could guide him to.

He found none.

The Station was a large, aired and well illuminated place, even though he had not yet seen, try as he might, any lamps or windows to speak of. There were a number of wooden benches painted a soft green evenly spaced a few feet away from each other with, most incredibly, no feet upon which to rest its weight.

The same occurred to the signs positioned all over the station. They seemed to be floating, although still and steady as if fixed in place by invisible nails to an invisible wood post.

Edgar tried to read the signs, but to little avail. They were written in a plethora of languages. He could understand the words separately, well enough to see that the signs were written in French, German, Arabic, Spanish - even English, for the love of God!

The problem, however, was that the words made no sense at all to him. They looked like gibberish, to say the least. He spent quite some time trying to figure what the hell *Food Court* meant.

“It’s no use trying to decipher these words, *signore*,” a feminine voice said behind his back. “It’s more complex a code than the one featured in your story ‘The Gold-Bug’, for instance.”

Then Edgar turned and saw a big, imposing woman looking down at him. She was dressed as a lady from his own time.

“*Signora* Psyche Zenobia, at your service as your Assigned Guide, *Signore* Poe,” she said, doing a quick curtsy.

~

“B-but you don’t exist,” he said, confused. “I created you.”

“Feel this, dear *signore*,” and she abruptly took his hand and put it over her heaving breast. “Feel this and tell me this is not truly a telltale heart – more so than that disembodied organ of your story.”

He indeed felt a very hearty heart beating under all the fabric of the dress. Self-conscious, he quickly pulled his hand from under her bosom.

“T-then I s-suppose I should thank you, *Signora* Zenobia,” he said, “for the privilege of meeting one of my own creations made flesh.”

“Not at all, sir,” she said. “I am the one who must thank you for this opportunity, and more, I must apologize, because I wasn’t at the Revival Chambers at the right time to

receive you properly. A man of your stature, artistically speaking, of course, should have everything he wants at the time of his convenience."

"Speaking of which, my good *signora*..."

"Yes?"

"I wish I could have something to drink, Miss..."

"*Signora, per piacere, dear Signore Poe.*"

"Yes, yes, I beg your pardon, *Signora Zenobia*. It's the heat, and the excitement, if you will. I would appreciate a whiskey, preferably. But bourbon would also be fine. Come to think of it, even a cold beer as well."

She looked uncertain.

"I really don't think it's the best for you now, my dear *Signore Poe*. Temperance, they say, is the best of remedies for those bestowed with the gift of resurrection."

"Who?"

"Who what?"

"They who, *Signora Zenobia*?"

"Why, they who created our environment and recalled us to life, *Signore Poe*. Our overlords, so to speak."

"And who are they?"

"They are from our future. From a time so removed from our own, when the science is so advanced they can resurrect people, my dear *Signore Poe*, as if in Judgment Day, imagine that!"

Edgar looked around. Suddenly he was very, very suspicious.

He licked his dry lips – now drier than ever, drier than parchment, but he tried not to think of it right now. Right now he needed to assert himself of a rather simple fact.

Was he dreaming?

Or, worse yet – dead, living in a private hell?

Because everything was there, plain for him to see – the Raven, *Zenobia*... and, now that he could see, even a Pallas bust on the top of a Corinthian column near the entrance to the Revival Chambers.

But, near the chambers – and *that* he hadn't noticed before – there was a bar. In fact, it seemed to be an English pub... or a French bistro, he couldn't be sure. But there were tables on the sidewalk, and people were drinking. *That* was enough to him.

But of one thing he was damn sure – God, he was *thirsty*!

“Oh, I see you noticed one of our main restorative places,” she said. “There is a whole roll call of writers there, my dear *Signore* Poe,” she said. “Take, for instance, that fellow over there.”

She pointed to a middle-aged man with a salt-and-pepper beard who was emptying a pint of beer in one single gulp.

He was drinking and fraternizing with several people in a big round table – why, there was even a woman with them!

Psyche Zenobia took a longer time to answer now; she opened her little purse and produced a big scroll – a scroll so big, in fact, that the purse could have not contained it at all. She unrolled it and started to read.

“Hm, let me see... according to the construction records, those are Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, André Breton, and Thomas M. Disch.”

“Construction records?” he said half-distractedly. “What those construction records are? And how come I’ve never heard of these fellows before? Please, my good *Signora* Zenobia, enlighten me.”

“One thing at a time, *Signore* Poe,” Zenobia said, without lifting her eyes from the scroll. “It is because they come from your future, evidently,” she explained.

“They are contemporaries of our so-called ‘overlords’, then?”

Psyche Zenobia laughed at that suggestion. Her laugh had a distinctive metallic ring to it. This bothered Edgar deeply.

“Not at all, my dear, dear *Signore* Poe! Now, imagine *that!* They come from just a century after you. This – and she made a sweeping gesture all over the place – is the work of men from much farther than merely the twentieth century!

“And those over there, mind you, are just some of the writers with whom you probably would be most likely to get by. Over other parts around here – don’t ask me where, they didn’t give it to me, I’m only Yours Truly Assigned Guide – seem to contain writers from the digital age, whatever that means.”

She looked back at the scroll, but this time the papyrus seemed to reflect the ambient light at her face – or to emit a light of its own. “Hm. Cory Doctorow. William Gibson. Bruce Sterling. Neal Stephenson. John Scalzi. Isn’t Scalzi an Italian name? Funny name, is it not? It reminds me of some exotic opera character.”

“And are they all here?” Edgar asked, now starting to get more than a little tired. And still thirsty. “How big is this place?”

“Oh, very big- in a sense,” she said.

“Could you please take me there?” he pointed to the bar/pub/bistro.

"Oh, certainly. How inconsiderate of me," she said. And she started walking in the opposite direction.

Frowning - and annoyed because of his dry throat - Edgar reluctantly followed her.

"We're not going there," he pointed out to her.

"There where?" she said.

"Now look here, my good Miss Zenobia--"

"*Signora*, dear *Signore* Poe, *Signora*. You made me a married woman, after all."

"What I think," he said, ignoring her correction and looking over his shoulder to the bar/pub/bistro and its apparently very much contented patrons drinking all kinds of beverages, "is that you are intent on deviating me of my purpose, and I cannot help wondering why."

"Is that so, *Signore* Poe?" she turned suddenly and faced him with a reddening face, not so merry anymore. "And what *is* your purpose? Pray tell!"

Edgar couldn't avoid a shudder. Now he was almost sure that he was in hell.

"Perhaps what our good *Monsieur* Poe really means but finds himself unable to say is 'what is the purpose of his captors?' Isn't it so, *Monsieur* Poe? Hm?"

Edgar turned and saw the short, nondescript man with a bowler hat too big for his head. Before he could say something, the little man stopped him, palm upfront, and said:

"You need not say anything, *bon monsieur* Poe," he said. "I can provide all the explanations you certainly need, hm?"

"Scram, *finocchio*," she cursed in Italian, along with another stream of very improper words for a lady to say. "I'm the Assigned Guide to *Signore* Poe."

"Not anymore, since you are doing a very messy job of it, *mademoiselle*," the little man said.

"Now, listen here, Dupin, you will not rob me of the glory of this moment! You appeared in three of his stories, while I only had two chances! *And I got killed in the second story!*"

As if to stress her point, she suddenly ripped free her high collar and showed a deep gash in her throat, badly held in place by a thick thread woven around her neck almost like a necklace. Edgar could only gaze in horror the dark, thick red blood that started seeping of the gash.

Then Zenobia's head started to wobble in her neck, threatening to fall down at any moment. Trembling, Edgar let go a cry of horror with that ghastly vision.

"Don't let that impress you, *Monsieur* Poe," the little man said, putting a calming hand in his arm. "This is just a little show our friend Zenobia here is putting to frighten

us. A 'sleight of hand', such as the stage magicians - the good ones, that is, there are so few of them - make to impress the feeble-minded. Are you a feeble-minded man, Monsieur Poe?"

Edgar Allan Poe was a nervous wreck.

He backed away from the hellish vision, bumping into something behind him. He daren't look away from that veritable Gorgon who still wobbled her head madly, and whose body started to spin almost like a Mussulman dervish, to his utter horror.

The whole vision was to him as something from the pits of Hell - or from the demons of the bottle, he couldn't help thinking. But that could not be, for he had not put a drop of liquor on his lips for...

For how long?

God, he was so incredibly thirsty. Even a glass of cold water would be a blessing now!

"Evidently," the little man went on saying, "this is more for your benefit than it is for mine, since I cannot possibly be scared away by anything. As a matter of fact, she also can't help being the way she is. It is the way we are wired, I guess. But I am quoting another writer. An unforgivable *faux pas, n'est pas, Monsieur Poe?*," the little man smiled and turned to him, extending his hand. "You know my name already."

"Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin," Edgar said.

"*Excellent!*," said the little man. "*Prononciation parfait!* You are truly a master, *Monsieur Poe.*"

Then Psyche Zenobia disappeared all of a sudden in a puff of smoke. Edgar screamed again.

"There, there," said Dupin, patting his hand. "That's all right now. She was recalled back to the Guide Depot. If the Resurrection Protocols see fit that she come back again to guide you, then she will return. Meanwhile, I will be your new Assigned Guide.

"But what are you?," Edgar asked Dupin. "Certainly, sir, you are not real. Neither that *signora* Psyche Zenobia. I created you both in my stories. However, since the two look and feel so real to me, it does not seem right that you are just figments of my imagination. And, since I do feel very sober *and* intolerably thirsty, it does not seem to me that I am being plagued by some "demon of the bottle", as the Temperance Societies use to call the natural state of those who lack sobriety. So, pray tell: who are you really?"

Dupin sighed.

"Something much too complicated for you to understand in its entirety, for you had no words in your time to define us. Suffice to say we are what you could call *dramatis personae*: false personalities conjured out of thin air, in this case, out of molecules of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and carbon. Matter, simply."

“And what am I? What is this place, dear sir? Please tell me! Am I in heaven or in hell?”

Then *Monsieur Dupin* did something he almost never did in his fictional life created by Edgar Allan Poe. He chuckled.

“Eh, *Monsieur Poe*. You are everything but stupid, eh? But then, you created me, so I suppose you are more intelligent even than me, after all. All it takes to deduce that is a measure of ratiocination.

“Yes, you guessed it right. You are not Edgar Allan Poe. You are not resurrected, since many centuries have passed on Earth and no DNA survived of his body to create a reliable copy.

“Therefore, as you are not a person, you are not in heaven neither in hell. You are a virtual construct living in an environment running in a nano-server embedded into a crystal travelling at near light-speed as part of an experience in exoplanet colonization,” Dupin explained at last.

For an instant – the briefest of instants, it must be said – Edgar forgot all thoughts of thirstiness and his face showed puzzlement for not understanding the words the Frenchman was telling him. Not that the Frenchman was a man, despite the evidence of his senses. God, he was feeling as desperately dumb as his own *Mellonta Tauta*’s Pundita! What a shame!

“But don’t worry,” Dupin went on. “There will be plenty of time for you to get used to it. We will only get to 55 Cancri f in another - ” He made a show of looking at his own pocket watch, but now Edgar knew that, as the impossibly big scroll held by Psyche Zenobia, whatever the little man happened to be seeing, it certainly wasn’t the time of day. “ - thirty-seven years, real time.”

“I have plenty of questions for you,”, Edgar (who now knew he wasn’t Edgar, but was **pretty sure** he was *still* very thirsty indeed, no matter what he was being told) said.

“You may ask them now.”

“Just one or two for now, if you please. The first is, will I be allowed to write? I feel a strange compulsion to do so...”

Dupin chuckled again.

“You must be jesting, *Monsieur Poe*! Of course you will be required to write! As a matter of fact, you will be sanctioned to write, you will be worshipped to write! In fact, that’s exactly why you and all those good writers are here – to document things, to write about events, in the selfsame style of your former selves.”

“Then, my good sir, after all these explanations you most kindly offered me, I suppose the alcoholic restrictions *Signora Zenobia* told me about before are nothing but a sham, a smoke curtain to dull the senses of the newly arrived.”

“You are absolutely right, *monsieur*. There is no restriction whatsoever upon your debauchery. In spite of the fact that you may behave as if you feel something, the reality is that you don’t really exist – none of us, in fact, really exist in the corporeal sense – and, therefore, cannot possibly be chained to the same burdens of the physical beings.”

“Meaning that, if I choose to drink all I want, I will not get drunk.”

“No, I think that in this respect you are wrong, *Monsieur* Poe. The parameters assigned to your construct program you to feel as if you are drunk. However, you will soon recover without ever having the ill effects of it.”

“Ergo, I can’t suffer from the diseases and demons of the bottle.”

“No, *Monsieur* Poe. Never being human in the first place, I don’t think that it would ever be possible.”

“Then you will most assuredly pardon me, *Monsieur*, for I must follow the calling of my Muse.”

And, then, enraptured by the urge of his programming he rushed to the bar/pub/bistro/whatever.

For he might not be the real Poe – maybe he might not even be *real* - , but, for all he knew, he had a mouth and he must drink.

Because he was *really* thirsty.

The Vanishing Project

By R. J. Astruc

"I was born July 24, 1897, in Atchinson, Kansas," says Amelia. "I was named after my grandmothers. My father was a claims officer for Rock Island Railroad, and a clerk the Great Northern Railway – amongst other things. I have two sisters, Muriel and Josephine."

"Two sisters?"

Amelia hesitates. On the surface she appears unflustered – hands neatly folded, ankles together – but there is a pitchiness about her voice that betrays her. Klara, watching from behind the mirrorglass, makes a note of this on the data matrix.

"I have two sisters," Amelia repeats, sounding uncertain now. "Grace Muriel and Josephine Elizabeth. I am the eldest. Muriel is two years younger than me. Josephine is –"

Klara sighs. "Look in the camera, please."

"Josephine is six years younger than me." Amelia takes a sip of water. "Are my sisters important?"

"Josephine is. She's an anomaly."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She doesn't fit with what we know of your history." Klara frowns. "Are you married?"

Amelia laughs. "No. No! Never. Although that's not for want of invitations. GP – ah, a Mr George Putnam of my acquaintance – has asked for my hand numerous times. Five times, in fact, to this date; and I doubt he has truly given up. He is quite a tenacious man, and I suspect that when I am old and grey I might be foolhardy enough to oblige his whim. But until then I –"

"Why don't you tell me about your career, now."

"I have many careers. I am an author and a sometime-designer of ladies fashions, but you may know me best as an aviatrix –" She stands now, abruptly, and for the first time Klara sees a twist of anger in the woman's face. "I am truly tired of these questions, my invisible companion," Amelia tells the mirror. "Now I would request, politely, that you answer some of mine. What is this place? I do not recognize your accent. Am I in a foreign country? Am I a hostage?"

Klara checks her computer, which is currently recording a 62% Similarity. Surprisingly low. Klara suspects it's the existence of this new sister, this *Josephine*, that's the cause. Extra siblings – and missing ones – are often the biggest factors in low Similarity readings. She wonders if this

relates to why this Amelia was found without her co-pilot, Fred Noonan. “No,” she says, scrolling through the data matrix, “you’re not a hostage. And for what it’s worth, my accent is American.”

“You certainly do not sound like any American I have ever heard,” Amelia declares.

“Yes, well, America’s changed a little since you were last there.” The data matrix hums under Klara’s fingers. “You’re here because you’re part of the Vanishing Project,” she says. “Do you remember the bright lights over the sea?”

“The twin vortex, yes. I could not control the plane. I blacked out, I believe, as I was sucked into one of them; when I woke up I was here.”

The data matrix freezes on a calculation.

“*Twin vortex?*” Klara asks.

“Yes. Two great funnels leading to nowhere, one blue, one white. I thought at first they might be water spouts, but ...” Amelia’s arms describe intersecting and parting parabolas. “Were they the Vanishing Project? What is the Vanishing Project?”

“I have to go,” says Klara, copying the matrix. “I’m sorry. Excuse me, Miss Earhart.”

Amelia groans and throws up her hands. “You had better come back soon,” she says. “I think I shall go mad here in this hall of mirrors. And an invisible companion is better than no companion at all.”

~

The premise of the Vanishing Project is that no one will miss something that is already missing. You cannot interfere with a parallel universe in ways that will have an impact on that universe’s future—you cannot, say, kidnap Indira Ghandi at the height of her power; or take Nelson Mandela during his prison term. The only people you can take are the vanished, those who are *never seen again*, those who disappear without a trace, swallowed by the sky, the desert, the sea. The Amelia Earharts, the Louis Le Princes, the Harold Holts.

The Vanished are, as Professor Yanyek says, fair game.

Klara finds Yanyek talking to Alexandrov in the viewing room that overlooks the facility’s medical bay. The two physicists are drinking soda and talking in Russian, and Klara waits uncertainly in the doorway for them to finish. She is, as always, a little awed in the presence of their genius. Yanyek is the creator and manager of the Vanishing Project, and internationally recognized as a leader in her field. Vladimir Alexandrov is one of the Vanished—the *first* of the Vanished—and the only one who’s ever made the transition from research subject to research scientist. Alexandrov, the physicist who created the mathematical model for nuclear winter theory, is responsible for designing the larger part of the data matrix they use to calculate Similarities, points of reference between the parallel version of a Vanished with its real-world counterpart.

“Hello Klara,” he says, finally noticing her.

“Hi.” Klara flushes automatically and looks away, through the viewing window. In the medical bay below she can see a group of scientists surrounding a prone form. They’re too closely packed for Klara to tell who they’re testing.

“Master Fard,” explains Yanyek, following her gaze. “My favorite historical racist. At the moment he’s refusing to speak to anyone but Jody, Awale and Dr Chengi. He considers the rest of us degenerate offshoots off the master race. So we’re going to have to find out his Similarities the hard way.”

“Oh,” says Klara.

Occasionally Klara worries about what she does, what *they* do. About how it affects the Vanished. But she understands that the Vanishing Project fulfills an important function. Their research is important not only to build a better picture of the past, but also helps them anticipate and model the future.

“How close was Earhart?” Alexandrov asks politely.

“Only 62%. Well, so far. I haven’t finished the matrix. But, um—she said something weird while we were talking about her last flight. I thought I should tell you about it.”

Yanyek raises her eyebrows. Yanyek is tall, pale and dark haired, and dresses in sharp, well-fitted suits. More like a business woman than a scientist. “Do tell.”

“Amelia said she saw two vortexes snaking toward each other over the ocean. She was caught between them.” Klara frets with the edge of her lab coat. “I figured there might be a malfunction in the machinery somewhere.”

She can see distrust in Yanyek’s expression—in fact she can almost hear the Professor’s thoughts: it *can’t* be the machines, so it *must* be your mistake—but Alexandrov is a kinder man. “I’ll look into it for you,” he says. “Even if it proves to be nothing, I believe every anomaly should be reported.”

“Sir,” Klara says, and then backs out of the room before Yanyek can put her challenge to words.

~

On Sunday, 17 December 1967, Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt vanishes into the surf of Chevoit Beach. He and his friends are down there to watch the yachtsman Alec Rose as he sails through the waters of Port Philip Heads. The waters of Chevoit Beach are choppy, treacherous, unpredictable, but Holt decides to go swimming anyway. As quickly as he enters the water, he vanishes from view. Emergency crews are soon summoned, but by this time Holt has already become one of the Vanished; and his body is never recovered.

Professor Yanyek's last Holt died from a heart attack two weeks after being *Vanished*; the Project's medics, like the search and rescue teams of 1967, were unable to recover him. Yanyek has been searching for an appropriate new Holt for weeks; now, apparently, she has found him. There's a notice on the Vanishing Project's mail-group, brisk and to the point as all Yanyek's correspondence: "Vanishing PM Holt This Tues Arvo. Interested Parties Please See Prof. Y For Details. (Watchers Welcome But Limited Space.)"

Klara writes back to book a seat. She's never actually seen the machines working—not *live*, anyway, although she has seen instructional videos on the vortexes. It'll be an experience, she thinks.

Tuesday afternoon, Klara is sitting in the front row of the machine room, a converted lecture theatre that now houses the massive vortex generators. Half the researchers are there, too, some with cameras, others with their notebooks at the ready to capture what the can of Yanyek's wisdom. Professor Yanyek, standing on a raised computer-station at the front of the room, is putting the finishing touches to the machines and the preparatory Holt matrix. A crew of medics stand by with a first aid kit and a stretcher.

When Yanyek is finished she coughs for attention and the room, already silent, seems to grow more silent still.

"Holt is one of the most famous of the Vanished," says Yanyek. "We'll be taking him from underneath the water, as we know from history there were people watching for him on the beach. You'll be able to see through the vortex, but please don't be alarmed—the water won't come spilling out."

She pauses, a finger hovering over the keyboard. "Are we ready to go?"

The students clap politely, and Yanyek, smiling, presses a key. Immediately behind her the vortex opens like a flower. Twice as tall as Yanyek, the vortex is round, yellow at the edges, purple at the centre. For second it hovers there in space, before the centre blows back suddenly like a streamer and Klara can see water, blue-green and striated with foam. She hears it too, the crash of waves and perhaps (or is she imagining it?) the distant cries of seabirds.

Automatically she cranes forward in her chair—as have all the researchers around her. Straining to see as far into the parallel past as possible. And suddenly, there is Holt. A spot in the water, pale, white, like a floundering seal. Yanyek (who Klara can see only in silhouette, a black shape against the radiant sea) adjusts something and sudden the focus of the vortex is zooming up to Holt. Klara feels a pull—or maybe she just *senses* the pull—and Holt struggles desperately against this new tide, his arms and legs churning the water. Like a fish on a line, Klara thinks—and then wishes she hadn't.

She's about to close her eyes when one of the researchers behind her points and shouts, "No!"

Klara stares. It's another vortex.

It's yellow and purple like Yanyek's and it speeds up past them and above them and the limply wriggling Holt vanishes into its round mouth so fast that it reminds Klara of a magician's trick.

Two of them, she thinks dumbly, as the room dissolves into pandemonium. *Amelia was telling the truth.*

~

It is almost like the facility is mourning in after Holt's disappearance.

People whisper about what happened in the corridors, like it's some big secret that Yanyek lost him. Their voices bubble with conspiracy theorist hysteria. They talk about made-up stuff like trans-dimensional mirrors and breaking the walls between worlds and super vortexes and parallel sub-realities and other such rot. Klara can't stand it. The truth is that no one knows why the other vortex appeared, not even Yanyek, not even Alexandrov.

Klara is happiest when she can escape her colleagues and work with Amelia on the data matrix. The strong-willed aviatrix, who hasn't been exposed to any of the vortex talk, seems to be one of the sanest people at the facility right now. Although, as Klara finds out, Amelia also is preoccupied with thoughts of other worlds.

They're straightening out the details of Amelia's relationship history (few boyfriends, and definitely no marriage to GP) when Amelia says, out of the blue: "How long will you keep me here?"

The true answer is probably *forever*, but instead Klara says: "Until we've finished our research."

Amelia presses her fingers against her lips thoughtfully. "Could you send me back in time, Klara?" she asks.

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"But surely you could —"

"Sorry. I wasn't clear. What I meant is that time-travel *is* impossible. Well, it is at the moment — I suppose in the future anything could happen." Klara sighs. "We can't go back in time. We can only visit *other* parallel universes. And we have no way of telling which one you came from."

"So send me back to any parallel universe!" Amelia bursts out. "I miss the twentieth century. I dream of it nightly. I am terribly homesick for my time in a way that you could not possibly understand. All things here are foreign and horrible to me."

“How do you think the *other* Amelia Earhart would feel to suddenly have a double?” Klara asks. “How do you think her family would feel?”

Amelia groans and puts her head in her hands. “I don’t know. I simply want to go home.”

“Maybe you should have taken the other vortex,” Klara mutters, more to herself than Amelia.

~

The Amelia data matrix is complete by the Monday; on Tuesday Klara takes her records down to Alexandrov. Her Amelia’s Similiarity is 65%, better than expected, and Klara feels that this will be enough to help the Vanishing Project historians’ research. Then again, she’s not entirely sure what the historians do. She sees them sometimes, in their jumpers and jeans, wandering around the halls with this book or that tucked under their arm. Casual. Unhurried.

Of course that’s not to imply that all historians are scruffy and slow, any more than all scientists are preternaturally neat and busy. The fact is that both the historians and the scientists take their cues from their bosses: shabby, white-haired Dr Chengi on one hand, and straight-laced Yanyek on the other.

Neat, busy Klara finds Alexandrov in his offices above the central vortex, making notes on a data matrix. Le Prince’s, from the looks of it. Klara watches as he calculates the complex equations that build Le Prince’s profile. There is an art to this sort of mathematics, and there is a strange beauty (so Klara has always felt) about a problem well-solved. Perhaps, she thinks, that’s what drew her to physics in the first place. Not the desire to do research, exactly, but the desire to tie up loose ends.

She coughs politely and Alexandrov smiles briefly at her before returning to his work.

“Good afternoon, Klara. You have Amelia’s matrix?”

“Yes.” She places it on the edge of his desk. Wary of disturbing him further, she’s about to leave, but he calls her back.

“Klara. I remember you asked—before the Holt trouble—whether or not there was a problem with our machines. I did check them, though I knew Yanyek was doubtful.”

“Thank you, sir,” says Klara, knowing that’s not the right thing to say, but feeling grateful nonetheless that a great mind like his would consider and evaluate her suggestions.

“There is no problem with the machines. But. I do believe what you told me. Even *before* Holt vanished, I believed you.” He pauses. “Here is a funny thing. I saw two vortexes, too.”

“What?”

“Yes. When I was vanished,” says the physicist, nodding. “But not at the same time. First there was one, then the other. Five minutes apart. Yanyek’s early work was not—her method was not refined, you see. So there were mistakes and breaks and so the vanishing did not always

happen as planned. So as it was intended. At least that was my thought. That it was the method at fault."

Alexandrov—this 79% Similarity version of him, at least—is fluent in English but tends to slip inexorably into Russian when his mind wanders. Klara, aware he's drifting, catches his arm. "Sir," she says. "What happened with the first vortex?"

"It is a funny thing," Alexandrov repeats. He sounds now as if he's doubting his own words, as if there's a pain to the memory. "It closed before it drew me in. But I could see into it. I looked deep into its mouth as it opened, and what did I see inside it?"

"Sir?"

"I think." He frowns. "I think it was me. I was inside the vortex, staring back at myself."

~

That night Klara dreams of a vortex hydra, a thousand eyeless heads churning the nature of reality around her. They come at her from all sides, each one trying to draw her in, each one deflated by the others. It is a tug of war. She wakes up shaking, clutching herself, still imagining that terrible *pull* of worlds colliding.

In the dim light of morning a thought comes to her, a thought that seems raw-edged and strangely sensible. *Maybe you should have taken the other vortex*, she thinks. It was a throwaway comment at the time, but now...

She dresses quickly. At eight o'clock she's standing in the office of Dr Chengi, the historian.

"Dr Chengi? Could I—do you have the time to—" Klara bumbles, stumbles over her words.

"Hi Klara," says Chengi calmly, behind her desk, which is piled high (Klara notices) with books on Australian politics. Chengi is slow-moving and shabbily dressed and Klara has always thought she looks like an old-fashioned librarian. "How're you?"

"I'm okay."

"Don't see many science-types up here. Must be pretty important, then, whatever you're here for."

"Sort of. Yes."

"Take a seat, then, and tell me all your problems. Or should I say, lie down on my couch?"

There is a nice faux-leather lounge and Klara sits on it. It's slightly uncomfortable, but leather always is. She watches Chengi; who is watching her in turn over the horned rims of her spectacles, her eyes sharp and dark behind them.

"It's about Amelia Earhart. I want to know more about her. About how she disappeared."

Chengi frowns. "Which version of her?"

“*Our* version. *This* version. The version in our world. I have the data matrix, but that corresponds only to basic facts about her life. Not specifically about her Vanishing.”

“She doesn’t teach you much, your Yanyek, does she?” says Chengi, but her tone is kindly. “All these poor scientists interrogating people they know nothing about. Amelia vanished on July 2, 1937. She—and her co-pilot Fred Noonan—were flying toward Howland Island. A few hours before they were scheduled to land, Amelia radioed in to say that they were flying into a storm. They were never seen again.” Chengi is watching Klara even closer now, if that’s possible, her brow wrinkled. “It is actually not so strange for a plane to seem to *vanish* over the sea and never be found. The oceans are, well, quite large. Klara, is this to do with what happened with Prime Minister Holt?”

“Yes.” Klara thinks of the vortex, its purple centre and yellow edges as dark as a storm cloud. Its long body like a waterspout, a tornado. Easy to mistake for one, especially if you Vanished thirty years before Hugh Everett III postulated the many-worlds theory of quantum mechanics.

“I’ve got to go now,” she tells Chengi, standing. “I’ve *really* got to go.”

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Yanyek is working on the machines. When Klara arrives, puffing after her long dash through the facilities halls, Yanyek is up to her elbows in wiring. One of the main plates of a machine hangs open, breaking the lines of the metal carapace, and brightly colored cables and tubes spill out onto the floor. Yanyek clucks to herself as she digs through them, an absent-minded surgeon seeking the critical organ.

“Professor Yanyek?” Klara pants. “I’ve got to talk to you.”

Yanyek shakes her head. “I need to fix this machine for the next Holt vortex. I don’t have time to talk.”

“It’s not the machines at fault. At least it’s not *our* machines.”

“Klara, I really —”

“It’s another *us*. A parallel *us*. That’s why there were two vortexes. See, Alexandrov told me that he’d seen himself through a vortex, before we Vanished him. Which he seemed to think was crazy. But he did, he did see himself: what he saw was another Vanished him who was working with another You on the Vanishing Project in another parallel universe.”

Yanyek opens her mouth; Klara keeps talking, even faster now.

“Also. Also, we’re Vanishing people.” Klara bites her lip. Even if the Professor doesn’t want to hear it, it has to be said. “We’re *really* Vanishing them, I mean. They wouldn’t have Vanished if it wasn’t for us. And I figure that one of the parallel *us-es* must have Vanished our Vanished, too. That’s why they were never seen or heard of again *here*.”

She pauses. Breathless. “Did any of that make sense?”

“Yes,” says Yanyek, sounding bored. “In a rather long-winded way.”

“Y-you knew about the parallel versions of us?”

“Well. We would have to *assume* the possibility, surely.” Yanyek curls her lip. She removes a red wire from the mess and wraps it around her palm. “I can’t imagine I would be the only version of me to come up with the idea. And as our machines seem sound, there is no other way that the two vortexes could possibly occur.”

“But. Yes. But.” Klara writhes. All the wind’s come out of her sails, her clever little idea foundering under Yanyek’s cold stare. “But what about what you’re doing? What we’re doing? We’re stealing people!”

“No. You’re looking at this wrong. You need to understand that in the universes we use, the Vanished have *already* vanished, just like our Earhart, our Holt, our Fard. What we do is happening in the past tense. It *has* happened. We are simply tying up loose ends in the past to ensure the correct future.”

“But those futures are *those futures* because we do take people, Professor. If we didn’t do this, their future would be different.” Klara pauses. “Wait, they would, wouldn’t they?”

Suddenly the whole nature of time and parallel universes, once always so clear to her, has become terribly tangled up inside her head. She leans against the wall and presses a hand against her forehead. In another parallel universe another Klara does the same. And in yet another, Klara goes up to Yanyek and slaps her across the face for her serene and horrible dedication to fate. To *playing* fate.

But *this* universe’s confrontation has fallen flat, too flat, and *this* Klara can’t muster the energy now to fight. *This* Klara doesn’t yell, or fight, or tender her resignation—because she’s already resigned to what has happened, to what will happen, to what must happen.

“I don’t like it,” she says finally, sadly, meekly, and leaves.

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But she does talk to Amelia. Because over the weeks they’ve been working together, a bond has formed between them through the mirrored glass, between scientist and subject. And when Klara explains what has happened (will happen, must happen) to Amelia it feels a bit like sitting in a confessional booth. *Look, she says. You weren’t going to die and vanish before we Vanished you. But you needed to be Vanished so your world worked out OK. I know it doesn’t seem to make much sense, but it does. I’m sorry that it had to happen to you, but that’s just the way it is.*

Amelia is too proper, too well-mannered to swear, but Klara can tell the aviatrix wants to.

“Are we sport to you,” she asks. “Is this fun for you, Klara?”

“No,” Klara says.

"I am just one person," Amelia says. "I am just one person with just one life. And you people took that away from me. I do not care for all this parallel universe talk. All I want is my world back. Because the world I knew *had me in it*. Do you understand, Klara?"

Klara does, which is why she walks out, leaving Amelia alone to talk to the mirrors. In the corridor outside she slides down against the wall and hugs her knees against her chest, and feels awful for reasons that she cannot help and certainly cannot change.

Space Bat

By G. O. Clark

From the
dark of his cave

towards the black night
of outer space

he hooked
the ride of a lifetime

clinging to Discovery's
external fuel tank

standard echolocation
gone all fuzzy

and went where no bat
has gone before

if only briefly.