



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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The Second Cousin of the Monkey King by Natalie L. Sin

Suet Dat, second cousin of the Monkey King, wasn't that important. He was well below the rank of god, unlike his well-loved relative, and his powers fell short of amazing on just about every level. No one in China was ever going to sell statues of Suet or build him a shrine, nor would Dickey Cheung be relaying his accomplishments in a movie.

Still, Suet enjoyed the anonymity of being unremarkable. He saw the kind of pressure put on more popular immortals and counted himself lucky. Even so, having no purpose at all became depressing after a few thousand years and for the last century Suet hadn't even cracked a smile. Feeling disillusioned, Suet asked his godmother, the goddess Kuan Yin, if anyone would mind if he retired to Earth for the rest of eternity. The goddess of compassion put in a good word, and Suet's transfer was quickly arranged. After being given a change of clothes that wouldn't attract attention and some pocket money, he descended to Earth on bridge of helpful birds. It ended in Hong Kong, circa 1984.

It took him a while to get the hang of human life. Eating itself was a challenge. In the heavens the only food available was celestial peaches, whereas humans enjoyed an embarrassment of culinary riches. During this period of acclimation, Suet found it best to be within sprinting distance of a working toilet at all times. Since this meant not leaving his apartment much, he decided to make the most of the situation and learn how to play the guitar. That was his first mistake. His second was naively thinking that his musical skills would be considered as mediocre on earth as they were in the heavens. Where he was from, there were musicians whose skills could alter the very fabric of time. Humans proved less discriminating.

This culminated in Suet's third and most profound mistake: He joined a rock group. More specifically, he joined a Beatles cover band. They called themselves Nathan Road and sang only in Cantonese. Such a combination should have doomed Nathan Road to an early musical grave. There was no reason to translate the Beatles, after all. People in Hong Kong knew who they were and were perfectly happy enjoying the legends in English. Then Suet showed up and changed everything.

Within a year Nathan was the most popular group in Hong Kong history: Their Cds sold in the multi-millions, concerts sold out in hours. None of its members could so much as pop out for a snack without being flooded by fans and paparazzi. They had fame, fortune, and piles of amorous female fans. Suet was miserable.

He was also torn. The thought of crushing the newly realized dreams of his band mates riddled him with guilt. It wasn't fair to cut their careers short. After all, Suet had forever to find personal fulfillment. In the spirit of fairness, he hung around long enough for the rest of the band to savor being rock stars. That, and earn enough to never have to work again. For Suet, it was enough to take a few hundred years off, providing he invested the money wisely.

After saying good-bye to Wu, Donnie, Bing, and Bing's English Bulldog McCartney, Suet left for America where no one would know who he was much less care. He ended up in the Northeast where he bought a condo in Beantown that overlooked the Boston Common. There he luxuriated in being no one again. He even stopped dying his hair black and let it return to its original bright shock of maroon. Days consisted mostly of sleeping in, reading, and taking long aimless walks while meticulously avoiding Chinatown. All was well.

Occasionally Suet missed having company. He even started to romanticize the times he shared a hotel room with Bing and the ever-flatulent McCartney. He also missed the more intimate connections in life: sex. To correct the problem, he started hiring escorts. The good ones knew how to hold up their end of a conversation and shared Suet's no kissing rule, something a nonprofessional would have taken issue with. Much like the back of a prescription drug bottle, kissing immortals had too many potential side effects: light headedness, reduction to animal form, temporary amnesia, lunacy, and in rare cases immortality.

The downside to using professionals was that they insisted on using protection. While Suet recognized this as common sense among humans, he resented having to participate. There was no possible way he could contract an STD, let alone share one, and pregnancy was equally unlikely. As befitted his underwhelming cosmic role, Suet was sterile. Immortals had notoriously low fertility rates, which Suet appreciated given that the heavens would have filled up pretty fast otherwise. In the end, he started hiring fewer girls and spending more time at the adult video store. In some ways it was a trade down, but with a DVD he could eat pizza during the slow parts.

One day Suet returned from a leisurely visit to the Erotic Emporium to find a postcard from his cousin. The front was a still from the original "Planet of the Apes." Suet's cousin had a whole box of the things.

They were a gift from the Lord of Amusement, who adored ironic gifts. On the back was a short message:

Dear cousin,

Some of the celestial animals have escaped. We suspect they may have fled to your area, so could you please keep an eye out?

-L.S.

Suet groaned. It simply wasn't safe for celestial animals to be around humans. They were kept in a nature preserve where they could mill around harmlessly. Most were fine with the arrangement, however there were always a few bad apples that got bored and wanted out. In the middle ages, a herd of unicorns broke free and ran rampant over England. Then there was the water monster that tried hiding out in that Scottish lake. For centuries, the animals treated Europe as the best place to go AWOL. Now it looked like America was the new safe haven.

"Idiots," Suet grumbled as he checked the rest of his mail.

There was no way to tell how long it would take to catch up with a wayward creature. The unicorns were pretty easy, given how blatant they were at frolicking around the fields and meadows. Good old Nessie, on the other hand, gave everyone a good chase before some guy with a camera accidentally caught her on film.

The postcard didn't mention what got out, which worried Suet a little. The next morning he decided to get up early and scout around. He left the condo shortly after dawn, armed with a small jade whistle and a mega-jug of black coffee. The whistle was in case he saw anything. Three short blows and a starling would appear, ready to convey any message Suet had. He kept the whistle in his pocket with the keys to his condo.

Around noon, Suet decided to break for lunch. Nothing out of place had caught his eye all day and he was starving. After grabbing a few items at a nearby convenience store, he went to the riverfront. It would have been a shame to eat inside: Summer was ending and there would only be so many warm days left to outdoors. Down by the river, he found a woman staring sadly into what appeared to be a foot long ham and cheese sandwich. She had the kind of hair that was too dark for blond but not quite brown and at the moment it was in imminent danger of making friends with a generous portion of mayonnaise. At the last second, she brushed it back over her shoulder and started talking to herself.

"Pickles," she lamented. "So many pickles."

"Excuse me?" Suet couldn't help himself. It was the most random display he had encountered in at least a thousand years.

The woman looked up in mild surprise at the sudden company.

"Do you like pickles?"

Suet shook his head.

"Neither do I. Yet here they are, covering my sandwich like slimy little sliced slugs."

"I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say. The slug comment was putting him off his own lunch.

The woman gazed out over the river. "Do you think pickles are bad for the environment?"

Suet considered the question. He couldn't think of any animals that were especially fond of pickles.

That said, he never heard of them killing anything.

"I doubt it."

"Good."

She started picking off the offending objects and throwing them into the river like miniature Frisbees. When she was done, she took a tentative bite of the sub.

"Ugh." Her face contorted. "All pickly."

"Do you want to trade?" Suet sat next to the woman and showed her the hot dog he purchased.

"You said you didn't like pickles."

"I don't hate them."

She grinned and it made her eyes change color. Suet had always been fond of hazel eyes.

"Deal." She handed over the ham and cheese. "My name is Aidan."

"Suet."

As they ate, the river water began to froth. Suet was trying to discreetly look down Aidan's shirt when a sharp hissing alerted him to the fact that the Charles River had become a towering serpent. It glared down at him and Aidan, as it tasted the air with its tongue. Then the snake's eyes flashed and it descended on Suet like a bolt of lightning.

Being swallowed by a snake was a unique sensation. Suet compared it to putting on a wet sweater that was two sizes too small. He was halfway down the gastrointestinal tract before he remembered that a stomach produces gas while, as luck would have it, Suet had been born into the element of fire. He quickly snapped his fingers to create a spark.

The snake never knew what hit it as the fireball exploded out of its midsection, throwing Suet free in the process. The flash and innards quickly returned to a liquid state, which Suet promptly began to drown in. As he took in another lungful of river water, he reflected that he really hadn't thought things through. At least he would only be dead for a few days, a week tops. And, with any luck, he wouldn't reappear somewhere socially awkward. At the very least he would be dry.

The world began to grow black as Suet drifted closer to his temporary demise. Yet when he came to, he was still wet and violently purging water onto the grass. Aidan was beside him, equally soaked.

"What the fuck was that?" She panted.

"Celestial serpent. Don't worry, it's gone now."

She stared at him, and then took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, can we go over that again?"

"It was a celestial serpent," Suet spoke slower this time. "It's gone now."

Aidan sat back on her heels. "Do I want to know how you know that?"

"It's probably better if you don't."

"All right then." She stood and held out her hand to help him up. "Wanna go dry off and grab lunch?"

Suet was impressed at how elastic Aidan's mind was. Most mortals would be screaming or unconscious. Come to think of it, he did hear a lot of screaming. Aidan heard it too, and together they

turned to look behind them.

"Shit."

He should have known. Water serpents almost always hung around wood beasts. It stood to reason then that if the former snuck out of the heavens the latter would have gone trotting along after. On their own, the wood beasts weren't that impressive. Give them a good tree to set up house in, however, and they tended to unleash chaos. From that one tree, they could control living plant matter as far away as three miles.

The screams were coming from the people in streets of Boston as arboreal death skewered them from above. A nearby oak had done a particularly good job: Each branch was a thick shish kebab of pedestrians it had picked off the sidewalk. One of them, a jogger by the shorts he was wearing, was still alive and hitting the tree with a water bottle.

"You need to get out of here." He told Aidan. "Do you know any place without any plants or trees?"

"I don't think that matters." She pointed. "I would have to get past all that."

Suet cringed. As far as he could see, trees and bushes were attacking humans. On the other side of the street, an old lady was sucked into an evergreen bush, which promptly spit her back as a wad of bloody meat and polyester.

"Stay close." Suet instructed. "They might leave you alone if they see you with me."

"The snake didn't seem too impressed."

"That was a water monster, we're dealing with a wood monster now. Fire and wood are even."

"I take it you're fire?"

"Yes. Now stay close to me while I blow this whistle."

Suet fished around his pocket but came up empty. Even the keys were missing.

"Oh no. No, no, no, no, no." He checked the other pocket, even though he knew it was pointless.

"Suet." Aidan gripped his arm. "Suet, the trees are moving."

"I know, but I have to find my whistle."

"No Suet, they're WALKING."

She was right. The trees were pulling themselves out by the roots and chasing everyone in their path.

"What do we do?"

"Run."

They made it about a block before an elm tree speared Aidan through the gut. Suet watched in horror as blood rushed from the wound and ran down the branch. The tree started to lift her into the air when something unexpected happened: Aidan's blood changed from red to silver. It continued to run down the branch until it reached the trunk, where it disappeared through the cracks in the bark. The tree started to shudder; then it started to shriek.

The branch running through Aidan's abdomen was the first to fall. She landed on her side with a dull thud and started to moan. Meanwhile the tree continued to make an awful wailing sound as shards of glistening metal tore it apart from the inside. It only stopped after being reduced to a pile of scraps and splinters. Suet ran to Aidan's side and yanked out the branch. She bolted upright and clutched the

rapidly shrinking hole.

"Why am I still alive?"

It was a fair question, but Suet honestly had no clue.

"Have you ever made out with anyone who wasn't human?"

"Unless CPR counts as kissing, no."

"What's CPR?"

"You know, mouth to mouth? You were drowning if you recall."

"So you kissed me."

"CPR isn't kissing." Aidan insisted.

"Essentially you kissed me."

She threw up her hands. "Fine, we kissed. Now what?"

"Now you're immortal."

Neither of them knew what to say. In the growing silence, it struck Suet that the trees had stopped the carnage and re-rooted themselves.

"Wow. You really freaked them out."

"Really?" She looked proud of herself.

"Good thing you're metal. Finding the wood beast will be easy now. All we have to do is find a tree that's bleeding."

They found the tree next to the duck pond in the Public Garden, next to a weeping willow whose slender branches had been used to strangle a few dozen humans. The corpses' feet dangled over the surface of the pond, an inch or so above a rapidly growing slick of blood.

"Why is it bleeding?"

"You killed one of the trees it was controlling. It's a sympathetic injury."

"How sweet. What do we do with it?"

"Get the beast out." Suet went up to the tree and switched to Chinese.

"You have three seconds before I set this thing on fire. One, two."

Before Suet could say three, a crack appeared in the center of the tree. When it got about five feet wide, the wood beast waddled out. To the unfamiliar eye, it would have looked like someone sewed the head of a bobcat onto a pigmy hippo. When it saw Suet, it made a pitiful mewling sound. Suet walked over and whacked the thing on the back of the head.

"Bad wood monster! Very bad! I hope they eat you when you get back to the celestial gardens."

The wood beast began to cry. Suet wondered what he was supposed to do until someone showed up to haul the little asshole away. As it turned out, he didn't have to worry. In the distance, a hulking form flew off the roof of a Dunkin' Donuts.

"Now you show up?" Suet exclaimed when the dragon landed next to the duck pond. It snorted and showed its teeth.

"I'm sorry." Suet bowed contritely. The dragon nodded.

"Hi." Aidan waved weakly and aped Suet's bow.

The dragon gave Aidan an appraising look and winked at Suet. Then it grabbed the cowering wood beast by the scruff of the neck and launched into the sky. The whole meeting lasted less than a minute.

"I'm going insane, aren't I," Aidan stated, more than asked.

"No. But don't worry, humans have a wonderful capacity for ignoring the extraordinary."

"Look Suet, I've been human all my life up until today. Humans might be dense, but they tend to notice large piles of rotting bodies."

Suet tried not to let his disappointment show. He had been so close to being dull.

"You ok?" Aidan asked.

He shrugged. "Do you think anyone noticed what we did?"

"Nah, everyone ran or died. We got lucky."

"Really?"

"Of course. Who needs that kind of attention?"

For the first time in 127 years, Suet Dat smiled.

Shahrukh and the Tibetans by Angela Ambroz

"You, sir, have been reared in great luxury as becomes your noble birth. How did you come here, by foot or in a chariot?"

"In a chariot, venerable sir."

"Then, explain sir, what that is. Is it the axle? Or the wheels, or the chassis, or reins, or yoke that is the chariot? Is it all of these combined, or is it something apart from them?"

"It is none of these things, venerable sir."

"Then, sir, this chariot is an empty sound. You spoke falsely when you said that you came here in a chariot. You are a great king of India. Who are you afraid of that you don't speak the truth?"

The Debate of King Milinda, translated by Bhikkhu Pesala

For something that was supposed to have predetermined behavioral patterns, the Shahrukh clone had a lot of funny ideas.

First of all, on the nature of clones. The Shahrukh insisted that he was his own person, with all the rights afforded to a human being. If you got him started on it, the Shahrukh could talk for hours on gender prejudices, meat factories and the relativity of souls. He could quote the ancient philosophers - from Philip K. Dick to Fat Sharma - and he was a card-carrying member of the Clone Liberation Group. The fact that he was stuck aboard the *Rahu Ketu* ship as it drifted, lost in space, didn't calm his

passion. Instead, free of the Hindustani Empire's shackles, the Shahrukh behaved in a most unclonely manner.

Second, on his name. The Shahrukh, like all celebrity clones, had been inculcated to know every mannerism, every gesture of his original. So he had watched and re-watched all of his original's films - numbering almost two hundred - and learned all of the dance routines. Those years, his training in the meat factory, had been the worst of his life, he said. In rebellion, when the Shahrukh joined the *Rahu Ketu* ship and fell out of civilization with it, he vowed he would never watch one of his original's films again. Instead, he became a fan of Sanjeev Kumar.

(Sanjeev Kumar had lived a generation earlier than his original, but the Shahrukh didn't care. He modeled his hair on the stiff, 1970s shelf of the original Sanjeev Kumar, he carried his shoulders hunched with the same world-weary moral indignance of Sanjeev Kumar, smoked beedis so that he could look like Sanjeev Kumar, swallowed his consonants so that he could sound like Sanjeev Kumar. He also insisted that everyone call him Sanjeev Kumar, instead of "the Shahrukh".)

But the Shahrukh's weirdest idea was his third one, regarding the empires themselves. Maybe because he had been born in a test tube and brought up in a meat factory, maybe one of those pleasure-inducing charisma chips had knocked off his common patriotic sense, but the Shahrukh just couldn't understand the war. Why all this fighting? What did he care if people were Hindustani, Chinese or Earth-born? Why was he supposed to hate the Chinese? He didn't.

He hated the meat sellers, the clone buyers, the Shahrukh fans.

Doctor Naziah Abbas was walking back to her quarters after a long shift in the Med Ward. She kneaded the back of her neck with one hand, occasionally steadying herself on the wall with the other. A new outbreak of the New Peshawar pox had occurred, and soon half the NP Zone was complaining of itchy armpits and a yeasty stink. For the past few years, the pox had been occurring with alarming regularity. Every year, as they approached the anniversary of New Peshawar's total annihilation, all the refugees would begin to complain of a burning sensation when they urinated. And no one thought to contact the counseling services.

Naziah didn't live far from the Med Ward, only around the corner and down one level. It was a relatively quiet area of the ship. Immediately past her room was the main door to the engine floor, and every night she fell asleep to the low thrum of the *Rahu Ketu's* engines. Not many people lived here, but there was a steady flow of officers, busy keeping everyone else on board alive. Captain Khan's rooms were also down the hall.

She was about to press her thumb against the door's key scan when something rattled above her. At first, she thought it was yet another glitch in the ventilation system. It was not unknown on the *Rahu Ketu* to have a ventilation fan cough up something hairy and wet. The sanitation officers called these things "shipcrawler hairballs".

Naziah steeled herself for something disgusting.

Instead, she began to hear the low huffing of a human being under physical duress. She waited, tense, and watched the ventilation grille dislodge itself. Someone grunted, the grille clanged, and then two long legs appeared. They dangled in the air above her for a moment before the rest of the person fell through. He was slick with black oil, but she recognized him immediately:

"Shahrukh!"

"That is not my name," he grunted, wiping gunk out of his eyes.

"Right. Well, sorry, it comes naturally. How are you, Sanjeev bhai?"

Naziah was one of the few people on the ship - apart from Captain Khan, and perhaps the other doctor, Rai - who did not go into fits of celebrity worship every time she saw one of the clones. Honestly, she was not really a fan of the Puranas films - cultural loyalty aside. She had never had the patience for them, her legs fidgeting as soon as the first song began. Regarding the clones, she could take them or leave them. If the Shahrukh wanted to call himself Sanjeev or Sanjay or Samantha, that was fine.

"I'm," he cleared his throat noisily. "I'm okay. A little dirty."

"What were you doing up in the vent?"

"Oh, huh. It's a secret."

Naziah chuckled. Then she noticed some blood on his ear.

"Arr◆, yaar. You've nicked yourself. Can you imagine how many germs are up there? Come with me, I'll clean that for you."

The Shahrukh clone followed her obediently. They walked together back up to the Med Ward. At the entrance, they passed through the sanitizing clouds of the quarantine wash and entered the white, glowing lobby. Naziah indicated the Shahrukh to sit. The waterless wash had caked the oil into the Shahrukh's skin, so that he looked like he had rolled around in black flour.

Naziah returned with some bandages, disinfectant and a bug reader. After clearing him of the NP pox and other viruses, she began to gently dab at his ear. He inhaled sharply.

"Sorry if it stings a little. Sit still."

After a moment, the Shahrukh smiled wryly. Naziah was reminded of an identical look from the Shahrukh posters that were plastered around the NP zone.

"I bet Nurse Patel would faint, seeing you do this," the Shahrukh said.

"Why do you say that?"

"I know what she thinks of me and the Shalu. Of what we're supposed to be."

"Glorified sex toys?" Naziah laughed. "Sanjeev brother, why are you always so serious? Don't they streamline that out of you at the factory?"

But she had struck too close, and the Shahrukh was sulking. After some chagrin (and chagrin at her chagrin; since when did she get star struck?), Naziah apologized.

"It's okay," the Shahrukh grunted. Then he sighed. "Changing people's perceptions is a slow process."

Feeling chastised and slightly bewildered, Naziah worked silently and carefully. Suddenly she was aware that any roughness or haste might be misinterpreted as anti-clone prejudice. When she finished, she touched his shoulder.

"If it hasn't healed within a day or two, come back and let me know." She tried to make herself sound friendly and indifferent. He avoided her eyes and shuffled out.

"By losing our language," the woman, Pema, was saying, "much of our wisdom and culture was lost. It was the final blow that killed Tibet."

Sanjeev was sitting on the floor, blowing on his butter tea. Prayer flags - white, red, yellow, green and blue - streamed across the crowded room's ceiling, flapping pathetically in the ventilation fan's breeze. There were hundreds of them, in various states of decay. Some women were seated on the floor, rolling beedi cigarettes in the special *mandala* flavor. *The sacred flavor of all colors!* the packets read. The wizened old Chinese woman, Pema, sat in front of Sanjeev, looking good-humored and a little sleepy. No, not Chinese, Sanjeev chastised himself. Tibetan.

Tibet

Before his first visit to the forbidden Chinese side of the *Rahu Ketu*, Sanjeev had never heard of the word. When the *Rahu Ketu* had found the destroyed Chinese colony, ten years ago, it had picked up nearly a thousand survivors. Some had died on board later from radiation poisoning - remnants of the atomic blasts which had destroyed their planet. But the rest had crowded into the *Rahu Ketu*'s lower levels, demarcating their territory with a haphazard and impenetrable wall of junk. In a universe where to be Chinese and to be Hindustani meant to be at war, the *Rahu Ketu*'s Hindustani and Chinese people lived for ten years in tenuous peace. They rarely mingled, sometimes individual acts of violence occurred, no one was ever truly at ease, but it was - in the words of Captain Khan - "not so terrible".

Sanjeev had started visiting the Chinese side about three years ago. At first, he went just to spite his Hindustaniness, the ethnic heritage that had enslaved him as a "mockery of a human", a copy of a frivolous movie star. Even though the Chinese side was much more crowded, he was never mobbed the way the Hindustani refugees rushed at him. *Arr❖, bhai! Bhai! Shahrukh Uncle! Arr❖!* On the Chinese side, they watched him warily, but left him alone. And he had learnt so much here. He had learned that they weren't Chinese - they called themselves Tibetan, and they claimed direct lineage from Earth, direct from the original Tibet.

It was Tibet, Pema said, that had been the buffer between the two superpowers in the beginning of the colonial period. And it had been the loss of Tibet and its assimilation into the Chinese Empire that had sparked the first skirmishes along the Himalayan border. Skirmishes that, with the Drop network, would evolve into an intergalactic race to conquer the universe.

"Just think, Sanjeev brother," Pema said, eyes distant. "Perhaps a free Tibet would have prevented the war? Perhaps it would have prevented the colonies?"

The way Pema spoke, Tibet had been a land of hyperbolic beauty. The sacredest spot on the sacredest planet in the universe. And they practiced their own form of Buddhism there, a form which - according to Pema - didn't resemble the Imperial Chinese Buddhism very much at all. Everything was better in Tibet.

"I think I want to be a Tibetan Buddhist," Sanjeev said one day, smiling suddenly. "What do I do to join?"

"Careful, brother," Pema chuckled. "You don't just rush into these things."

And Sanjeev was rushing. He was carving a new identity for himself among the Tibetans. He was shedding the skin of the Shahrukh clone, a clone who was supposed to be Muslim like his original, who was supposed to sing and dance and copulate and never know anything else. Rubbish! Sanjeev was desperate to take on something fresh. And he knew he would find it in Tibet.

"Let me take a look at you, dear."

The hands felt his body. They touched his legs, tickling his knees. A knuckle brushed his Adam's apple. This was the meat factory.

"Say something for me, son."

The Shahrukh coughed, squeaking, and said, "What do you want me to say, uncle?"

"That'll do. Note this down, Kamal: physical development proceeding. Very good. Unit now aged six years, seven months. Voice has dropped. Raise your arms for me, son."

The Shahrukh raised his arms.

"Deodorant injections, whoo! Begin immediately. Good, good. First hairs. Check off the puberty box, Kamal."

"Yes, ji."

Later, the Shahrukh was sweating from his exertions. They had made him dance until his knees hurt. He was tired, but he wanted to play. He didn't want to play with Avi though. Avi had been mean to him.

The Shahrukh stopped by the doctor's desk.

"Doctor Uncle."

"Yes, son?"

"Doctor Uncle, Avi - Avi said I have no atman. Avi said when I die, I go out in the rubbish."

The doctor sighed. He pulled the Shahrukh onto his lap. "Oof, big boy with big ideas! Well, dear, Avi is right and Avi is wrong. You are not going into the rubbish, obviously! Cruel child. But the atman... well, the atman is a very special thing, that only some people have."

"What is it?"

"It's the - how shall I put it? - the essence, the soul of a person. It's a very special thing that some people have, like a special connection with God."

The Shahrukh felt his lower lip tremble. "Well, why don't I have that?"

"Oh, don't be upset, my boy! Not everything has one. And it's only a very special thing that some people have. You're very special too, Shahrukh, you're a star!"

"Is it better to be a star or have an atman?"

"Star, my son! So much less to feel bad about," Doctor Uncle smiled sadly.

"Pema ji, can I tell you something?"

The woman cocked her head to one side, listening. The incense was burning strong, it was giving him a headache. He was sawing through a piece of flimsy metal, helping the nuns with their new dormitory. Everyone else was gathering in the Garden for Losar. He was eager to finish this last piece of board, even though Pema had reassured him that these things never started on time. Now they were alone in the throne room. An enormous statue of the Buddha was stuffed into the far end of the room, the top of its head poking a hole through the sloped ceiling.

"Go ahead, Sanjeev."

"Well, first... my name isn't actually Sanjeev," Sanjeev mumbled. "The name I was given was

Shahrukh."

"What do you prefer to be called?" Pema asked. She was stacking the boards in a corner by the door.

"Sanjeev, please."

"Okay."

"There's something else," he said. He felt a lump forming in his throat. He started sawing with more vigor. "I - I don't know if you know this, but I'm - actually a celebrity upstairs."

"Oh yes, I think Li Bai was mentioning it."

"Yes... I don't know if he mentioned, as well, but, really, I'm a clone of a celebrity."

"Oh?"

Sanjeev turned his face away, even as he strained to interpret her tone. He shrugged nonchalantly. "Yes, you know. Artificially made. Implants and... you know. Not original."

"That's interesting," Pema said. Sanjeev bristled. The old woman asked, "I've heard that you people age much faster than us. Is that true?"

Sanjeev raised his voice to hide the tremor in it, "Uh. Well, yes. I'm eighteen years old, really."

"Really!" Pema smiled. She came up to him, inspected his face. She touched his chin lightly, where he hadn't shaved, "And all this white already!"

Sanjeev rubbed his stubble. "Oh, well, that's stress." He laughed. Then he swallowed. He had finished cutting, there was nothing else to do. He placed his hands in his pockets, pushing downwards. "So, I... Can I still be a Tibetan Buddhist?"

"Oh, Sanjeev," Pema sighed. "I'm pleased by your interest, but - "

"I understand. Sorry."

"No, wait, now you're upset." Pema touched his arm. "Sanjeev bhai, I understand that clones have something of a strange status for your people. But since you worry about it so much, yes, clones have bodhicitta potential, there's nothing stopping them from becoming as enlightened as any other person. Your mind is the same as mine, the same as the Dalai Lama's. And it's through mind," Pema put her thumb on his forehead, "that one reaches nirvana. So stop worrying about *that*."

Sanjeev felt like crying. He tried not to smile. "The Dalai Lama?"

"An old bodhisattva. Listen, Sanjeev bhai, the original ruler of Tibet was called the Dalai Lama. Even though he had reached nirvana, he chose to live and die and live again on Earth, in order to help people reach enlightenment. He went through sixteen lives before he chose to leave samsara."

Sanjeev gasped. "And I'm the sixteenth clone of Shahrukh."

"There you are. We all come back many times before we reach nirvana."

"He came back, again and again, sixteen times?"

Pema nodded.

"Was the Dalai Lama a star?"

"Oh, ha," Pema laughed. "Sort of, in a way."

Sanjeev smiled. "And you said I have the same mind as the Dalai Lama?"

"You have the same potential, yes. Why not? That brain of yours is no different than mine."

"But what about - you know - the atman?"

"That's a Hindu thing," Pema said, gathering up her bag. "It is an illusion. All is impermanent. Didn't I give you Milinda to read?"

Sanjeev stopped her before leaving. "Pema ji, maybe I'm the *seventeenth* Dalai Lama!"

At this, Pema dissolved into laughter. "Ha! Always someone famous with you! Well, I see I have quite some stories to tell you. Next time, Your Holiness. Right now, it's time for Losar."

They were laughing loudly, too loudly.

Sanjeev sighed - the sigh of the sober among the drunk. Here he sat, forced to watch the female clone - the idiotic Shalu woman - puppet-dance, while drunken people made idiotic drunken people talk around him. The ship's captain, Asadullah Khan, was seated on the floor, leaning on his elbow and slapping his friend on the shoulder, laughing red-faced. His friend, Balbir Singh, former governor of the New Peshawar colony and Shalu's current owner, was doubled over in mirth. He was spilling some of his drink on the ground.

"Arré, ji," Sanjeev said, "you're getting the baijiu on the carpet."

Balbir Singh looked up blearily, blinking. "Oh, oh, quite right." He made some sloppy attempts at drying it off with the edge of his suit. The Shalu, glowing with sweat, arrived with a towel. She gathered up her sari and plopped down beside him.

"Ji, ji, ji," Captain Khan slurred. "Arré, Sanjeev bhai - you are our friend. Our pal! Our handsome dost! All this formality with Balbir bhai," he made some movements with his hands, "distance, eh? Distance."

"Well, he knows what I think of him," Sanjeev mumbled.

"Oh-ho!" Balbir roared. "This again!" He nestled his face in the crook of the Shalu's neck. "Heard that, my love? Sanjeev is going to tell us again why I'm evil and you're a slave."

"Leave Balbir ji alone," the Shalu said.

"See! Balbir 'ji'?" Sanjeev said. "Why am I so formal? Why is *she*?"

"I'm only as formal as malik ji wants me to be." The Shalu smiled.

"*Malik ji*?" Sanjeev exclaimed, shrill. Malik ji, owner sir.

"She's joking! She's joking!" Captain Khan said quickly. The Shalu giggled.

Captain Khan scooted over and pressed the white baijiu bottle into Sanjeev's ribs. "Here, yaar. Have a sip and then let's hear that Sanjeev Kumar impression again."

"Yes!" Balbir exclaimed. "I'm tired of this old argument. Do the angry bit from *Trishul*."

Sanjeev drank from the bottle. It burned a hole down his throat, raging like fire. He wanted to be angry, but was - like the others - tired of it. Apart from alcoholism and the New Peshawar pox, the *Rahu Ketu*'s other main ailment was laziness. It crept in like a disease, wrapped around a person and then stayed there, stuck. There were so many things Sanjeev wanted to care about, but couldn't.

Balbir and the Shalu had fallen into deep conversation, and so Sanjeev moved towards Captain Khan. The old captain looked half-asleep. He was red-faced from alcohol, his cheek rough with stubble. Sanjeev nudged him.

"Asad sahib," he said softly.

"Hmm?" Captain Khan had his eyes closed.

"Asad sahib, it's true you're from Earth, na?"

The captain made an affirmative noise.

"When did you leave?"

"You mean, when was I forced to leave?" Captain Khan's eyes snapped open. "When did the imperial wisdom draft me?"

"Hindustan zindabad!" Balbir said from the other side of the room.

"Hundreds and hundreds of years ago," Captain Khan continued, drifting off. "Before the first gen Shahrukh was a speck of an idea in a tube."

"No, I - I mean, what year was it?" Sanjeev asked. "Earth standard?"

"Oh! Uh. Two thousand..."

"Old!" Balbir interrupted. "Forever, ever old."

"Why the questions, yaar?" Captain Khan said, looking up at Sanjeev. "Want to know something about the sacred motherland?"

"No, I just..."

"Arré, tell us, yaar!" Balbir said.

Sanjeev glared at him. Picking at the carpet, he shrugged. "I was just wondering. Asad sahib, have you ever heard of Tibet?"

"Bit-Bit?" Balbir asked. "The brand of biscuit?"

"No, Ti-bet, it's..."

"Yes, I know it," Captain Khan was wide awake now. He was looking at Sanjeev, watching him closely.

"Where did you hear about it?"

"I - well, I heard this Chinese merchant mention it."

"Which one? The vegwallah?" Balbir asked.

"No."

"Baijiuwallah? He's a bastard."

"No!"

"Many of our Chinese guests claim their heritage from Tibet," Captain Khan said.

"Yes!" Sanjeev said. "And I was curious. I had never heard of it."

"Most colonists don't know it." Captain Khan waved his hand. "It's ancient history for them, and 'their' history, not ours."

"Yes. I thought, since you're Earth-born, na..."

"And I know many, many things," Captain Khan smiled.

"Exactly," Sanjeev chuckled. "I thought maybe you knew something about it."

The captain slouched down, getting ready to doze again, "Not much, yaar. Butter tea. Himalayas. Dalai Lama, etcetera..."

"The Befana?" Balbir asked. The Shalu was petting his hair.

The Dalai Lama! Sanjeev's blood started pumping. He could feel the emotion building up within him. Most clones had built-in beta blockers to make sure they didn't suffer from stage fright. It meant a lifetime of artificial contentment. Sanjeev felt his excitement growing, straining at the leash of his implants and training. So perhaps the Dalai Lama was a real figure after all, someone from Earth who chose to come back, again and again, to help people reach enlightenment! A man who wasn't an "original," but who was revered as His Holiness anyway! Sanjeev remembered reading the Dropped entry with disappointment:

DALAI LAMA, n. (i) a brand of silk (New Ladakh origin), (ii) fictional rebel God-king who lives for thousands of years; featured as villain in films "Mountain Sky: Lost in Lhasa" and "Mountain Sky 2: Vengeance of the God-king."

Not really the liberator of all human suffering that Sanjeev had been expecting. But what Captain Khan had said - this was hope, this was potential! If the Dalai Lama came from Earth, from Tibet, then he could not be of New Ladakh origin after all!

What had Pema said, "We all come back many times before we reach Nirvana?" Everyone was a Buddha, everyone a Dalai Lama!

"What's wrong, brother?" The Shalu asked, her brow furrowed. "You look like you need to use the bathroom."

"No, I'm okay." And Sanjeev smiled.

Sanjeev was becoming very familiar with the ship's ventilation system. He clattered through it, knocking his elbows and knees in ways that would hurt later. It was pitch black, with only the occasional light coming from an opening into a room or corridor. He felt his way along until he reached the place where it suddenly sloped downwards. He hated this part of the journey, since there wasn't enough space to turn completely around and slide down on his butt. Instead, he had to slide on his stomach, hands reaching forward to knock aside any shipcrawlers or other alien objects. The ventilation shaft was slick with something that smelled lightly of yeast.

When Sanjeev had first crossed the Invisible Line into the Chinese zone, a group of youths had spotted him and cracked his forehead open, split his lip, kicked at his eyes and stomach and kidneys. Only a few Hindustani faces were ever allowed to cross the Invisible Line - Captain Khan and his officers, the doctors. They were all identifiable by their uniforms, except for Captain Khan, who was well-known by everyone onboard, and so sometimes came in his shorts. Any other Hindustani was potentially a target for the disaffected youngsters. After his first fight, Sanjeev had woken up hours later, stuffed halfway into the ventilation system. He had taken the hint and crawled back upstairs into the Hindustani zone using the air shafts.

Today he found his usual point of entry: the old pool. It had been drained of water long ago, and a giant

stupa made of recycled metal had been constructed in the sloping center. Many years before, the Tibetans had gutted their side of the ship and rebuilt it, creating new rooms, rickety hallways, sloping stairwells, preserving only the main lines of sewage, water, air. The pool was one of the few spots that had been left intact, so that it matched the ancient maps of the ship that were held in Captain Khan's desk upstairs. Not that Sanjeev studied them.

Sanjeev pressed his face against the grille, checking to see that the pool was empty, and then he started unscrewing the grille. Suddenly there were hands, arms, voices and noise. The grille was ripped off, screws flying, and Sanjeev was pulled roughly out of the ventilation shaft.

There were four of them, young men, angry. Sanjeev put his hands up to defend himself, but the first blow came to his ribs.

"Wait, wait!" Another blow caught him on the chin, and he banged his head against something hard. He put his palms together, "Dalai Lama! Dalai Lama!"

A boot hit his temple, and he hid his head in his arms, but then the boys were talking rapidly, and one of them stopped the other from continuing.

"Dalai Lama!" Sanjeev said. Something hot and wet was crawling into his eye. "Dalai Lama, Dalai Lama!"

Two of the young men came and grabbed him, pulling him to his feet. Sanjeev cringed, fought back, but they were too strong, and they started dragging him up the pool's sloped floor and to the exit. "Dalai Lama, Dalai Lama, Dalai Lama..."

In the corridors, people exclaimed and gasped when they saw him. Sanjeev just kept his palms together and kept repeating Dalai Lama, since it seemed to have served him well so far. The boys took him to a room that was filled with smoke. Each wall was lined with hundreds of white baijiu bottles perched in precarious pyramids. There was a man in the center, smoking a beedi and tapping into an old keyboard. He looked up in unsteady curiosity when the boys and Sanjeev arrived.

Sanjeev was trembling. He thought he heard one of the boys say, Something something Dalai Lama.

"Dalai Lama?" Sanjeev confirmed.

"Oy!" The beedi-keyboard man spoke Hindustani. "You're the Shahrukh clone!"

"Uh," Sanjeev said. He wasn't sure whether this would be helpful or not. He decided to try out what Pema ji had said. They had the same mind, Pema ji had said. "I might be the Dalai Lama."

"Oh, Your Holiness! Forgive me if I don't prostrate. My name is Li Bai. Don't recognize me?" The man smiled. "Your captain knows me well. I sell the baijiu upstairs. Baijiuwallah, na?"

"Oh."

"Did you get lost?"

"No..." Sanjeev began, but then, looking at the smoky room and angry men, changed his mind, "Yes."

Li Bai narrowed his eyes. "So how was your vacation from samsara, Your Holiness?"

Sanjeev faltered, feeling ridiculed, and muttered, "Okay, I guess."

"Have you been here before?"

"No," Sanjeev said. Li Bai waited. "Well, yes."

Li Bai smiled. "Why?"

Sanjeev shrugged.

"Surely you find the Hindustani side more comfortable. So much more space."

Sanjeev said nothing.

"All right, off you go, Your Holiness. Don't let them catch you here again, eh."

They grabbed him again, jabbing him in the kidneys with their knees, and went back in the crowded corridor. Sanjeev felt deflated, defeated. His body hurt. He wanted to cry. This stupid ship! This stupid ship and this stupid war and the stupid empires! Sanjeev kept his face down, not wanting to see the surprised Tibetan and Chinese faces as he was shoved past, wanting only to return to his room and lick his wounds and never go to the Chinese side again, wanting to forget all about the Dalai Lama business.

"Sanjeev bhai!" A woman's voice. Sanjeev looked up. It was Doctor Naziah Abbas.

She was kneeling down by an old woman, her medical kit opened up on the ground. She looked Sanjeev up and down, shocked. "What...?" Quickly, she flipped open her phone and dialed. "Hello? Yes. Naziah speaking. I'm sorry to wake you, Captain sahib," she looked pointedly at Sanjeev, "but we've had a bit of an accident with the Shahrukh. I'm sending him up now." She flipped the phone off and glared, "I don't want to know. I don't care. Just go back upstairs, where you're supposed to be."

"Ya Allah, Shahrukh, sometimes it's like you're one of those young punks I have to keep in line!" Captain Khan waved his hands, gesticulating. "You're worse than a teenager!"

"I *am* a teenager!" Sanjeev exclaimed.

"No, no, you're not. Don't hide behind that! You are a forty-five-year-old man. And a mature adult does not go crawling through our ventilation systems and popping into Li Bai's lap!"

"I didn't pop - "

"Let me finish," Asadullah roared. "Now look at you - you'll get a scar there and you've probably caught the pox. How do you intend to perform for Diwali?"

"What if I don't want to?"

Asadullah laughed.

"I'm serious!" Sanjeev exclaimed, feeling impotent. "I don't want to! I don't ever want to again!"

"You'd like to retire early, then?" Asadullah asked.

A clone's "retirement" had long become a Hindustani euphemism for "death". Sanjeev thought of the rubbish piles and Avi, his childhood friend. He thought of his atman and the Losar horns blowing and eternal space.

He said nothing, but Asadullah immediately softened. The older man rubbed his face with his hands. "Allah. Allah. Don't look at me like that, yaar. I didn't mean to scare you."

Sanjeev tried to sound mature, tried to use all the weight in his adult tenor. "I just don't want to dance. I want to - do something else. I can do what I want."

"No one does what they want."

"Well, I can. I'm my own person!"

"Your own - what?" Asadullah suddenly exclaimed. "Shahrukh, you pick up identities like old pajamas! You don't want to be the Shahrukh anymore, so you're the Sanjeev Kumar instead! Li Bai tells me you'd like to be His bloody Holiness the Dalai bhenchod Lama now!"

Sanjeev stared at the floor, his face heating.

"Shahrukh, I understand your confusion. You were made to be a celebrity, but you don't like the life of a celebrity." Asadullah sighed. "I can sympathize."

"It's not about that!"

"Then why don't you pick up a more mundane identity once in a while, eh? Why not be the Doctor Rai? The Uday Mohan?"

"It's not that. You don't - you'll never understand," Sanjeev pouted. "Only a Buddhist could understand, never a bloody *Muslim*!" He tried to load the final word with as much invective as possible.

But Asadullah just rolled his eyes and sat heavily in the chair.

"Fine. 'A bloody Muslim.' Okay. Go back to the Med Ward and see who's there and see if they can't fix you up. Insha'Allah, this will all pass for Diwali. Come back tomorrow morning, we're going to discuss the program. And I'm asking Doctor Rai to turn on your tracking chip again."

"No, no - please - no! I'm sorry!"

Asadullah shook his head, frowning. "Don't do that. Stop that. Just go, please, Shahrukh, go."

Doctor Rai said nothing as he worked on Sanjeev. He injected him with a local anesthetic, stitched up his forehead, gave him a few ice packs for his torso. He worked quietly and quickly, his eyes puffy and red. His hair was still tousled from where he had been sleeping, a pillow had left a crease mark on his cheek. Sanjeev sat very still, feeling ashamed. They had had to wake Doctor Rai up too.

Over and over, the hurt returned.

Dalai Lama was a brand of silk. Sanjeev's forehead throbbed. He had been disrespectful to Captain Khan. His chest felt constricted. The baijiuwallah, Li Bai, had called Captain Khan and laughingly asked whether His Holiness would like to perform at the next Losar party.

"There," Doctor Rai said softly. Sanjeev stared at the ground. "Come back in a few days to get the stitches out. Then you'll need to come back *again* so we can smooth that scar down. But don't worry. A couple weeks and you'll be ready for the spotlight again."

Sanjeev said nothing.

"Now, I'm going to update your biodata to say that you've had an accident and won't be available for, ahem, your other engagements. Is that all right with you?"

Sanjeev shrugged. Most of his clients had stopped visiting him anyway when he had started coming back caked in black flour, smelling of yeast and rubbish. Sewage was not very sexy.

"Oh, do cheer up, yaar," Doctor Rai said. "You're supposed to be a star. People look up to you." He pulled off his rubber gloves, snap-crack. "What were you doing there, anyway?"

Sanjeev muttered unevenly, "I don't know."

Doctor Rai made a sympathetic noise and ruffled Sanjeev's hair. "Oh, my little dear. People forget you're not as old as you look, eh? You went exploring then? Well, tell old Doctor Rai. What did you find?"

"Nothing," Sanjeev said, annoyed.

"You know, if you ask me, this whole ship is full of fools," Doctor Rai said. "We complain, we hit each other, we fear each other. People seem to forget that when we left the empires, we left the war behind as well. But ignorant people - you know how they cling to things - 'Hindustan zindabad' and all that rubbish - even when it's not in their best interest." He sighed. "If people read a bit of history, maybe they would realize that it wasn't so long ago that we Hindustanis were being colonized. Arr♦, Shahrukh, you like history, na? I think I detect a spark of intelligence in that pretty face of yours."

Sanjeev shrugged again.

"Here, my boy, let me give you something." Doctor Rai opened a cabinet by the door and rifled through old and scuffed laptop books. He retrieved one from the back, its monitor bent and flickering, the Page Forward and Page Back keys faded into gray. He handed it to Sanjeev, whose head burned hot and painful when he looked down. "Some Chinese thing - I can't remember what. I bought it years ago, in Delhi Prime. History of the Himalayas or something like that. You like that sort of stuff, na?"

But Sanjeev was already hearing the choral voices of hope pounding with his migraine. The Tibetan horns, the joy, the freedom beckoning him again. The Dalai Lama! Freedom from samsara! A new life! He smiled at Doctor Rai.

"Thought so." Doctor Rai smiled in return. "Now, don't get caught again, you old punk."

Delusion by Heather Parker

This day had started like any other - foreboding, threatening and ordinary. I'd got used to seeing every day that way in the last few months. I woke up fearful every morning as the world pressed in around me. It wasn't that anything dreadful was happening to me - I just couldn't stop believing it was about to.

I still went to work at the library every day. I'd been brought up to think you didn't give in to this sort of thing. You ought to be able to cope with life. And I suppose to most of the people around me, it seemed as if I did. Simon and the kids still saw me as the reliable wife and mother I'd always been. Not a woman terrified of what each new day might bring...

But this day wasn't like any other, I realised, as soon as I found the old battered photograph album in the stacks and started looking through the sepia pictures. I stared at the images with a mixture of recognition and disbelief, feeling my hands shaking. Why did these photographs look so familiar? I had never seen this album before, and yet these people weren't strangers. They were my family. No... that could not be right, I thought in an instant. This could not be possible! I felt as if the images were calling out to me, and I knew I had to follow.

Some small part of me wanted to be 'sensible'. But I couldn't erase what I was seeing, could not put the intense sense of recognition out of my mind. These pictures were not simply remnants of the lives of people long since dead and gone, they were pieces of me - my memories, my family, pieces of my

world. I saw the farmhouse where I used to live, the one Simon had built with his own hands. I saw the apple tree I used to sit under and read on spring days, the stable where we kept our horses, the small family graveyard where Simon's parents were laid for their eternal rest. I saw the places I had visited day after day, night after night in my lonely dreams.

I told the elderly library patron that the album she wanted could not be found, and hurriedly asked her to fill out a formal request slip instead. I did not care that she stared at me over her bifocals with puzzlement and concern- these were my memories, not hers, and not anyone else's. No one would have them but me.

When she left the circulation desk I breathed a sigh of relief. I was safe, she was gone. I had discovered, at last, a glimmer of what had been missing from my life all these years, a clue to what was "not right" about my sensible life. These pictures offered me something I had only dreamt of: tranquility. Completeness. Was I having a nervous breakdown? I wondered. I had to take the chance that this was real, not a dream, not a delusion. I was hardly ever off work, and yet I walked out of the library, without a word of explanation, the photo album carefully hidden in my coat pocket, and took the bus into the hills. I don't think I expected ever to return.

I asked the elderly bus driver to stop and I continued my pilgrimage on foot. I stopped to catch my breath and gazed out across the desolate, lonely fells. I still wasn't sure what had brought me to this particular place, although in a strange way it was familiar. I simply kept going, pushing further and further into the fog. In my mind I could see an old pony and trap, making its uncomfortable way home from town after market, stumbling up the muddy track and onto the empty fells. Perhaps I'd seen an old painting somewhere, perhaps I'd seen it in a dream.

The wind moaned across the moors as I climbed higher through the mist. It was getting colder and the light was fading. I wasn't sure where I was heading or what I would find there. But I knew I mustn't give up.

I still clutched the album, not caring if it was valuable or if I should have taken it from the library. It was mine. A woman has a right to her own memories, doesn't she? I carefully pulled it out and stared once more at the photographs which had such power over me. There it was. The stone farmhouse standing alone and yet calling to me after all these years. The family whose pictures appeared on these pages drew me to this wild place like a magnet. I knew I was close to home.

I had been here many times before. When I was feeling really bad, I would retreat into an imaginary world where I was at peace and happy. Everyday worries didn't exist there and reality couldn't intrude and spoil everything. Sometimes I felt it was the only part of my life that was actually real. It helped to keep me sane - if indeed I was. The pictures in this album mirrored my secret world perfectly, down to the farmhouse on the moors, my precious retreat. I knew I had to find out what was happening or I would regret it for the rest of my life.

I wondered vaguely what would happen when it went dark up here. Would I die of hypothermia? I hadn't told anyone where I was going. I started to feel cold. The wind blew the damp mist against my cheeks and with it a breath of reality. What the hell was I doing? I asked myself. Surely I was mad. I thought briefly about trying to go back, but that prospect seemed as bleak as the featureless scenery surrounding me in the moors.

During that moment of uncertainty, I saw the light. Not a blinding flash of clarity, but a real light coming from a window ahead of me. The daylight was fading, but I pushed my aching body on through the mist. I needed to find the people who lived here and yet I was afraid. In my secret imagined world,

they were warm and kind and they loved me. I had a fulfilling peaceful life and I didn't worry constantly. But were they real?

'Thank God you're back, Emma. We were just about to send out a search party.'

I jumped and turned to face the man I knew as my husband. He was so familiar it didn't seem disturbing. The same untidy fair hair, which always refused to obey a comb.

The soft Cumbrian accent. And yet, somehow he was different. The lines around his eyes were less noticeable. He looked younger. Less strained than I remembered.

'Simon?' I whispered, welcoming the warmth of his voice and not wanting to question any more.

'Who else would be daft enough to be out on the moors on a night like this? Looking for you,' he emphasised, laughing and putting his arm round my shoulders. It felt so real. And so good.

I noticed his clothes were almost a century out of date and the welcoming glow from the window was soft candlelight. As it was in my dream. Was I going mad? Was I so anxious to escape the constant struggle of everyday living, I was imagining this world? I knew I should be frightened of what was happening to me but I wasn't. I wanted it to be real. I needed to believe.

I took a chance. 'Are Maggie and David at home?'

Simon looked taken aback. 'Course they are. It's only a few hours since you left them. Are you feeling all right, love?'

I smiled at him and nodded. 'I was miles away. Daydreaming.'

'Aren't you always?' he grinned as he opened the farmhouse door.

After a few weeks, I stopped trying to work out how this miracle could have happened. Or which life was real and which was imaginary. Life truly was simpler in 1914 and I was happy and at peace. Maggie was an easy child and David a normal teenager, with everything that entails. I felt I was beginning to understand the concept of hope and I was looking forward to the future with confidence. I tried not to think about that other world and settled quietly into the role of farmer's wife with Simon, whom I loved dearly.

But my dream was shattered one terrible day when David returned from the village and made his dreadful announcement. My seventeen-year-old son had volunteered to fight in the Great War.

I still remember the horror his words evoked in me. The memories flooded me with chills and nausea, forcing themselves up into my brain with the desperation of water bursting from a breaking dam. I grabbed the edge of the table for support as I saw it all play out in front of me in an instant - the letter informing us that David had been killed in action, the tear-filled funeral, the polished gravestone we set beside those of his grandparents. There had been no photos of the funeral in the album, of course not. No, this could not be happening, no...

I did not realize I was saying that word over and over, out loud, as I heard it in my mind. No no no no!

David was disappointed and upset by my reaction.

'Oh, ma, every lad in the village is joining up. We'll be all right - we're all going to be in the same regiment.'

'But David, you've no idea what you're getting into. There'll be hundreds of thousands of lads like you killed or maimed in the next four years.'

David looked at me strangely and then across at his father.

'You've said a few things like that lately, love,' murmured Simon, concerned. 'How can you possibly know what's going to happen or how long this war will last?'

'Everyone says it'll be over in a few months,' added David scornfully. 'I thought you'd be proud of me.'

How could I explain? Perhaps the other world was just in my mind. My heart started to beat faster and I felt the familiar cold sweat breaking out on my face. Nausea threatened to overwhelm me and I rushed out of the house into the cold, sharp air of the moors. I realised suddenly that I was shivering. How could this happen? How could my perfect world be shattered so easily? I was having trouble breathing and everything around me started to spin. I knew I was losing consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, Simon was sitting by my bed and holding my hand tightly. His eyes were full of pain and I wanted to comfort him.

'Am I in the cottage hospital?' I asked, confused.

'You're in Middleton General, love. Don't you remember anything?'

I was puzzled. Of course I did.

'I know I had a dizzy spell when David told me he'd enlisted. But I must have passed out after that.'

Simon looked bewildered. 'Enlisted for what?'

'For the war, of course. He'll be shipping out to France in a few weeks. But he'll get himself killed, Simon, believe me.'

Simon spoke quietly but firmly.

'Emma, you've had some kind of a breakdown. David's doing his A levels in the spring and going on to Durham University in October.'

He let that sink in and continued.

'You left the library yesterday lunchtime and disappeared. We were all frantic with worry. We searched the places we thought you might have gone but there was no sign anywhere. Then this morning, two walkers found you unconscious up on the moors. The police said it was as remote an area as you could get. If those two hadn't found you, you would almost certainly have died.'

Simon's voice broke and he put his head in his hands. He was trembling.

'Or is that what you wanted, Emma? Were you trying to kill yourself?'

A month has passed since that dreadful day and I'm starting to feel better. I've talked to doctors and, more importantly, to my family. Simon was horrified to learn what I'd been going through and angry and hurt that I hadn't confided in him earlier. Gradually he came to understand and he and the children have been kind and patient with me. I don't know what happened during those hours, although I'm certain I didn't go up there to die. The other life was still real to me. But I knew with the help of my family and the medication I had to move forward and try not to think about it anymore. I was glad to be back in this world, where my David was safe and sound.

This morning I opened the door and took the coat from the laundryman standing on the step. I shuddered, realising it was the one I'd worn that night on the moors. Simon must have sent it for cleaning while I was in hospital.

'Now, lass, you should be more careful with your stuff. You were lucky you didn't lose this in the wash!' The jovial man passed me a battered old photograph album someone had found in the pocket.

'Looks to be quite an age, too. There's a picture of a young lad in uniform that could be from the First World War.'

After I shut the door, I sank to the floor, my heart racing and my head pounding. I had asked Simon about the album but he said he couldn't find it. It wasn't with me when the ambulance brought me to the hospital and he had gone through my bag carefully. Everyone said it was part of my illness and it couldn't really exist. No one had looked in the pocket of my coat - until now.

I slowly opened the fragile book and stared down at the faded photos. I could see they were Simon, Maggie and David. They had the same faces as the people I was living with now. But these photographs were from 1914 and my David was wearing khaki uniform. He was standing in front of a lonely stone farmhouse high up on the moors and this time I noticed the figure standing closest to him.

It was faded and it was in sepia. But I could hardly fail to recognise myself.

The People Fever by Jason Heller

Sometimes the pain took him when he was chopping wood for the cabin's fire. Other times it flared up, hot and bright behind his eyes, when he was listening to the songs and skits on the radio set. Sometimes it even woke him out of a dead sleep.

He hardly ever slept dead anymore, though. That is, except for right after the sickness fell.

Pa had called it the people fever. Ben didn't know what other folks called it. But he didn't bother with other folks, mostly. And even when he did, he got used to hearing them cry. Their screams filled his head some nights.

He just turned the radio up louder.

Pa wasn't around anymore. Neither was Ma. But Ben still recollected what they taught him. They had rules. Ben was but a boy when they died, but he took to those rules and kept them close.

First: Keep enough wood in the shed.

Second: Don't let the batteries get wet. The radio don't work without them. And be careful when you sneak into the valley to steal new ones.

Third: No matter how much the fever hurts, don't do what it tells you. Eat squirrels if you have to, or birds. Boil their heads down to jelly, eat them raw. It doesn't matter.

Just don't eat people.

The first two rules were easy. There was nothing much to do all day except chores, anyway. The cabin was dull and quiet but for the radio. It looked like a metal lunchbox painted red. The paint was chipped. It glowed and hummed. It was hooked up to a tractor battery, greasy and dusty, bigger than the radio, even. The antenna ran out the back of it and through the crack in the wall and up the tall pine outside. It picked up all the crackly, hissing voices that made their way out of the valley and up into mountains where the cabin was.

Ben listened to it every Thursday night. Thursday night was The Hog Report.

The radio had real hog reports, of course. And crop reports and weather reports and news reports. But this was different. This report didn't give advice to the farmers in the valley, the folks Ben stole tractor batteries from and tried not to eat.

This was The Hog Report starring John Seed. And Ben lived for him.

#

The wood had been tough chopping that day, wet on account of the last night's rain. The ax chewed through the tough trunks slowly, as if it didn't want to.

Ben's muscle wasn't in it, either. He was anxious to get done and switch on The Report.

Ben ran through some of his favorite John Seed skits in his mind. The old lady and the door-to-door salesman. That was a good one. So was the one with the deer hunter and the talking deer. John Seed played all the parts himself, that is, the ones that weren't played by his wife, Sophie.

Even better than his skits, though, were his songs.

Ma had sung to Ben when he was little. And when all the chores were done early and their bellies were stuffed with Ma's stew, Pa even joined in. Pa played guitar, just like John Seed.

John Seed sang what he called "the best work songs and country-and-western ballads in the whole of California." He sang with Sophie Seed and sometimes with special guests like Cowboy Corncob and Alicia Plainsong the Injun Princess. John Seed strummed, a sound like pine needles being rustled by the wind. And his voice was like a dirt storm, a million little bits of grit swirling together into one dusty howl:

Set up camp on the banks of the river,

Never meant to rest.

Broke down camp when I was done pickin'

All the farmer's best.

The migrant life is one of achin',

One of toil and task.

Not allowed to eat my labor,

Not allowed to ask.

Ben sang along in his head, still struggling with the wet firewood. His boots were wet, too, and cold, and it was the warmth in his left sock that made him realize what had happened.

That's when the pain came.

Pa and Ma had taught him young that the pain in their joints and bones and brains was just part of being who they were. Ben was good at forgetting the pain. But when Ben took his boot off and saw where he'd cut himself with the ax, he tried hard not to cry. It was bad. One toe was off, the other hanging by skin.

That's what you get, Ben, for gathering wool about John Seed and all his skits and songs while chopping wood, he said to himself as he bandaged up his foot the best he could. But the blood kept soaking through the rags. Then the red filled up his head, and he couldn't see or hear anymore.

#

Waking up on the ground was something Ben knew. Every time the fever came and he couldn't stop it, he'd wake up hours or days later, as near as he could reckon, with twigs and rocks poking at him. One time a bear cub had even been licking his nose, seeing in Ben something of himself.

But this time Ben woke up moving, the treetops blurring by above him.

He passed out again, but when he came to, he had stopped moving. Laid out on the forest floor, he leaned his head all the way back until he could see, upside down, a man building a fire. The kindling took right away. Hardly any smoke. The wood was dry.

"Mister," Ben said, his voice a stranger in his throat. "How long I been out?"

The man came running over as Ben sat up and brushed leaves from his back. His foot started throbbing. Ben looked down and saw it wrapped in a huge bundle of cloth.

"Easy there, Big Red." The man's voice was raw and fine, a friend's voice. "I patched you up the best I could, but that's gonna be real sore for a while."

"Big Red?"

The man laughed. "Yeah. Come on, you looked in a mirror lately? You look like a big red bear with all that orange hair."

"Mirror." Ben turned the strange word around in his mouth.

"Here, let me help you over to the fire. You need to get warmed up. Been a long day." He looked around the woods. It was getting dark. "Then maybe," he winked, "you can tell me what you're doing out here. From the trail of blood I found next to you yesterday, you must have been running for a good while on that hurt paw before you passed out."

Ben sighed. If the man was right, it meant Ben's fever had come and gone. He wondered if he'd made it all the way down to the valley, to the farmers, before the man had found him. Then something flickered in the back of his head, like the kindling catching fire.

"Mister," he said, squinting hard, "what... what direction did the blood lead to?"

The man looked at Ben, his eyebrows up. "East," he answered.

Good, Ben thought. East was the cabin. West was the valley. He hadn't made it to the farmers. He hadn't broken Pa's rule.

The man saw Ben grin. He grinned back at Ben. The firelight jumped across his stubbly cheeks. His broad-brimmed hat was tilted to the side like it was laughing at the both of them.

Then the man lifted his head and sang:

He hailed from the east with a head of flame,

He didn't have toes or even a name.

I offered him my hand, and he offered the same,

We went walking east in the direction he came.

Ben's jaw hung open. The man was returned to grinning.

"John Seed, proprietor and star of John Seed's Hog Report, at your disposal."

#

Over the next few days, Ben almost forgot who John Seed really was. Then, after a long day of splitting logs and catching stew-hares together, John Seed would pick up Pa's old guitar and play.

It was odd, Ben thought, to hear John Seed sing in the cabin with the stew bowls pushed to the side of the table and a fire roaring. His voice was different. Even when the radio was hooked up to a new battery and the antenna ran all the way up the tall pine, John Seed didn't sound quite the same as he did in the flesh.

One day while they were hard at work in the yard it occurred to Ben to ask John Seed why he was there.

"Ha!" said John Seed. "You know, that's why I like you, Ben. I've been up here, what, a week now? See, unlike most folk, you're not nosy." He wiped his forehead with an oily handkerchief. Winter was coming, and there was a lot of wood to stack.

"I'm sorry," Ben said. "I hadn't meant to... "

"No, no. It's fine." He loaded his arms up with split lgos and talked while he piled them up. "See, Ben, I have a... a wandering soul. I don't fit in, not rightly. I'm not from California. I'm from back east, Tennessee. I had a wife there, a job, a home. But I couldn't keep 'em. I couldn't stay there in one spot. There's just too much life and love and heartbreak and hope everywhere. Why sit in one place and just settle with the little bit that comes your way?"

"That's when I left Tennessee. Headed west. Picked up some songs riding the rails and working on the fields to make my way out here." His eyes went away, like he was looking at stars. "To hear fruit-pickers singing in the fields, or hobos in the boxcars. It's like... like a choir, Ben. Not the snooty kind. The human kind."

Ben got the courage to interrupt. "But what about The Hog Report? What about Sophie?"

John Seed looked at the ground. "Yeah. I know. I have it all, don't I? When I moved to California, I hooked up with Sophie, got hitched, started the radio show. Folks are starving to death across this land right now, strangers to themselves and to each other. And here I am, running away from fame and fortune."

He guffawed and slapped his knee. "Or at least what passes for fame and fortune in that valley down there. Here's the thing, Ben, and I've never told anyone this before. At least not without putting it in song, which is a cowardly why to tell someone how you feel. See, I... I can't take people. I love the idea of people. I love meeting them and soaking up everything they can give me. But I love to be with everyone. Men, women, it don't matter to me. And when people find that out, I have to leave. I just can't be around them, Ben, do you understand?"

Something cracked in Ben's chest. It felt like the pain, but also not at all. "I reckon I might."

They both stacked in silence for a minute, then John Seed stopped and looked hard at Ben. "Now it's your turn, Big Red. Why do you live out here on the mountain? What were you doing there in the woods when I found you? There was no way you were going to make it to the valley in time to get your foot sewed up. And where are your parents? You're a big feller, I'll give you that, but you can't be more'n 17."

Ben shook his head. His shaggy red hair fell in his face.

"My parents got sick and died a ways back. I live here 'cause they did. And I ain't fit for human

company, either, John Seed," he said, the ache in his chest like a tiny fire. "I appreciate you helping out and singing your songs and such, but best you remember that."

#

Winter came early and angry. What was rain one night turned to snow, and Ben and John Seed woke up to a hip-deep blanket of white. The battery had died weeks back, and after the last fever, Ben was afraid to steal into the valley for a new one. It pained John Seed to listen to the radio, anyway. He said it reminded him of Sophie. He'd abandoned his wife, he sobbed one night to Ben, with a note and a kiss in the middle of the night.

But with John Seed singing for him in his own cabin almost every night, Ben didn't miss the radio.

To pass the long hours, John Seed started teaching Ben to sing. He started out with the guitar, but it proved too complicated. So John Seed strummed and sang, and Ben sang along:

Dust road, dirt road,

Cement in the city,

Take me to the magic town

Where girls are gold and pretty.

Redhead, black hair,

Skin as soft as down,

Take me to the pretty girls

Who make me tall and proud.

It was during one such lesson, with the wind piling the snow high outside the door, that John Seed leaned over and kissed Ben, his beard like barbed wire and his lips chapped and strong. It made Ben's blood thunder. For a second, he almost thought the fever was back. Then John Seed kissed him harder, bit his lip.

"John Seed, don't." Ben ducked his head, his pulse filling his ears. Then he met John Seed's eyes. They were fierce and wide, like a deer's that had been shot and lay bleeding in the woods.

"Ben, I... I don't want to hurt you. Sometimes that seems to be the only thing I'm any good at."

"You won't," Ben said. Then he picked up the song in his clear, wandering voice as John Seed's parched, raw one joined in, a sound more lonely than the wolves they'd sometimes hear circling the valley in the night.

#

"John Seed," Ben asked later, after the crickets and owls had taken over the singing and the two men lay in their cots, "what were your parents like?"

"My parents? My mother... well, my mother was a saint. But I tried even her patience. She couldn't figure me out anymore than I could myself.

"That's the thing about you, Ben. You don't even know how to judge, do you?"

"I guess not," Ben said. "I... I reckon I have a way of getting inside other folks' heads, see things they way they see 'em."

"I'd say that's about right," John Seed chuckled. "But what about you, Red? You never talk about your folks. You mentioned some rules of theirs once, is all. Were they decent people?"

Ben almost whispered. "Yeah. Decent people. They didn't want to live out here in this cabin, you know. None of our kind did. They all did what they wanted, lived where they wanted. They didn't follow Pa's rules. They didn't follow any rules."

"And I don't follow you, Big Red. What do you mean? What others?"

"The other folk like us. The ones who don't follow the third rule."

"And what rule is that?"

Ben's tongue stumbled. "Don't let the people fever take you over. Don't... don't eat folk."

"Eat people?" John Seed laughed. "Aw, go on now. You mean like a, a vampire?"

Ben shrugged. "A what?"

"You know, vampires, like in the picture shows. They have to suck blood to live. Human blood. No garlic, no crosses, no sunlight, no mirrors." John Seed looked around. "Then again, I guess you don't have any of those things in the cabin, do you? Is that it, Ben? You a blood-slurping vampire?"

Ben dug back hard into his memory. "You mean the... the heartkin? Those are our cousins. The ones who drink blood. No, that's not us. We're the headkin." Ben's skull hurt from all the recollecting.

"The headkin?" John Seed's voice clamped up like his jaws were a bear-trap.

"Sure. The heartkin need blood. We need... "

"Brains." John Seed finished. He thought for a moment. "That's what happens in the valley, then, when folks go missing a couple times a year. Everyone just figures it's some wild animal out here in the woods, an especially hungry one."

Ben nodded. "That's the people fever. When it comes, I have to eat. Pa and Ma taught me it was wrong, though. That's why we ran away from the rest of our kin. They live down in the towns and in the cities, the places where people are easy to come by. Where they're not so missed when they get taken away.

"But Pa and Ma told me it was wrong to harm people." Ben's voice was hollow, and his eyes were wet. "They told me to make do with animals as much as I could. That it was better to live like an animal than to kill folks."

"Hush, Ben, hush," John Seed said. "They did the right thing. People out there... They can't abide by anyone who's different. Your parent's were right."

"No, they weren't!" Ben yelled. "They left me alone. They died because of the "right things" they did. And they... they made me this way, the way I am."

John Seed sat up in his cot, reached over, took Ben by the shoulders. His hands were so gentle, Ben couldn't tell if John Seed was afraid or just trying to comfort him. "What way, Ben? You're still a person. I've traveled across this whole land, seen people beat down and taken advantage of because they're different. You've heard my songs, Red. You know. Even if all you say is true, none of it matters. This people fever don't even matter. You can choose what you do, who you are. It's just... lust, that's all. I have my wanderlust. You have your kind of lust. We just each of us have to find someone to understand it, to understand us.

"And if no one down there in the valley or the cities can understand us, we can stay here in the cabin.

Forever, for all I care. Just working and trapping and singing songs. I've done enough wandering, enough running. We both can just stay."

John Seed grinned, but there was sadness in the shadows under his eyes. "Let's just make a promise, okay, Big Red? You don't ever hurt me, and I won't ever hurt you. That's all I've ever really wanted from anybody. No more judging, and no more pain."

Ben looked up at John Seed by the light of the candle that flickered between their cots.

"John Seed, my kin don't just eat brains to stop the fever. We eat them to think. To stay smart. When we eat that stuff, we get everything that's in there. All the thoughts and whatnot. That's why my parents died. They stopped eating, even when the fever came, and they just got less smart and less smart until they were too stupid to even breathe. I had to watch it all, John Seed. I had to watch them turn into... into animals."

He hung his head. "And it's happening to me, too. I know it. It's just a little bit every day, but I can tell. The only brains I eat are rabbits' and squirrels', and that's the way my thinking ends up. I can't barely recall what being smart was even like. But I used to be, you know. I used to read books, Pa's books, before I had to burn them all last winter to keep warm. They weren't no good to me anymore. And the guitar... "

Sobs shook him. "I used to play guitar. With Pa. I played and made up my own songs. As good as you, even, John Seed. As good as you."

#

Ben didn't expect John Seed to still be there in the morning, but he was. They made breakfast in silence and sat down and ate like nothing was different. Like they didn't know the other's secrets.

After breakfast, without a word, Ben dressed in all his warm clothes and packed two bags and put on his snowshoes. John Seed helped him dig out the cabin's door, and, without another word, Ben set off.

#

Five nights later, John Seed had just started trying to tune a tricky string on Ben's Pa's guitar when something hit the cabin. It shook the rickety cots and the pots and pans lining the wall. John Seed sat still, listening hard.

Then it happened again.

He ran to the door and pressed his ear against it. He heard a scrape and a moan. Then he grinned and yanked the door open.

Ben lay there, collapsed on the snow. He held a bag in his shaking hands. Something hard and heavy was inside.

"Ben, Lord, get in here." John Seed dragged him and his bags into the cabin and slammed the door. Then he stripped Ben, hauled him into bed, and boiled some water that he made him drink. Then he covered the boy, climbed into his own cot exhausted, and fall asleep.

The buzz was the first thing he heard, then the crackle. Then the voices. John Seed jumped out of bed, his head clanging like a church bell. Still half asleep, he pictured a mob from the valley, a trail of blood and boot prints that led to the cabin.

Then he looked around the room saw where the voices were coming from.

The radio.

Ben stood over the lunchbox-like machine. He was hooking something up to it. A battery. John Seed gaped at him.

"What in hell? Is that what you did, Ben? Walked all the way to the valley in the dead of winter just to get a battery for the damn radio?"

Ben glanced at him. His eyes were bright, quick. "Yup. But listen, John Seed. They've got someone else doing your Hog Report now. They're playing an advertisement for it."

They both strained to hear. A tiny voice squawked through the speaker.

"It's Sophie," John Seed breathed, then collapsed on the cot. "She's doing the show by herself. Thank God. See, Big Red? That woman didn't need me. She's better off now. She needs all that attention, anyway. She needs people. Not like me."

"Still," he said, grabbing Ben for a hug, "I ought to whup you for pulling a stunt like that. You could've died down there. And all for a battery."

Ben smiled. "That wasn't everything." He nodded at his other bag, stuffed full and oddly lumpy. "I took care of it, John Seed. I did what I had to do. I've been good for a long time. My whole life. But I can't hide from myself anymore, can't cage him up. I can't do what Pa and Ma did, bless their souls. I can't live by their rules. They were right, in their own way, but they were wrong."

Then Ben sat down next to John Seed, picked up the guitar, tuned the tricky string like it was nothing, and started playing.

Fellow Travelers by Rebecca Nesvet

Tom inspected the mailbox of 12 Cobble Court, the next house on his list. "Kurill-Flores," it read, the handwritten letters crowding the yellowed sticky label trapped underneath the dirty glass. *Not* a well kept house, Tom observed. In the front, the grass grew wild. It was mingled with wild onions and dandelions. Around the corner, just beyond the sagging backyard fence, was a pile of—Tom was not sure entirely what. Construction materials, or debris from a demolition long since otherwise completed. The ground floor windows were lit up: at least some of the Kurill-Flores family must be at home.

Tom straightened his tie, pulled the knot as far up as it would go without choking him, and headed for the front door. It was painted a dull slate-blue, which appeared to have faded from some brighter color. Chips in the paint exposed white paint beneath, and looked like stars fixed in a layer of void. In the top half of the door was set a diamond-shaped window, with a lacy black metal grille covering the glass. The unilluminated space within left the glass as dark and nearly as opaque as the grille. He rang the bell, and waited, silently rehearsing his spiel. No one answered.

Tom stepped back for another peek at the front windows. They were still lit. In the room beyond one of them, a young girl in a leotard and ballet shoes, maybe nine or ten years old—dragged a vacuum cleaner out of site by the accordion tube of the nozzle attachment. Then the four diamonds filled with light and the front door flew open.

"Yes?" It was an older girl, of high school age, and obviously in need of the gifts Tom was charged to

bring. Her black tank top failed to entirely mask a claret-colored brassiere. Her eyelids were smudged with black war paint. Under fraying denim shorts, black lace stockings pulled the eye upwards from red ballet-style shoes.

"What is it?" she said.

"My name is Tom. I'm just passing through the neighborhood--"

"Uh huh." The young woman leaned against the inside of the doorframe. Daring him to help her understand. "We don't have a phone." She tried to shut the door. Tom put his hand in it. The door shut on his fingers with an ugly sound. He winced at the pain. It's a trial, he told himself, silently. Be brave, and persevere. He screamed anyway. From the inside, she put the door on the latch.

"Go away," she said. "I'm warning you."

Through the windows in the door, Tom saw the child-her sister?-pad into the front hallway.

"It's still there," the younger sister said.

"Just ignore it."

"Okay."

Tom's hand was still stuck in the door, but it wasn't completely shut. He didn't move his fingers. "Just a moment," he begged, as the child ran off again. "Listen. Please."

The teenage girl left the door on the latch, and stepped back from it.

"You're a Mormon," she said.

"Yes. A Latter-Day Saint."

"So you *have* to do this, right?"

"It's my choice."

"You can say no?"

"I could," Tom said, "but I wouldn't want to. I want people to have the knowledge I have."

"If you say no, they kick you out, right?"

"No." Really, Tom wasn't so sure. He knew of several young men who had gone off on their Missions, been converted by the naive and the sinners, and returned as apostates. None had been run out of town, but many had either quickly strengthened their spiritual resolve and reformed themselves, or had been quietly advised to make their fortunes elsewhere, and had obeyed. But at this moment, Tom determined, he was telling the truth. There was something very wrong with this girl, whose parents raised her in an actual wilderness, and who had attacked him, like an animal, with a door. She needed help; he wanted to help her.

"I'm not allowed to let people in," she said. "You see, I'm the sitter. But you can say your thing from out there. I'll listen."

"Thank you."

"That's okay," she said. She twirled a piece of her hair between two fingers. "I think I know what you mean-to have knowledge, and think other people need to share it."

Maybe, then, this would be easy. Tom almost forgave her for the pain in his fingers. That was a test,

and he had passed with flying colors. He launched into his story-*the* story, the history of future and past, of farmers and angels and a hat full of stones. She stood a few feet back from the door, the faux-golden chain suspended in the air between them, and listened, intently, as none of Tom's housecalls ever had before. He tried to keep his mental eyes on the landscape of the tale, and his physical eyes connected to hers, and away from the black lace and, behind it, her longish, gently curving legs.

"And then," Tom continued. "The Lamanites forgot Hebrew and where they came from and became injins..." Darn. He always forgot... "Native Americans. And Christ visited them, and Joseph Smith saw that, too."

"In the stones?"

"Yes."

"Interesting," she said.

"You believe it?"

Her gaze traveled to the ceiling, momentarily.

"Black holes are of infinite mass," she said, "and if one of them swallows up the world, they'll contain all the knowledge of the universe. Things can maybe travel through them to the past, or other worlds. Were those stones infinitely heavy?"

Tom had to think about this. Nothing said explicitly that they weren't. On the other hand, Smith had been able to pick up the hat, with the stones in it. But God has infinite strength, and was always willing to share some of it with His prophets and believers.

"They were heavy," Tom said. "Maybe they were black holes."

"Very interesting," she said. "Now, I have a question for you, on that same subject."

"Black holes?"

She unlatched the door and pushed it open. "Mysteries."

"I'm pleased to try and answer it."

"You'll have to come into the house."

"I thought that wasn't allowed."

She smiled. Her teeth were perfect. The smile sculpted her face into a heart shape. "I won't tell if you don't," she said.

"I sure won't, Miss..."

"Jessie." She opened the door. "Call me Jessie."

Tom stepped over the threshold and Jessie shut the door behind him. She locked both of its locks.

"It's a kind of a mystery," she said. "Like yours. An unknown, about the way things work, in the universe."

"I'll try to answer," Tom said. "I might not know the answer, of course."

"Of course," Jessie said. "It's in the laundry room."

"There's a problem?"

"No," Jessie replied, grabbing a red plastic flashlight from the grimy floor, and beckoning him down a hallway. "Just an unknown."

Cardboard boxes and plastic milk crates filled with books, papers, and file folders lined the hall. The walls were decorated with smudged handprints of brightly-colored paint, some looking wet. Tom almost slipped on a stray clear acetate report cover, invisible on the dirty floor.

"Careful," Jessie said. "Doctor Kurill teaches at the University. That's where she is now, in her lab."

They came to a kitchen. Three chairs were pulled up to a small wooden table. Above the table, in a niche in the wall, hung a family photo in black and white. The child-younger, perhaps two or three-and two adults, a blond woman with short spiky hair pulled back from her face by a metal headband, and another woman, Hispanic, with long, dark hair, thin, tired-looking, in a wheelchair. The woman in the chair held the other one on her lap, or, rather, on the arms of the chair. The child stood in front of them, clutching a stuffed lion and grinning at the camera. Looking at the picture, Tom felt very far from his home town, but also intrigued. They looked strangely happy, all three of them. They were all smiling, even the tired-looking woman.

"Dr. Kurill and Ms. Flores," Jessie said. Then, she whispered more. "Ms. Flores has passed on."

"I'm very sorry."

"It was a long time ago. MS. Now, Dr. Kurill's trying to find a cure."

The doorway led to a stairwell. It was dark and narrow. Tom could just make out the top two or three steps. Beyond those, total blackness took over. This was just the sort of place in strangers' houses that everything and everyone in Tom's life had instructed him to avoid; he had been cautioned by the Elders, the Mission Manual, his Mission teammates, his entire family and even, in a sense, by every horror movie he had ever secretly viewed on television in the early A.M. hours.

"Sorry," Tom said. "I don't think I should."

"I'm not asking you to go down there," Jessie countered, calmly. "Just look. Please?"

It was the politeness that did it. In the world beyond Tom's home town, few people were polite. The please didn't assure Tom that Jessie's intentions were absolutely benign, but he missed the sound of the word. "All right," he said.

She flicked the flashlight on and pointed it down the stairs. The amber beam shot down the stairs, rippling in a zigzag shape over their edges, then, at the bottom end, curved into a spiral and ended. The center of the spiral was black.

"What do you think it is?" Jessie asked.

"I don't know."

Behind him, a small voice piped up. "*I* know."

Tom turned around to find the little girl behind them. Her face, hands, and clothes were now covered with purple and green paint.

"Clara, I *said* ignore it."

Clara planted her small hands on her hips, no doubt further ruining her dress. She glared at Jessie.

"It's a black hole, Jessie. And I'm gonna tell."

Jessie dropped to the floor, and looked directly across into Clara's eyes.

"Clara, if you tell your Mommy *that*, no one will believe you."

"She will if it's true."

"Not even then."

"She will too!"

"Listen," Jessie said. "This nice man is going to find out what that is. And if it's not a black hole, we're going to believe him, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because he's a question-answering man. That's what he does. Right, Tom?"

"I don't know everything."

"Nobody does," Jessie said. "But some people make it their business to find out, and spread the news. Right?"

"Some kinds of news. I'm not a rocket scientist."

"That's okay," Jessie said. "I don't think that's a rocket. Do you, Clara?"

The child shook her head, vigorously. "It's a *black... hole!*"

Jessie held the flashlight out to Tom. It was still on, and cut a swathe of light across the floor, revealing a thick layer of gray grime.

Tom wanted to turn and run, but he thought of the darkness in Smith's hat. Was it not the same sort of darkness as at the bottom of these stairs-intimidating, and shot through with mysterious light? Perhaps he had been sent not to educate Jessie, but so that *shemight* enlighten *him*, or rather that, through her, God might enlighten him. He regretted his observation of legs and lace, though that, too, might be part of His inscrutable plan.

He took the flashlight and pointed it into the abyss. Instantly, the pattern reappeared: a diagonal zigzag, then a spiral, with a dot of black at its centre, which seemed, from the way the inner parts of the spiral faded, to be very far away.

Tom switched the light off. "How big is this house?" he asked.

"Three stories," Jessie replied.

"No, I mean, how big are the foundations? The floor plan?"

Her thin, dark eyebrows scrunched together, and her eyelids lowered.

"What," he asked her, "are the building's dimensions? Including the..." He waved at the space below.

"Laundry room?"

"Yes. The laundry room."

"I don't know," Jessie answered. "I'm just the sitter."

At that moment, Clara bounded into the room.

"Jessie! Watch TV with me!"

"I'm busy, Clara."

"I'm not s'posed to watch it alone." The child pouted, hands on hips again. Very immature for her age, Tom observed. He and his brother would never have behaved like that. He also observed that on Clara's face, the paint had dried, and around the mouth, it was cracking.

Jessie picked Clara up and carried her out. Tom remained respectfully behind. He heard water running, and Clara screaming. Then Clara ran into the room, face smeared less extensively with paint, and made a sharp turn around the laundry room door. Jessie followed her into sight.

"I'm gonna tell you wouldn't watch it with me, Jessie."

"Go ahead. Your mom knows it has a V-Chip."

Clara stalked out. From the direction of her disappearance, Tom heard a ravenous roar, and nearly jumped.

"Discovery Channel," Jessie said.

"I just thought..."

"Come on," Jessie said. "This is a house, not a zoo."

"You have to admit," Tom countered. "People have seen lions, but never a black hole."

"Lions," she said, "don't eat light. People, but never light. So it isn't difficult to see them, if you really want to."

Tom had absolutely no desire to see a lion, and increasingly less interest in seeing whatever was in the room at the bottom of the stairs, if it even was a room, or a bottom.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've got to go. Next call."

Jessie was ahead of him, suddenly, between him and the door. She leaned against the frame again. Silently, she latched it.

"No use."

"My list..."

"There's no one home next door, Tom."

"I think I can determine that for myself."

"Next door is *my* house."

"Then I'll keep going."

Jessie crossed her arms. "Please, Tom. Just see if it's a black hole, or something else. So I know whether Clara really needs to be kept away from it."

"Some other day."

"Tom, please. Since Nita Flores died, Clara's been a brat. *Nobody* can control her. She acts like she's half her age except when she thinks like a forty-year-old and just this afternoon she's tracked paint all over the house and made the vacuum cleaner spit up God knows what on the living room carpet and as for the TV..."

"They have a V-Chip."

Jessie lowered her voice. "I just *said* that. They *don't*. Please, help me?"

Tom set his teeth. "What do you want me to do?"

"It's simple. Just go downstairs far enough to throw the flashlight into the... the..."

"The suspected hole?"

"Nobody but Clara suspects it. The ambiguity, call it. Throw the flashlight into the ambiguity, bulb end up. I'll stay up here and look at the back wall. If I don't see any light hit the wall, then we'll know that light can't come out. So maybe it's a black hole. But if light *does* come out..."

Tom tried to think about what he'd learned in eighth-grade physical science about black holes. The little he could remember was not encouraging. "Don't they destroy everything in reach?"

"Only if you get too close to the event horizon."

"Why can't *you* go down there, and *I'll* watch the wall?" It was a nasty thing to ask her, but she'd asked it first, of him.

"Because *I'm* the sitter. If I disappear, and Dr. Kurill comes home from the movies and finds you here, with her ten-year-old daughter, what's she going to think?"

"I wouldn't be here."

"No," Jessie said. "You'd have *been* here, according to Clara, and whoever else saw you coming up the road. Most of the neighbors, I presume?"

It was true. At least six doors on Cobble Court, Cobble Street, and Acacia Street had been shut in his face that day. This address was on his chart, as any of the Mission Coordinators back home could be forced to acknowledge.

"They'd come home and find just Clara and a Latter-Day Saint with a Y chromosome."

"People round here hate men?"

"No," Jessie said, "but we read the news. And we have our share of reporters."

"Those crazies on the ranches don't have anything to do with..."

"Well, *they* seem to think they do."

Tom dug in his pocket for his cell phone. "There is no way that there is a black hole in this house," he declared, "or under it. Now you open that door, or I'll call the police."

"Okay-you win." Jessie pulled the latch free and swung the door open. "Get out-if you really are afraid of a suspected dark basement."

Tom pushed past her and stepped outside the door. She started to close it. Behind her, something flew past; something that glowed yellow. Clara, he realized. The multicolored incandescence was a new coat of paint. A spot of light danced across the wall.

An image flashed across Tom's mind, one as old as light from a relatively distant star. Joseph, the dreamer of the Old Testament. The one after whom the American Joseph was so auspiciously named.

Tom stuck the phone in the sliver of open doorway as again Jessie slammed the door. The phone cracked and crunched. Tom didn't care. The Mission Fund would replace it. As Clara, standing on her toes, reached for the laundry room doorknob, and Jessie dashed toward her, Tom pushed the door open and tackled the child. She yowled like a drenched cat. The flashlight fell from her hands and bounced

across the floor. Jessie came to Tom's aid, wrestling Clara into a chair.

"No!" Clara screamed.

"Don't be silly!" Jessie replied, holding her down. "You want to be eaten by a monster? Pulled to tiny tiny pieces, and..."

"Sent back in time."

"In pieces," Jessie said.

"I want to go back in time. I *want* to see Tia Nita!"

"I know, Clara." Jessie held her tightly. "But you can't, really."

Clara frowned. "She's there! I *know*!"

"Clara," Tom said. "I believe you. Your Tia *is* there, in the past. But you can't get to her and feel it. You'd stop existing first."

"Except in the past," Clara said.

"Yes," Tom said. "But it's like Jessie said. You can't go there. You can't even see it."

"What about the future? Can Tia Nita see *me*?"

Tom thought about this. In those stones-as heavy, perhaps, as a hole in space-time, Smith had seen the future, had he not? "You mean, can she see you from... from awhile ago, through a..."

"Wormhole," Clara said. "Can she?"

Tom turned to Jessie.

"No," Jessie said. "A wormhole, if it exists, is at the end of a black hole, and nothing can escape a black hole, not even light to see by. You remember, we read that in the book."

Clara nodded, and Jessie sighed. Then, suddenly, Clara burst out of the chair, diving toward the forbidden door, and again, Tom caught her. Jessie grabbed Clara's hands and held tight. Clara screamed.

"Clara, listen. Do you want to watch the Discovery Channel?"

"I want to find *Tia Nita*! I want..."

Suddenly, Clara stopped screaming. From the other room, a voice emanated, calm, uninflected and electronic. Clara broke away from Jessie and Tom. She ran, not to the laundry room, but toward the sound. Jessie followed her, and Tom brought up the rear.

On the television, a great crowd of reporters surrounded a thin person in a wheelchair.

"Tia Nita." Clara said, in a whisper. The crowd gave the speaker some space, and Tom saw that it was a man. Tom looked to Jessie, and she pressed a finger to her lips. Some misunderstandings she deemed worthy of preservation. Then the image changed to a woman in a smart suit, walking across the weed-free lawn of some affluent-looking university. A man in a leather jacket—a semi-famous Hollywood actor whom Tom vaguely recognized from a space opera movie, trudged along beside her.

"This was a significant about-face for Professor Hawking and physics," the woman declared in an English accent that Tom associated with movie villains and Shakespeare. "Having considered Professor Preskill's evidence, Professor Hawking now concedes that black holes may indeed give up mass and energy that they've swallowed, and seem not to lead to tunnels to other worlds."

"So for now," asked the actor, an American, "time travel goes back to being impossible?"

"That's right," said the woman, as they strode out of sight, and credits began to fill the screen.

"Shit," Jessie said. "A hole *can* leak light."

"If the past's not in it," Clara asked, "then where is Tia Nita?"

Tom thought of the answer, instantly, in the words he had been taught to speak. Here was a person who wanted to hear those words. But he thought of the spiral of light in the basement, and his own fear of the open door and the abyss, which was not exactly the abyss of the Church's teachings, and yet not entirely dissimilar. To feign certainty in the face of such ambiguity had to be a sin.

"Ask Tom," Jessie said. "Where is she?"

"I don't know," Tom said. "I'm really sorry."

He turned sharply on his heel and headed for the front door. Clara was crying. Jessie, holding her, paid Tom no attention. He reached for the latch, but the door swung open, as if of its own accord, to the width of the golden chain.

"Jessie? Clara?" The voice was a woman's. Tom unlatched the door and it swung open. The woman was Dr. Kurill.

"We're in here," Jessie called out. Clara was still crying. Dr Kurill pursed her lips and glared at Tom.

"Who are *you*?" she asked.

Jessie appeared in the hallway, with Clara. "My friend Tom," Jessie said. "He was helping me with some questions. Homework."

Tom bolted out the front door, down the length of Cobble Court, round the corner onto Cobble Street, and past six houses till he came to the signpost where Cobble met Acacia. He realized that he'd left behind his list of addresses, his pamphlets, his bag, his book about the Lamanites from antique Judea, his smashed cell phone, the keys to the hostel-everything, practically, except for the wallet containing forty dollars and change in his pants pockets. The address of the hostel, in the folder from the Mission Coordinator, completely eluded his memory.

That, Tom decided, might be part of the inscrutable plan.

Contributor Biographies

Natalie L. Sin

Natalie L. Sin is a horror writer and avid coffee drinker, not necessarily in that order. Sin has appeared in ["Necrotic Tissue"](#), [Strange, Weird, and Wonderful](#), "The Monsters Next Door", ["Macabre Cadaver"](#), and ["Tales from the Moonlit Path"](#). Her dream is to have one of her stories inspire a Hong Kong movie. In the meantime, Sin continues to honor the source of her inspiration by making awful things happen there.

Angela Ambroz

Angela Ambroz lives and works in Suva, Fiji, as an environmental economist. She is Italian-Slovenian, educated in the US and UK. She has a personal interest in postcolonialism, diasporas and, of course, science fiction.

Heather Parker

Until recently, Heather Parker worked for the University of Cumbria, but now writes semi-professionally. She has won prizes in several UK competitions and many of her stories have been published in popular British magazines. One has appeared in a new book of mystery stories in the USA and her fantasy novel will be published in October by Drollerie Press.

Jason Heller

Jason Heller has been writing sporadically since his epic poem about alligators appeared in [Humpty Dumpty's Magazine](#) when he was 8. His speculative fiction and poetry has been published or is forthcoming in [Apex Magazine](#), [Pear Noir!](#), and [Kaleidotrope](#). He's currently a writer and editor for The Onion A.V. Club and makes noise in a punk band called The Fire Drills. They do the worst Cheap Trick cover you've ever heard. Find him at www.puzzledpanther.blogspot.com.

Rebecca Nesvet

Rebecca Nesvet earned the MFA in Dramatic Writing from New York University in 2008. Her scripts have been internationally produced and stage-read, and won several awards, including First Place in the Arch and Bruce Brown Foundation competition, First Place in the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's Playworks Competition, Second Place in Sonoma County Rep's, Nominations for Best Original Writing and Best Overall Production in the Desert Theatre League (California's) Desert Star Awards, Finalist status in the Magic Theatre's Sloan Foundation-funded science plays competition, and, at NYU, a \$10,000 Sloan Writing Grant (for science-themed feature screenplays) and the departmental Chair's Award.

Her poetry is published in the British magazines *Haiky Quarterly* and *Avocado*, and she has taught Creative Writing as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire in England for two years.