



speculative fiction **FOR THE REST OF US**

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**Table of Contents**

One Too Many by Natalie L. Sin.....	1
Late Night Caller by Gayla Chaney.....	6
Memories of My Sister by Aliette de Bodard.....	11
Brolga Dreaming by Deborah McDonnell.....	20
Contributor Biographies.....	28
Natalie L. Sin.....	28
Gayla Chaney.....	28
Aliette de Bodard.....	28
Deborah McDonnell.....	28

**One Too Many by Natalie L. Sin**

Woon woke up with a nasty backache. The reason became apparent when he tried to sit up, only to fall off the carousel horse he had impossibly been sleeping on. Then again all things were possible with enough alcohol. He couldn't remember leaving the party, much less sneaking into the amusement park. A quick look around told him it was the Shijingshan Amusement park: Beijing's answer to Disney Land.

Unfortunately, Disney noticed and sued a few years back. Woon forgot how the matter was resolved. Personally, he never understood what the big deal was. Amusement parks all pretty much looked the same anyway.

He had been to Shijingshan a couple times when he was much younger, usually on trips to the mainland to visit his grandmother in Beijing. Admission was free for senior citizens, making it one of the few indulgences his grandmother could provide. The thought of asking her daughter, Woon's mother, for money always gave her indigestion. Not that it stopped his mother from trying to force money on her. Even as a kid, he knew there was nothing friendly about it.

It occurred to Woon that those trips with his grandmother were probably the motivation for his drunken sojourn: That summer would mark the first year since she had died. No doubt being in Beijing had stirred up all kinds of nostalgia, an emotion that would have only been exaggerated by the drinking. Woon grabbed the rump of the horse to pull himself up only to jerk his hand away. He could have sworn he felt real hair on the tail, but a closer look indicated only an overactive imagination.

“Fuck,” he proclaimed to no horse in particular. “How much did I drink?”

It wasn't unusual for him to drink to excess. He was still young and healthy, after all. Responsible habits could wait right along with settling down and providing grandchildren for his overly interested mother. She already had plenty, Woon had three older sisters, but as the last bearer of the family name there was a lot of pressure on Woon's seed.

He peered over the edge, impressed that he had made it all the way to the second tier of the carousel. It provided a great view of one of the park's five roller coasters. The name escaped him, but Woon was pretty sure it was the kind where the seats were suspended from the tracks overhead. He remembered how his grandmother always tried to talk him out of getting on those kinds of rides.

“Too fast,” she would tell him earnestly. “You go up there, you die from broken neck!”

The fact that scores of visitors took the ride and got off with spinal cords intact didn't faze her. The way his grandmother's logic went, someone she loved was infinitely more likely to die in a freak accident than some stranger. Because of this, Woon had taken a lot of rides on the carousel as a kid. Just never on the second level: He could fall over the edge, crack his skull. Life was full of peril. Truth be told, Woon had never felt more loved in his life.

On his way to the stairs, Woon noticed a bottle of rum resting against the hoof of a perpetually prancing horse. Apparently he hadn't been traveling alone. Woon picked up the bottle and smiled to see that it was over half full. He unscrewed the cap and took a long swig.

“Well my friend, I think it's time to go.”

Rum firmly in hand, Woon carefully made his way down the stairs separating the carousel's two levels. He still didn't feel completely sober, nor did he intend to stay that way. The park was miles from the club and Woon knew he would get lost if he tried to find his way back. Better to find someplace to sleep it off. He could stay hidden until the park opened and then blend in with the crowd. If any of his friends asked what happened to him, he would lie and say he went home with a woman.

Since he would be spending the night anyway, Woon took his time looking for a place to sleep. The park was a queer place at night: Unnaturally silent and lonely. It felt like being the last person on earth, if earth was paved with cobbled streets flanked by houses shaped like ice-cream cones and thickly frosted cupcakes. It would all be charming when the sun was out. For now it was several shades of wrong, like an overprotective mother exploded. Everything was too forcefully cute: a contrived celebration of eternal childhood.

Woon was down to the last few inches of the bottle when he came across the worm. The mascot for the Worm Ride, the dazzling green invertebrate greeted everyone too short to get on the real roller coasters. A ticket window winked dully between the worm's widely spaced, over sized teeth. It was grinning widely, it's eyes closed from the force of it and cheeks ready to pop. The worm was either absurdly happy or suffering a stroke.

“Excuse me mister,” Woon asked with exaggerated politeness. “Do you know where I can get something to eat?”

The worm gave a shoulder-less shrug.

“Having never eaten, I couldn’t say.”

Woon was about to scream when his brain helpfully suggested that he must have been drugged. It would explain the complete blackout, not to mention the weird feeling hanging over him ever since hallucinating the horse’s tail. A talking worm was just icing on the cake.

The worm’s black ball of a nose wiggled and its faded white eyelids peeled back to reveal warm brown eyes.

“Do you mind if I have a sip?” it asked shyly.

Woon decided to roll with whatever fantasy the drugs had tricked his brain into believing. Whatever he had been slipped, he didn’t want it to turn into a bad trip.

“I thought you didn’t eat?”

“No one ever offers me anything. They don’t give me anything to drink, either.” The worm sighed. “It’s not that I need it, but it would still be nice, you know?”

Woon walked up to the worm and offered the bottle. He wasn’t sure where to put it. The worm didn’t have arms.

“Just put it into my mouth.”

Woon saw that the window to the booth was gone, replaced by the illusion of a mouth. He stuck the bottle between the worm’s lips and waited to hear it crash to the ground. Instead, the worm clamped down firmly and tilted its head back. After taking several generous gulps, it brought its head back and gestured for Woon to reclaim the bottle.

“Thank you,” the worm said. “The last time I had anything to drink was when someone spilled juice on me. Most of it got on my skin and attracted ants. It was very tickly.”

“Oh.”

Woon wasn’t sure what else to say. The worm sounded so genuine and Woon usually didn’t have much of an imagination. Of course he had never taken a hallucinogen before.

“Do you have a name?” the worm inquired.

“Leung Tak-Woon. You can call me Woon, if you want.”

“That’s a nice name,” the worm complimented. “No one ever gives me a name, they just call me worm.”

Real or not, Woon was starting to feel bad for the worm. He wondered if this was all a reflection of latent poor self-esteem that his brain had buried.

“Can’t you name yourself?”

The worm shook his head. “That seems like cheating. How did you get your name?”

“My parents.”

Woon immediately felt like an ass for bringing them up. Giant fiberglass worms probably didn’t have parents.

“So you have to be born? Too bad.” The worm visibly sagged.

“Tell you what,” Woon offered. “I’ll share my name with you.”

“Oh I couldn’t, it’s too much!”

Woon waved away the worm’s protests. “It’s fine. I’m not the only Woon in Hong Kong, anyway.”

“Well thank you, brother Woon.”

The worm bowed. Not knowing what else to do, Woon bowed back.

“You’re a nice person Woon, and I enjoy talking to you. But you really should get going. It’s too dangerous to sleep in the park.”

“You sound like my grandmother.”

“Then she’s smart. You don’t understand Woon, things happen at night. Not everything in the park accepts its purpose.”

Woon could only stare blankly back, which the worm took as a cue to explain.

“Sometimes when enough people believe you’re real, you start to believe it yourself. That’s how I happened, and I’m not the only one. My purpose is to make people want to ride the roller coaster, and I accept that.”

Things were getting too weird for Woon. A talking worm was fun at first, but enough was enough. Woon had never wanted to be sober so much in his life.

“I guess I’ll get going.”

“Good. Go straight out and don’t slow down for anything. If the others find you, you won’t make it out alive.”

The worm’s eyes were wide and worried.

“They blame the humans for their suffering. Please Woon, don’t let them see you.”

“All right.” Woon humored his new imaginary friend. “I’ll be really careful.”

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Woon decided to listen to the worm, just at his own pace. In his condition, it didn’t seem wise to be racing around. If possible, he wanted to wear out the drug before he got out of the park. He was back on the cupcake road when he started to hear things. At first it was an almost inaudible rustling, like early autumn leaves. When it grew to a heavy shuffling, Woon started to look over his shoulder. He wondered what kind of animal was following him and if it was big enough to constitute a threat. It could be a stray dog, like the ones back where he grew up. In general they were harmless, but Woon had heard of people coming across dogs that were diseased or insane from malnutrition.

A sharp snorting caught Woon’s attention. It was coming from behind a concession stand and didn’t seem like a sound any dog would make. Woon gripped the neck of the bottle tightly, thinking he could smash it and use the jagged end as a weapon if he was attacked. He found himself thinking back to what the worm said, and immediately hated himself for being a baby. The worm was pretend, after all, meaning that whatever it said came from Woon’s own head. In essence, he was scaring himself. The best thing to do keep walking out of the park and see if he could get a taxi this late at night.

When something round and short shuffled out from behind the concession stand, Woon knew that he was still tripping balls: One of the cars from the elephant ride was out for a stroll. As it got closer,

Woon's stomach clenched. Fashioned to look like baby elephants, the Elephant Ride carts were supposed to be pink, yellow, or blue, all of them pleasingly plump. The one in front of Woon was a swollen and diseased, its skin a patchwork of bruises and scabs in varying stages of healing. There was an open wound in its stomach from where a metal beam would normally attach the cart to the rest of the ride. It stretched with each step the elephant took, releasing a growing mixture of intestines and wads of fat that dragged along the ground.

Woon wanted to run but thought better of it. Whatever the elephant was might be encouraged if he fled. Woon didn't want some stray dog biting him on the ass. It would be better to go slowly and hope that it lost interest.

"Now," he whispered to himself.

He turned away, careful to not make any sudden movements, and found himself facing three more rotting elephants. Beyond them, he could see several more by the Ferris wheel trudging along to join their siblings. Every so often one would stop and emit a pathetic squeaking sound from its trunk.

"Stop it," Woon commanded his pounding heart. "They aren't real. I could walk through them if I wanted to."

He had no intention of testing that theory. Instead, he decided to take the path of least resistance and walk around the single elephant behind him. None of them were moving very fast, which made Woon optimistic.

The elephant's eyes followed him as he walked past. Out of the corner of his eye, Woon saw the elephant leer at him, its mouth twisted to reveal a seeping black maw scattered with spiked teeth. Before he knew what was happening, the trunk flashed out and wrapped around his waist. It whipped Woon around viciously before hurling him down onto road. As he gasped for air the elephant loomed overhead, one foot raised over Woon's face. Remembering his earlier strategy, Woon smashed the bottle and slashed desperately until he felt the glass snag flesh. The elephant shrieked and stumbled back, giving Woon time to get up and run.

The sound of thundering feet and nasal howling told him that the elephants were done strolling. Within seconds another trunk caught him by the foot. Luckily he was able to twist his leg away and the beast was left with only a shoe. It was harder to run after that, but Woon didn't dare stop to discard the other sneaker. Either way, he was too slow. A broad head smashed him in the back and Woon went flying. He hit the ground shoulder first and felt the skin rip away as he skidded against the stones. He turned onto his back and saw that there were at least ten of them now. The elephant's eyes were sickly yellow and gleaming as their trunks writhed in the air like epileptic snakes.

It was real. The worm was right and had tried to warn him, but what sane person would have believed their eyes or ears? Even if he had never touched a drink in his life, Woon would have only assumed he was going mad. As the monsters advanced, he wondered if they would leave enough of him for someone to find. He supposed it didn't matter, dead was dead. At least his grandmother would be waiting for him on the other side.

The elephants were touching him now, their cold trunks poking and winding about his flesh. They left wet smears wherever they touched and Woon felt bile press at the back of his throat. The ground rumbled beneath him and he nearly wept.

"Just kill me!" he screamed at them. "You want to share me with your fucking friends?"

The elephants backed away and reared on their legs. They were going to smash him to pulp, or else tear

him apart like chunks of meat. Instead, they started to run in frantic circles. A few bumped into each other and fell to the ground where they writhed like engorged ticks. Suddenly the ground exploded and Woon tumbled backwards. There was one last fleeting glimpse of sky before his head hit something hard. A sharp crack lanced his brain, then there was nothing.

#

“What are you doing in there?”

The voice was shrill and annoyed, worse than any alarm clock. Woon opened his eyes and squinted at the sunlight filtering in behind the head peering down at him through a tiny window.

“Lousy drunk, get out of the worm! Don’t make me drag you out!”

Woon rose to his feet on shaky legs. The old man scowled at him through the ticket window. Woon saw that he was wearing a brightly colored shirt proclaiming “Come Ride the Worm!” in gold letters.

“How do I get out?” Woon asked.

He was eager to end the interaction. Waking up in a strange place with a hangover was disconcerting. What the hell was he doing in an amusement park?

The man frowned. “Are you still drunk? The door is right there.” He disappeared from the window, followed by a dismayed shout.

“How did you get the padlock back on the door from inside?” he demanded. “Your friends put you in here?”

Woon decided it was as good a story as any.

The man cursed and spat on the ground. “Some friends. Did you make them mad or something?”

Woon concurred. The man muttered angrily.

“Come on, I need to get the ride ready.” He unlocked the door and hurried Woon out. “You tell your friends that they must respect private property. Next time, I call the police and get you all arrested.”

“I’ll tell them.”

Woon looked down and saw he was minus a shoe. He debated whether to look for it at the park’s lost and found, but decided if anyone found it they would have probably thrown it away.

“Shit! Someone cracked the worm!”

Woon turned around and saw the front left tooth of the ticket booth was split nearly in two. For some reason, it made him incredibly sad. Off in the distance, the music for the elephant ride started. Woon heard it and felt as if something cold and slimy had run its hand up his spine. Ignoring the pain in his foot, he hurried out of the park. He wanted to be far away when he remembered what he was so afraid of.

## **Late Night Caller by Gayla Chaney**

The phone rings once, twice, three times. I roll over to check the red glow from the digital clock on my nightstand. It reads: Three A.M. Lifting the receiver from its cradle and without waiting for the late

night caller to reveal her identity I mumble, “Pamela? Is that you?”

“Yes. It’s me,” Pamela answers quickly.

It’s late, even for Pamela, and my voice conveys my annoyance. “If you are calling me at three in the morning, you better be in a desperate situation or—”

“I’m okay,” is her response. “But I need you to do me a favor.”

I sigh heavily into the phone while expecting to be asked to please come pick her up from the parking lot of some club or apartment complex where she went to party and now can’t remember where she parked her car, or where she left her keys.

Pamela has burned her bridges with most of our other friends. They either hang up or tell her to call a taxi. But I can’t do that. She was there for me when my husband took off with our dental hygienist, and because of that, I am willing to listen when she calls. Usually, she just needs transportation. However, this is not her request tonight.

“Beth, there’s this guy in a neon blue suit,” she begins, “and he’s standing in my yard outside my bedroom window.”

“What?” I am suddenly wide awake. “Have you called the police?”

“No, no. You don’t understand. He’s not going to hurt me,” Pamela starts, but I quickly interrupt.

“Are you crazy?” The panic is evident in my voice. “Grab something to use as a weapon while I call the police on my cell phone.” My heart is pounding. “I’ll stay on the line with you.”

I tightly grip the cordless phone in my hand as though my strength could travel through our transmission and offer my friend some real support as I try to think where I left my purse with my cell phone in it.

Pamela ignores my concern as she speaks in an unruffled, instructive tone. “Look out your window, Beth. There’s supposed to be another man waiting there for you.” Her voice is as calm as though she were reading a recipe aloud.

“What man?” I shriek as I duck down below the window sill. Carefully, I part my curtains to peer out into my yard.

“Is he there?” Pamela asks.

Sure enough, there is a man standing there. “Yes,” I whisper. I can’t make out his eyes; still, I can feel him staring at me. Instinctively, I avoid focusing on his face. I fear his eyes might lock onto mine. It is an irrational fear, but it is strong enough to keep my gaze on his torso.

“Is he wearing a blue suit, too?”

It is not a suit-and-tie getup, which is what I thought Pamela meant. It is more like a scuba suit, snug fitting, including the head, outlining the basic structure of a man.

“He’s in some sort of suit, but it’s so dark I can’t see the color.” As I say that, though, I make out a slight glimmer from the being in my yard. His suit appears to pulsate, and it is, in fact, a luminescent blue.

“That’s exactly what he told me. He said, ‘Call your friend and she will confirm that I am telling you the truth.’ He explained that since I trusted you, he would send a testimonial to your yard, one that looked just like him.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask while sliding down beneath my window, groping all around me in the dark for my purse.

“He is speaking through the window to me. Beth, this guy is incredible. He knows me. It’s like he is the man I’ve been looking for all my life, and finally, he shows up right outside my window.”

“Pamela, listen to me,” I interject as forcefully as I can, but to no avail. Pamela carries on as though she doesn’t hear me at all.

“I think he is using telepathy or something,” she speaks softly into the receiver, “but he assures me that I have nothing to fear. I believe him. He just wants to be my friend, not like all the jerks in this town. Interlopers, that’s his word for the clowns around here. He’s different from them. He’s trustworthy, I can tell.”

Pamela’s naiveté has always astounded me and never more so than now as she continues describing her visitor. “He promised that confirmation was waiting in your yard. He wasn’t lying to me, was he?”

“We must call the police,” I whisper. I don’t dare turn on the lights for fear of being seen by the blue man in my yard. Instead, I crawl across the carpet until my fingers make contact with the strap of my leather bag. Feverishly, I pull it to me, unzip it, and grab my cell phone. “I’m dialing 911 right now on my cell,” I tell Pamela.

Pamela’s voice seems to drift off as she murmurs, “Don’t bother them about this. He merely wants me to come outside so he can show me something.” I hear her phone drop to the floor.

“Pamela!” I scream. “Don’t go!” I listen, but she doesn’t respond. Pulling back the curtain panels, I peer out into my yard only to discover that my blue stranger has disappeared. I punch 911 on my cell phone while holding the land line to my other ear, listening desperately for Pamela to return.

When the 911 operator answers, I blurt out, “My friend Pamela Freeman needs a police officer right away. She lives on Concord Circle. I don’t know the exact address, but it’s the third house from the corner, on the south side of the street, the one with the crape myrtles in the front yard. Please hurry. There’s a man in her yard in a glowing, blue suit, and he told her to come outside, and she dropped the phone and—” I begin to sob.

The operator asks for my name and address. I suspect she thinks I am lying or drunk or crazy. Her tone only increases my anxiety. My voice trembles as I say, “I’m Beth Weissman. I live at 1703 Westlake Drive, and I need a police officer, too. There was a man in my yard, but he left. But he might still be out there, only...not where I can see him.” I part the curtains again and survey my yard.

“Miss Weissman, there was a man in your yard and in your friend’s yard?”

“Yes!” I practically screech in reply. “My friend’s in danger. Please believe me. Tell the officers to hurry. That guy may be a psychopath or a hypnotist. I mean, he’s blue, and he’s talking to her in her mind, somehow.”

I know I am sounding insane, but I can’t seem to stop myself from blathering. “Telepathy. That’s what she said, or I think that’s what she said. Something like that, anyway. I can’t believe this has happened! Are the police on there way yet?” I am too terrified to get angry at the operator’s somewhat cynical response. Instead, I beg her to stay on the line until the police officers can get to my house.

Pamela’s door is standing wide open when the police officers arrive on the scene. There is no sign of forced entry and no sign of Pamela either. Someone picks up the phone and I am still on the line listening. With a phone in each of my hands, I hear police personnel on both lines talking to me

simultaneously.

When the dispatcher confirms that a police cruiser is now in my driveway, I hang up and rush to my front door. There I find two, uniformed police officers standing on my porch. The sight of them causes me to break into grateful tears as I begin sputtering details about glowing, blue-clad men mysteriously appearing and then disappearing, taking my friend with them at three in the morning.

I catch the glances between the officers. “I know this sounds strange, but I’m not making it up. My friend may have been abducted. She needs somebody to search for her. Don’t you have some dogs or something? Oh, stop looking at me like that. Just do something, please!” I jabber on hysterically, acutely aware that these officers, my rescuers, are viewing me warily while I helplessly plead with them to search for my friend.

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It has been three weeks since Pamela’s disappearance and still, no leads. The police conducted a series of interviews with all those who knew Pamela. Their inquiries produced an unflattering profile of a single woman with a few too many unsavory acquaintances from the clubs she frequented. The list of suspects is long.

“Possible foul play,” is their favorite response to any inquiry about the Pamela Freeman case. They discount my story of another man appearing in my yard at the same time Pamela called me to describe the man in her yard, both wearing blue, glowing suits. They suggest I had an episode of hysterical vision, something like hysterical blindness, they explain, only the opposite. I am inclined to think they made that term up.

“Why don’t you just follow up on my lead instead of attributing it to psychosis?” I inquire angrily of the detectives assigned to the case. “Costume shops, party apparel merchants, or some such business would surely have a record of two blue, electrical suits being rented. Or if not, then at least, they might know where a person could possibly purchase such items.”

The lead detective, one Lyle Meriwether, a sixteen-year veteran of the force who doesn’t appreciate being told how to do his job, smirks at my suggestion. “Nobody has ever heard of glowing, blue suits around here, and frankly, I am a little skeptical about your account, Miss Weissman. Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he pauses and smiles, giving me ample time to take it “the wrong way” before he resumes. “Sometimes, eye witnesses confuse details, mixing up the facts, because of the urgency of the situation. Your friend calls and tells you there is a man in her yard. Then, you see a man in your yard. Your friend claims she sees a blue suit and suddenly, your yardman is in a blue suit, too.”

“He wasn’t my yardman.” I hiss.

“Look, Miss Weissman. You believe you saw little blue men, and we believe you might have been mistaken.”

Though I know it is the wrong thing to do, I react defensively. “I never said they were ‘little’ and I never said they were ‘blue.’ I said they wore blue clothing. There is a difference, one that an astute police officer would have noted.” I glare at Meriwether, and he sighs heavily in response.

“Thank you for all your help, Miss Weissman. We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.” He stands and opens his office door for me. I have officially been dismissed. I believe I hear the word, “fruitcake,” as the door closes behind me, but then again, it could just be my mind playing tricks. Apparently, that is the consensus of what has been happening to me lately.

It is obvious that I will never be believed. The very thing, the glowing blue suit appearing first on the man in Pamela's yard and then, on the man in my yard, convincing Pamela that her late night caller was trustworthy, has now convinced the police that I am nuts. It seems diabolically clever to me. It also seems incredibly sad. My friend is gone, and all I hear the police do is insinuate that I am an unreliable witness, and that Pamela is somehow responsible, at least in part, for her own disappearance due to being "a female engaged in high risk behaviors." Their words, not mine.

I've consulted the Internet and a few costume shops since Pamela's disappearance. Not that I really expected to find blue suits that lit up in the dark and glowed in a pulsating rhythm similar to the one I reported seeing outside my window. I didn't actually expect to find anything like that at all. But I wanted to make sure that the next time I spoke with Detective Meriwether, he would know I was still on the case. If he has the slightest bit of a competitive nature, and I'm sure with his ego, he does, then my persistence should inspire him. He might expand his investigation to include the possibility that there is more to the disappearance of my friend than the run-of-the-mill pervert following her home from some sleazy bar.

I keep repeating the story of Pamela's abduction. Detective Meriwether claims that I am trying to frighten people. He suggests that I am craving attention at the expense of a serious investigation. I've been labeled Wacky Weissman by some, and Miss Blue-Clue by others, but I refuse to be intimidated into silence. It's possible that Pamela is still out there somewhere. Maybe she has amnesia or is being held captive by lunatics. So, I post flyers to keep her face before the public. Yet even as I continue my crusade, I fear her unusual abductors may not have left any clues behind.

Yesterday, I was contacted by a newspaper reporter to respond to Meriwether's dismissive remarks regarding my account of the man in blue standing in Pamela's yard the night she disappeared. I countered with, "I've personally called every costume shop in three counties to check on the availability of neon blue costumes. I'm also looking into alien abduction organizations. I've contacted MUFON. That's the Mutual UFO Network," I explained, before concluding with my familiar, accusatory question: "What's Detective Meriwether and his band of merry men done to follow up on the only lead they have?"

That didn't set well with him or the police department. They were the first men in blue, and I guess they don't want any competition. "Unsubstantiated" is a term they toss around about my version of events. "Extraordinary," is another label they attach to my account, though they say it mockingly.

If anything were to happen to me, the police would label me an overwrought, hysterical female, and most likely, that would be explanation enough not to pursue my case with much more gusto than they have shown in Pamela's disappearance. It's both frustrating and frightening. I'm considering having an alarm system installed. I recently purchased a snubnose .38 which rests in a holster slung over the headboard of my bed. I fully understand that I am my own first line of defense.

Whoever showed up that night in Pamela's yard actually claimed two victims: Pamela and me. Though I still live in my same house, in the same town, nothing is the same. Pamela was just the first of my friends to disappear. My other friends have begun disappearing, too, though not from the planet, just from my presence. They must be embarrassed to be considered an acquaintance of someone who insists that she saw what she saw.

I resent their desertion, and I have, on occasion, retaliated with hostility. "Fickle friends are worse than blow flies!" I hollered recently when I noticed two former pals turn to avoid me in the grocery store. I suppose that remark got quoted a few times, which probably hasn't helped my popularity much.

The unknown that never disturbed my sleep before Pamela disappeared, now wakes me frequently. Beyond the usual rapists, murderers, thugs, and psychopaths of our world, do others lurk in a realm just outside our boundaries? Do they occasionally rend the veil and snatch a specimen from our midst? How do they select their prey? Questions like these have begun to trouble me when my room overflows with the stillness of late night.

In my bed with the lights out, I contemplate law enforcement lingo such as, “missing persons,” “foul play,” “cold case,” and “police procedures.” I figure Pamela is as much a victim of cop jargon as she is of the other men in blue. Perhaps, wherever she went isn’t so bad. Maybe she could come back if she wanted to, but she just doesn’t want to. Why couldn’t that be a possibility?

I wish she would contact me and let me know she is okay. If she is staying voluntarily with her abductor, I wouldn’t even report it to Meriwether. I’d be so relieved if “foul play” could be scratched off the list of potential scenarios that I’d actually cheer for alien abduction or amnesia or running away. “Where are you, Pamela? Can you, please, let me know if you are okay?” I sort of mumble this request aloud, repeatedly, like a prayer or a mantra. And when I cease my request, I listen with an absorbing anticipation, waiting in the dark for the phone to ring.

## **Memories of My Sister by Alette de Bodard**

I was baking flatbreads on the hearthstone when I saw my sister walk out of the forest.

I paused, disbelieving. She had left us, many years ago, to become a hermit. She had abandoned both my husband Nayan and me, and we had never heard from her afterwards. We had thought her safely ensconced within the forest, weathering monsoon after monsoon in some crude hut, serenely meditating on the gods of the Triad. And now she was walking towards me, as if she still belonged in my house.

She had changed. Her hair was white, her face gaunt and pinched, as if she had not eaten for moons. She wore rough, blackened clothes of bark, nothing like the red cotton sari she had put on before entering the forest.

I had half-risen, my hands still covered in spiced dough; she saw me. “Isalaya?” she asked, and swayed.

“Menmathe,” I said, and was there to catch her as she fell.

#

I carried her inside; she weighed little, as little as fallen leaves, as the wind through the canopy. She was no longer the elder sister I remembered, who had been carrying herself with a quiet certainty that filled her whole being. The forest had aged her, hardened her and thinned her so much I feared I was not carrying a live person, but the husk of one. Her hair had been black when she had left us; now it was as white as milk.

What have you seen, sister? What made you come back here?

Her eyes opened, focused on me. “Where—?” she asked. She looked at me, at the four mud walls making up the house, and the image of the Protector engraved over the hearth.

“You’re home,” I said, quietly.

She took a deep breath. “No,” she said. “I don’t know you.”

“You called my name. Before you fell. I’m your sister.”

“I—” She was obviously trying to focus on what had happened, and obviously failing. Tears filled her eyes. “I don’t remember,” she said, over and over, like a hurt child. “I don’t remember anything.”

I had not forgotten what she had done: her betrothal to Nayen, broken without thought of what it would do to him, the casual way she had abandoned both of us, sure that we could fill the hole she had left. But still, at seeing her so vulnerable, my heart twisted in my chest. “Ssh.” I put my arms around her, rocking her until she stopped crying. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll find some help.”

Nayen, who was now my husband, was working the communal fields, as he did every day. So I put on my shawl, and went instead to the nearby temple, to get Lanari, the village’s priestess of the Destroyer.

The temple stood a little away from the village, not far from our own house. Its facade was the highest and most colourful of the village: its builders had painted images from the legends on the white-washed wall and on the door of sandalwood.

I left my shoes on the porch, before an image of the Destroyer—for one can only go barefoot in the presence of the gods—and entered the temple. The inside was filled with incense smoke; no doubt Lanari had lit the sticks recently. After the clean air of outside, the stifling smell made me feel dizzy.

Lanari herself was laying coconut oil on the altar, muttering prayers to the Destroyer, who had swallowed the poison in the primal ocean and saved all of creation. She looked up, saw me.

I explained to her, in a confused manner, what had happened. She frowned, and closed her palm-leaf book of prayers. “I’ll come,” she said.

#

Menmathe looked at Lanari curiously when she entered, but showed no sign of recognition. Lanari’s face, serene, ethereal, showed nothing of what she felt. She merely took Menmathe’s pulse, asked a few questions—questions which soon faltered when it became clear my sister had lost her memory.

Afterwards, she spoke to me outside, out of earshot of Menmathe.

“She is—different,” she said. I knew she remembered the composed girl who had decided, one day, that she would serve the three gods by dedicating her life to them. Menmathe had walked into the forest without asking anyone’s advice. Not even mine.

“Changed,” I said. “What is wrong with her?”

“I don’t know. Her pulse is very weak, and I don’t like the way her skin feels. She’s on the edge of a fever.”

“A sickness?”

Lanari shook her head. “Look at her. She is still young, and yet her hair is white. She has clearly received the Gift of the gods. She shouldn’t be sick, but should have the power to dispel any sickness. She should be wreathed in glory, so to speak.” Her voice was bitter; Lanari had never found the courage to leave the village and seek out the visions of the gods. “And most of all, she shouldn’t have lost her memories.”

“So?”

She refused to meet my gaze. “You live on the edge of the village, Isalaya. You know better than me what prowls the forest, and what can come out of it.”

I did not speak for a while. “Rakshasas,” I said. Demons who consumed human flesh, and took the shape of their victims. “How likely is it?”

“It might be. But I don’t think so. Hermits, especially Gifted ones, know how to ward against demons. Besides, rakshasas cannot abide the light of the sun, but daylight doesn’t seem to bother your sister.”

“But you’re telling me all the same.”

“I am warning you,” she said. “Just in case. But I think that something went wrong when she received the Gift of the gods. That it burnt everything out of her. It will take her time to recover.”

I looked at the first trees of the forest, with their shimmering shadows. Time to recover. Time in my house, seeing Nayen every day. Time to remember she had once been betrothed to him. I did not want that. But what other choice did I have? I could not turn my back on her in her moment of need; or I would have been no better than her, who had abandoned us for the forest, years ago. I could not cast her out.

#

Nayen came home later that evening. He moved slowly, stiffly: tilling the communal fields under the sun always exhausted him. I had brewed some cardamom tea, for I knew his throat would be parched. Had this been an ordinary evening, I would have waited for him inside, where there were fewer mosquitoes. But I had to warn him.

So I stood on the threshold, a vague smell of cardamom in my nostrils. Nayen stopped when he reached me, and looked into my eyes. He had always known how to read me. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“She’s come back,” I said.

He had no idea who I was talking about. I was glad, selfishly so, that he had forgotten Menmathe and his previous betrothal to her. I was glad that she no longer had any hold over him. How childish of me. How foolish.

I led Nayen inside, to the mat where she was sleeping. He stood, silently watching her, and I saw pity fill his eyes. “Menmathe,” he whispered.

I did not speak. She had no right to be there, no right at all. She had shattered enough when she had walked away from us, leaving Nayen behind without a second thought, and me in the middle, holding everything in place.

“How—?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Lanari came, and did not know either. She said perhaps something went wrong in the forest.” I did not say anything about her warning.

“I see.”

I served the tea; he drank it, speaking only briefly of the work of the fields. Later, we ate cardamom rice and coconut, and I laid aside a serving for Menmathe. Throughout the evening Nayen kept glancing at my sister, waiting for her to wake up and speak. I said nothing, but something in my chest twisted each time he looked away from me.

At length Menmathe opened her eyes, stared at both of us. “Isalaya,” she said.

“This is Nayen,” I told her. “My husband.” I knew what I was doing: staking out my claim to him before she had a chance to remember him. I could not prevent myself.

“You don’t remember anything?” Nayen asked, gently.

She shook her head. “No. I—I was in the forest, looking for the Gift of the gods. I dreamt—I dreamt that they spoke to me.”

“They do that,” Nayen said. He knelt by her side, looked her in the eye. “We’ll take care of you, never fear.”

Later, as we lay on our mats, listening to Menmathe’s even breath, he said, “I didn’t think she would come back.” His voice was shaking.

I was silent for a while, staring at the stars through the open door, at the moon, the eye of the gods on this world. Mosquitoes sang in my ears, an endless reproach. “Nor did I. But you saw her. Her mind is a child’s.”

“Are you afraid you won’t be able to deal with that?”

Nayen was a kind man, a strong and gentle soul, one who had always known where my weaknesses lay. And for that last, too, I loved him. “I am afraid,” I said, “that we will find we haven’t grown since she left us. That nothing has been forgiven or left behind.”

“You’re my wife.” Nayen stroked the base of my neck, tenderly. My skin quivered under his touch. “Nothing else matters.”

“And she was your betrothed. Have you forgotten?”

“I forget nothing.” I could not see his eyes in the dark. “I promise you she won’t come between us.”

“No,” I said, at last, blinking away tears. “She’s done enough damage.”

#

I took care of Menmathe as I took care of the other household tasks. In between washing laundry, baking flatbreads and grinding spices, I spoke to her of the past, of the way we had played together near the river’s edge, back when we were young children. I shied away from the later years, the ones when she had grown distant and moody, searching for her place in the world. The days when she broke away from us.

But, even without memories, she was still sharp enough. “How did you meet Nayen?” she asked me, one day.

I had been preparing rice in a mortar: with each descent of the pestle, husks would break, leaving only the white grain we would eat. Now I stopped, looked at her. My hands were shaking. I pondered over whether to give her a lie. But I could not. “He was your betrothed.”

Her eyes rested on me, expressionless. “And I abandoned him when I entered the forest?”

You broke him. You tossed him like a toy you no longer had need of. What was he, after all, compared to the gods of the Triad, the gods you suddenly decided to serve?

I could not tell her that. I could not hurt her when she was at her most vulnerable. So I said nothing.

“I see. I am sorry,” she said, and there was no emotion in her voice.

“Don’t be,” I said, and then had to stop, for Nayen had entered the house. I rose to greet him, still

smelling of rice.

“Isalaya.” He kissed me, making me whole, as he always did.

“Is she better?” he asked, after we were finished.

“The same.” He moved away, motioned for me to follow. “If she bothers you—”

“I am her sister. Who else would take care of her? Our parents are both dead, and we have no other relatives.”

“I know,” Nayen said, gently. “But you talk of nothing but duty, Isalaya.”

“What more do you want from me?”

He was looking at Menmathe, and did not speak for a while. “Something to remind her that she is among family.”

“Then you see to it,” I snapped. “She tore our houses when she left. You ask for too much.”

“I ask for forgiveness,” Nayen said. “As you said, she is like a child. She doesn’t remember.”

No, she did not remember. I could not even confront her with the past, no matter how dearly I wished for her to realise what she had done, what she had wrecked with her arrogance.

I moved away from Nayen, said, “I have to see to the laundry.”

The laundry was wet and heavy; I struck it, again and again, against the flat stones at the river’s edge, seeing, again and again, Menmathe’s serene, confident gaze as she broke her betrothal to Nayen. Her look as she entered the forest one moon later, unaware of what she left in her wake. Curse you, I thought. Why did you have to come back?

When I returned, Nayen was kneeling by Menmathe’s side, speaking to her, earnestly. Two empty bowls lay on the ground; the air smelled faintly of cardamom tea. Menmathe was smiling like a young girl.

I turned away, struck by an unjustified pang of jealousy. Of course Nayen loved me. How could I doubt him? How could I condemn him?

But, as the days passed, and Nayen spent more and more time with Menmathe, neglecting the work of the fields, my worries deepened. He was always with her, sometimes holding her hand, sometimes smiling at her, with that secret, composed smile he had reserved for me.

I had known, of course, that our marriage had only happened because Nayen, adrift after Menmathe’s casual rejection of him, had needed someone he could lean on. Or, to put it more bluntly, because, with Menmathe gone, we only had each other.

But I had learnt to love him, and I thought he, too, had returned my feelings.

Only to fling everything to the winds once Menmathe returned. I was no competition for her. Even white-haired, even amnesiac, she still was everything I could not be. Even Nayen had only been on loan to me, and now she was claiming him back as easily as she breathed.

I went to Lanari, and told her what was happening.

She was silent for a while. “You may be overreacting,” she said, her wrinkled face thoughtful.

“Perhaps. But I know him well enough to tell. He doesn’t see it yet. He thinks he brings her comfort.”

“I see,” Lanari said. “I can’t think of much to say, really. If he’s what she needs to get better...”

“And what if he’s not?” I asked, and realised how selfish this sounded.

“Tell him. Make him see what he is doing.”

I could have told Lanari how Nayen would answer. And I would have been right.

“Are you so jealous?” he asked. “This is ridiculous, Isalaya. We are still husband and wife.”

“For how long?”

“Don’t be silly,” he said, sharply. “We were married before the gods.”

“Yes,” I said. “I realise that you may not have been thinking marriages were final.”

“You’re being unfair.”

“Then tell me why you spend more time with her than with anyone else. Tell me why your fields are untended.”

“She’s your sister, for the Triad’s sake!”

“And you’re my husband,” I said. “Act as husbands should.”

His fists clenched, and I thought he was going to strike me. But he merely went away without a word, as if I were not worthy of quarrelling with.

Menmathe had been watching us. When Nayen was gone, she said, “I had not realised.”

“Don’t lie,” I snapped. “You enjoy it. You’ve always enjoyed having power over other people. Over me.”

She looked hurt. Her face was even gaunter than usual. She had been eating little, as if the forest had left no human appetites in her. “I am sorry if I offended you,” she said.

I turned away from her to brew some cardamom tea, and did not speak.

#

I slept with difficulty that night, and got up while it was still dark. I walked the outskirts of the village, seeking something that might bridge the gulf between Nayen and me. And I found nothing. I stayed away from the forest’s edge, but I still heard the chatter of macaques as they leapt from branch to branch, the night cries of tigers on the prowl. And I wished Menmathe would go back to the forest where she belonged, to be lulled to sleep by those sounds instead of my husband’s voice.

I came home in a foul mood. Nayen was still sleeping—I could hear his soft snores from outside. But Menmathe was awake, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor. The moon was still up, and bathed her in its cold, unforgiving light.

And for a moment the moon let me see something behind the human outline: something with fangs and claws, with yellow eyes that transfixed me in the darkness, something vast and inhuman that knew only hunger. It did not last. For when she heard my steps on the threshold, Menmathe moved away from the moonlight, and everything disappeared.

No.

It had to be an illusion. I was tired, and prone to imagining things.

But I knew what I had seen.

I smiled at Menmathe, saying nothing. But now I remembered Lanari's warning. A demon, she had said. And everyone knew that the moon, the eye of the Creator on this world, showed demons for what they really were.

A demon. Not my sister at all, then, but something else.

All day I remembered that outline, as I baked bread, as I swept the floor of the house. Menmathe spoke little. When Nayen came she basked in his attentions, but it seemed to me there was an unhealthy hunger in the way her eyes lingered on him.

I went, again, to Lanari, and told her what I had seen.

"You are sure?" she asked.

"No. It could be jealousy trying to give me a good reason for hating her."

"I don't think you need that." Lanari paused, counted on her fingers. "It has been almost a moon since she came back to you, hasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "What is your meaning?"

"Assuming the last person it consumed was your sister, that makes it more than a moon since it ate anything. It's hungry."

"Nayen," I said. "I need to warn him."

Lanari stopped me with a gesture. "It's a rakshasa," she said, "that is strong enough to walk in daylight, while lesser demons fear the gaze of the sun. It's strong enough to defeat a hermit with the powers of the gods. You can't expect to tear your husband from it that easily."

"Then give me a way," I snapped. "Give me a way to kill it."

Lanari pursed her lips. "Hard. Essence of goldenrain flowers is what they prescribe, but it doesn't keep for long, and it takes time to brew."

"How long?" I asked, my heart sinking.

"Three, four days. Can you keep an eye on him till then? The demon draws its power from the forest; it will need to lead Nayen back there in order to fully overpower him. Don't let them leave."

"I'll try," I said.

#

I could not keep an eye on Nayen, who went to till the fields every day, but I could keep an eye on Menmathe. I spoke to her, reminding her of the time we had spent together, knowing, all the while, that she did not remember. Or that, if she did, they were not her memories, only those of her victim.

My sister was dead.

I tried to go about as if everything was normal, but it was hard. At night, I waited until both Nayen and Menmathe were asleep before I would fall asleep myself, and I rose at dawn before either of them.

On the third morning, weariness overcame me, and I overslept. I woke up, panicked, to see that both Menmathe and Nayen were gone.

No.

I rose, and went running through the village, asking those I met if they had seen either of them. A

farmer finally remembered that Menmathe had entered the forest near the western edge of the village, followed by Nayen, who had been walking behind her as if bewitched.

“Why did you not stop them?” I wanted to cry, but knew it would be useless.

Running after them, no matter how I wished it, would avail me nothing. I would be powerless against a rakshasa. So I went, instead, to wake up Lanari.

As it turned out, she was already awake, and praying.

“They’re gone,” I said, breathless. “I need your essence.”

Her face twisted. “It’s not ready, Isalaya. It won’t be ready for another few hours.”

“I can’t wait that long. Give it to me as it is.”

“It doesn’t have its full power.” But still she handed me a flask containing a golden liquid, one that smelled as musky as a rich woman’s perfume.

“I’ll come with you,” she said.

I shook my head. “You would only slow me down.” She was long past her prime, old and wise for all of us, but she would not be able to keep up with me.

“Good luck,” she said, but I was already running, my fingers clenching the flask as the only hope I had.

#

There was one path within the forest, and their tracks were easy to find. As I ran deeper under the canopy, the trees became larger, towering over me like guardians of hidden wisdom, and the light changed, became green and shimmering, lost its connection with the sun overhead. The cries of monkeys, of birds, became overwhelming.

I ran, keeping Nayen’s face in my mind. I ran, remembering Menmathe’s expression as she had entered the forest, years ago.

I found them in a clearing that shimmered with magic: magic that clung like mist to the branches overhead, to the thick trunk of the banyan trees. Nayen was kneeling in ecstasy before Menmathe, who still wore her human shape. She had both hands on his head, and I could almost see the stream of memories she was taking from him.

“Stop!” I said.

She raised her head.

“Step back!” I cried. “Or I’ll...” I unstopped the flask I held. Its strong, musky smell filled the air, dispelling the demon magic.

The rakshasa’s face did not change expression. The demon did let go of Nayen, however, and took a few steps backwards, but not enough for me to consider my husband out of danger.

“So you have found out,” it said. Away from the sunlight, its shape wavered between that of my sister, and the other one, the one with fangs, with inhuman eyes.

“Yes,” I said. “Now step back. I won’t let you take him.” Its face twisted in pain. “I need him. How else will I keep myself whole?”

I held the flask before me, moved between Nayen and the demon. “Was that why you came to me?” I asked. “For this elaborate charade? Couldn’t you feast on some other travellers? Why did it have to be

us?”

Why did it have to be my sister’s shape?

“You don’t understand,” the demon said. It moved, slightly, watched the flask, as if knowing I held it at bay with an incomplete weapon. “I could not remember anything. I consumed her, and took her shape, and the gods in her overwhelmed me. I could not remember who I was. I had never been so sick. All I had were her memories of your house. Of family. Warmth. Kindness.”

Tears filled my eyes. I had given Menmathe none of those things, and it was too late now.

“You will not have him. He is not yours. He never will be yours,” I said, knowing all the while that the one I could have told the words to could no longer hear them.

“I need him,” the demon said. “I—” It shivered. “I can no longer feed on human flesh. But his memories—if I can have more of them—” It moved closer, seeing that I had not done anything.

I held my ground. “No. You have no place here.”

“I need to—”

It was pitiful now. Reaching out with shivering hands—claws, hands, trying to move past me, but not daring to. And in every pore of its body, the gods that had filled my sister were raging, fighting against the demon’s very nature. It was a wonder it still held together. Death, in truth, would be a kindness.

“I—” it said, and lunged past me.

My hand opened, out of its own volition. The flask flew through the air and landed on the rakshasa’s chest. The fragrance of musky flowers filled the air, so sharp I thought I would weep.

The rakshasa howled, staggered backwards, clutching at the place the potion had struck. It was unravelling before my eyes, the goldenrain essence eating its whole body. The liquid did not have its full powers. But then, neither did the demon. They warred together before my eyes, and I had no wish to wait to see who would finally win.

I turned, shook Nayen until his eyes focused on me. He did not recognise me.

“Menmathe?” he said, and I wondered how many years of memories the demon had taken from him.

“Come,” I said, pulling him against me. Together we walked out of the clearing. I turned, one last time, to look at the rakshasa, and saw it sink to its knees, its eyes on me.

“Warmth,” it said, a bare whisper, one hand covering the gaping hole in its chest. It was still wearing my sister’s face, and pleading with me to understand. “Kindness.”

I turned away from it, weeping.

#

When we arrived back at the village, Lanari was waiting for us by the door of my house. “So?” she asked.

“It’s dead,” I said, curtly pushing past her to get Nayen to the bed. I needed to be alone with him.

Lanari waited for more explanations, but I could offer her none. “Later,” I said, my voice shaking. She said nothing, only moved away from me, and left me to tend to Nayen.

His body was unscathed. His mind, though, would be another matter. The rakshasa had taken much from him.

When his eyes at last focused on me, bewilderment and loss filled them. He looked at me, struggling to remember what I meant to him; I could tell he no longer knew.

"I—" he asked. "What happened?" His face twisted, as Menmathe's—no, the demon's—had, when she had been trying to remember what had happened.

I did not speak for a while, realizing how close I had come to losing him. How my jealousy towards Menmathe had blinded me to what should have been obvious. "It doesn't matter," I said at last. I held him against me, feeling his warmth spread to my skin, to my heart, until the demon's dying face was nothing more than a dull, aching memory. "I'll take care of you."

## **Brolga Dreaming by Deborah McDonnell**

This story has previously appeared in print, in an anthology entitled "Fantastic Wonder Stories". The anthology was published only in Australia, in April 2007.

Hot days always make Mina feel fat.

The heat builds in the city without relief, layer upon layer of furnace glare beneath the sky's blue arch. It bounces from the brick and glass buildings, and rises in a bituminous mist from the baking black roads. A sulphurous smell spreads from the exposed river-flats, and the cicadas shriek long into the sleepless nights.

But the humidity is worse. Her flesh feels swollen, and the ground pulls at her joints, as if gravity is a wet thing. Her elbows won't turn the right way and however she might wish otherwise, her arms lie moist against her.

The air is stifling in her lungs, like breathing spores; and her skin is damp and loose. The lightning sparks and crackles across the sky, but still it will not rain.

Her tears are inevitable.

Weekdays are easy enough: the activity and cursory social contact of work annul the hours. But on Friday night it begins. The creeping hours before the blue glare and tinny buzz of the television, the slick-melt taste of chocolate and wine consumed alone. By Sunday she is defeated; her eyes hot and her flesh clammy and the back of her brain faintly thrumming with weeping.

Her blood beats fast, and her breath bubbles through tear-salted lips. A great drowning need arises within her, she cannot breathe through the press of it.

"Please," she begs. "Please. I need...I don't want to be alone any more."

#

Pallid and sluggish, she wakes amid the previous night's workings: the glitter of early light on the discarded chocolate foil; tear-stains yellowing on the couch cushions; the lees of wine black in the dark green bottle. A sour smell rises from its uncorked throat, a smell that clings to her throughout the day.

But that night's phone call from her sister is different. Partly for Jenna's idea, but mostly because it is when the bird appears.

"Ready for a blindingly brilliant idea?" As usual Jenna begins without salutation. Only one person lives in the flat, only one person answers the phone. Her sister knows this.

Mina makes a noncommittal noise, and looks outside.

And on the balcony, with its wilting Cupid's Lily crinkling to brown at the tips, stands the broлга.

It appears to be a perfectly normal broлга. It stands at shoulder-height, with a sorrowfully long neck banded in red, and dark stilt-like legs. The shadow of the balcony above gives its silvery feathers a brown cast.

But the crane is here, on a narrow and brick-girded apartment block balcony -- as if the grout and cracked tiles are a stretch of water bright and free beneath the sky.

Mina drops the phone in her surprise. It falls on her foot, sending a flare of pain up her leg. She swears and hops, while Jenna's voice issues from the handset into the carpet. The bird watches it all without reaction.

She retrieves the phone. "Sorry, what? This bird... Anyway, I dropped the phone. What did you say?"

"Honestly Mina," Jenna says with suffering. "I said, I've organised a date for you."

"What? Oh, Jenna, I don't know..."

"He's really sweet. You'll like him."

She shakes her head, though only the bird sees it. "It's whether he likes me that's important. And he won't."

Jenna clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "You're too bloody depressing, you know that? Look, where's the harm? I'm just trying to help, you know. You're always going on about how lonely you are."

Mina is a single breath away from refusing. Instead, she closes her eyes, and swallows. "Okay."

"Great! He'll be there in an hour."

"Tonight?" Panic pitches her voice high. "But..."

"Of course tonight. Otherwise you'll just cancel. Besides," she teases, "you never know. You might get to use those holidays after all."

#

Mina showers -- cold, to sluice away the panic and the odour of the rotted river flats which clings to her skin. As the rush of water gurgles to quiet, she feels cool, refreshed: brave.

"This time," she says, "he'll like me. It will work."

She opens the curtain, steps out of the stall.

When she sees the bird's reflection in the mirror she squawks, an awkward reflex pitching her shoulder into the frame of the shower-stall. The bird turns its lithe neck and fixes its bright eyes on her reflection. The chalky scent of damp feathers is strong in the small room.

"Bloody hell." Scowling, she rubs ineffectively at her shoulder. Already sweat prickles her skin.

She considers attempting to shoo the creature outside. But she cannot think how to convince a five-foot bird it wants to be outside, when it has clearly decided otherwise.

The phone rings and Mina hurries to answer it, eager to escape the bird's scrutiny. The bird has built a nest in a corner of the living room, a great mound of twigs and leaves -- and is that uprooted Cupid's Lily?

Her sister is already speaking.

"He's what?" Mina interrupts. "Did you just say...?"

"Blind," Jenna says. "I'm telling you in advance because I don't want you to make a fool out of me. Or yourself for that matter. Besides, you're always complaining men don't like the way you look, right?"

"I have to go," Mina says. "I've this bird in the flat -- "

"A bird? What on -- ?"

"I'll call an exterminator tomorrow." But she says this quietly, glancing between the bathroom door and the bird's nest. "I don't have time now, I'm still not ready." She doesn't wait for farewells.

In the bathroom the bird still stands on the bath's slender lip. She edges her way back into the room; but the brolga merely tilts its head to watch her.

She can see it as she applies make-up, both out of the corner of her eye and as a smear at the edge of the mirror. Occasionally its claws snick on the enamel as it shifts from one scaled foot to another. She starts each time, her shoulders jerking, her make-up suffering.

Gritting her teeth, she leans toward the mirror. The mascara has clumped on her fine, pale lashes. She tries to scrub it off but it has already dried, and her effort leaves her eye red and her skin grey.

The bird gives another little hop (she gives another little jump), and clicks its beak like laughter.

"Look!" She turns to glare, pointing the mascara wand. "When you look like I do, you need all the help make-up can give you, and you take what you can get. You're not bloody helping!"

The bird moves.

It snakes its neck out and down and clicks its beak. Then with a sinuous flick it rears its head back, and flings its wings wide: the feathers bend against the shower stall on one side and the tiled wall on the other. And it jumps into the air, easily reaching the damp-dewed ceiling.

On outstretched wings it floats back down to the lip of the tub. Even after it has landed it seems to keep floating, so smooth and soft is the movement.

It bows.

Rising from the bow, the bird hops from one foot to the other and back again, claws ticking. It bobs its head once, and fixes her with a bright yellow eye.

#

All evening the memory runs through her mind: the brolga's dance and the way it paused afterward, waiting for her response.

The way, when she had simply stared, it shivered its wings, hopped down from the tub, and stalked past her. It settled with a shuffle of feathers and a rustle of leaves.

Her date's unfocussed gaze can't hold her. She tries to concentrate, but the way he holds his head, first to one side and then the other, reminds her of the bird.

When she visits the restaurant bathroom now she notices her eyes: one mascara'd and the other pale

and lashless, no longer red but still skimmed beneath with grey. He has said nothing about it, and in response she feels a sudden spurt of gratitude -- until she remembers he is blind.

She fixes her mascara, studies the results.

"I'll start exercising tomorrow," she whispers. "I'll lose some weight before it gets physical."

But after dinner, before her front door, she lets him stand close and bend down over her. She thinks with clammy fear of the dimpling like orange peel at the cheeks of her thighs: men never hold her there because the pallid flesh is always chill. She thinks too of the bird, nesting in her living room. She obediently tilts her head upward.

It is a chaste kiss, a single press of their lips, and she recognises the taste of goodbye.

"I'm sorry," he says. "It's just... Well, to be honest, you bring me down a bit."

"Yeah," she says. "Gravity's a bitch."

#

Her sister arrives early the next morning. She grins at Mina's state of undress, and says in a false whisper, "Is he still here?"

For answer Mina simply holds open the door.

Jenna pauses in the living room and casts a suspicious eye over the ceiling and the shadows lurking atop the bookshelf. "Did you get rid of that bird?"

The broilga is nesting in its usual mound of rubbish. It watches Jenna with frank curiosity, then slews its long neck around and inserts its straight beak between the feathers of a rumple-folded wing. Faint clickings emanate from whatever it is doing.

A queasy fear thrums in Mina's blood and her head rings, as if she is humming with flaws like a struck crystal. She tries to say, "You don't see it?" but only a strangled cough emerges from her throat.

Jenna abandons her scrutiny of the ceiling and sits abruptly on the couch. Her eyes are on Mina, but her feet neatly step over the detritus of the nest. And when the bird stretches out a wing, the beak's hidden tip clicking along the shaft of the feathers, Jenna makes room by picking her leg up off the floor and hanging it over her knee.

"So?" she demands. "Sit. Tell me. How was it?"

Inadequately, Mina shrugs. "He opted out." Bitterly, she adds, "He thinks I'm too fat, of course."

"No," Jenna breathes. "He said that?"

"Not in so many words. But I've heard it all before. I know how to read between the lines now. I suppose I can't altogether blame him," Mina adds. "Look at me. Padding like this, on a single woman? It spells Bad Investment."

"Oh God. Don't start that again."

#

There is a new girl at work. Mina studies her while the personnel manager fusses with his paperwork. The impression first is of slightness: her pale hair cropped, her grey skirt high upon slim legs, sleeves falling over her hands. She is wearing black stockings, and no shoes.

The girl turns her neck. Caught staring, Mina blushes, offers an inadequate smile and turns away.

But the blood flickers beneath her skin, hot and cleansing, and soon the only thought remaining is not a thought but an awareness, a tautness.

The personnel manager notices none of this. "Mina. I need to speak to you about your annual leave."

With an effort, she concentrates on him.

"You have" -- he checks papers -- "fourteen weeks."

"Yes. I'm saving them," she offers.

"I see that. And I understand. But, Mina, this sort of things costs the company money. We're not a large firm, we can't afford employees to accrue more than twelve weeks. I'm afraid you'll have to take some of your leave."

"Take some...? But it's for my honeymoon."

He looks at her with surprise. "You're getting married?"

"No." Distress makes her palms clammy; she falters. "I mean, one day..."

#

At lunch the new girl, Basia, sits alone at the next table. Mina thinks of joining her; but this time Basia does not turn to catch her furtive glance, and without encouragement Mina feels too awkward. Instead she dutifully pulls out her salad. A bitterness rises within her throat, that she should suffer through such limp meals and yet still lose men.

To distract herself she remembers the grey bird, dancing in her bathroom. "What makes the broлга dance?"

Her co-workers stare at her, some blankly, some bemusedly, slim-hipped Saskia with a faint smirk. She has interrupted their conversation. Embarrassment hot in her cheeks, Mina drops her eyes. "Just a random thought," she mumbles. "Don't worry." She stabs a pale shard of carrot, which crunches into a bitter powder between her teeth.

Saskia laughs. "If you hate salad so much, why bother? Do what the rest of us do" -- she lifts her hamburger in salute: "Eat junk and be happy."

Mina tries a smile more hesitant than heroic, and answers with her best attempt at humour. "I'd end up the size of a barge. I mean, look at the size of me when I only eat salad."

She thinks it particularly cruel of them all to laugh.

Mina stays behind then as the cafeteria empties, picking at her wilting salad, until the room is virtually abandoned around her, silent and echoing. Basia is the last to stand, and she pauses by Mina's side. "The broлга's dance," she says.

Mina looks up, her breath a little too short. "Yes?"

"It's a mating thing."

Her skin prickles; she feels again the strange warmth in her blood, the tautness like anticipation. "I don't do girls," she blurts.

Basia watches her sombrely. "I was just going to tell you the broлга's story."

Sharp red heat creeps again across Mina's skin. "Oh."

"Once," Basia sits beside Mina, "there was a young girl who loved to dance. Her skill and grace was such that all who saw her dance loved her, and rejoiced.

"One day, an evil man saw Brolga dancing around the old Coolibah tree, moving with the sway of the branches, and he vowed to have her to himself. As the wind fluttered in the branches, Brolga danced out into the sunlight, raising small puffs of dust from her feet. And the evil man gathered together the wind and the puffs of dust and he summoned the whirlwind, which closed upon Brolga and bore her away.

"But she refused him, and resisted him, and he grew ever angrier. When he saw her tribe had tracked them down, and still she refused him, he vowed none could have her.

"Again he called up the whirlwind. Raw and terrible, it spun the dancing girl high in the air. And when it fell to quietness again she was gone. In her place was a tall, grey bird. It stretched out its wings and, with long hopping steps that mimicked the girl's grace and joy, the bird began to dance."

Shyly, Mina admits, "I always wanted to be able to dance."

Basia gives her a queer little half-smile. "I know."

The smile is contagious, a spreading of sunlight beneath Mina's skin, a sudden fluttering in her stomach. Before conscious thought can frighten her, before anyone can come upon them in the empty cafeteria, Mina leans forward and presses her lips to Basia's. The cool touch of the kiss shivers across Mina's skin and hammers through her heart.

When she opens her eyes, Basia measures her curiously. "I thought you didn't do girls."

"I don't," Mina stammers. "I mean, normally... I wished on a lightning storm the other night," she says then. "But either my wishes are as woeful as my relationships, or the lightning went astray. Because I thought I was wishing for a man. But instead, I found a woman."

She holds her breath after daring this.

But Basia makes an exasperated click with her tongue, and shakes her head. "Spells are made of needing, not wanting. Yours was for happiness," she says. "Not partnership. Look, I wouldn't be here if I didn't think you were worth it. But the thing is:" -- Basia gives her an apologetic glance -- "I don't do miserable. Sorry."

#

The words run through her head all afternoon. They skitter through her memory and draw forth companions.

\_You're too bloody depressing; you know that?\_

\_Don't start that again.\_

\_You bring me down.\_

Leaden clouds hang sullen overhead as she walks home, and a fug rises from the river to stifle the streets. Sweat beads and slides upon her skin; lightning flickers impotently across the horizon; but it does not rain.

\_I don't do miserable.\_

Inside her flat, a man in a black jumpsuit stands talking to Jenna. He wears a cap with a red logo, which he removes when he sees her. "Afternoon, ma'am," he says. "I was just about to leave you a

note. There's no sign of the bird; guess it left through the door sometime today."

Jenna is using her elbow to indicate the exterminator, and nodding encouragement.

The broilga stands behind them, by the balcony door. She'd left the glass door open for it, and now the flat has the same hot-pressed atmosphere as the streets.

Mina speaks to the three of them. "He said I bring him down. But why should I believe him, why take him at his word? When I could go to the effort of manufacturing his reasons."

Tears sting her eyes. Angrily she fists them away. Jenna is confused, the exterminator is not sure where to look. She takes a breath and continues.

"My sister would very much like you to ask me out. And I'd love to, but it will have to wait. Because Basia's right: I'm a misery. I thought it was because they kept leaving; and maybe it was, at the start. But now it's like some habit, some absurd comfort. It's not my weight that drives everyone away. It's my wretched gloom. So I'm taking my holidays."

The exterminator is examining the floor, and casting wistful glances at the door.

Jenna is staring at her, incredulous. She knows why Mina has been saving holidays. "You mean the blind guy...?"

"No," Mina says. "But I'm tired of waiting." And she ushers them to the door.

Jenna hangs back a moment. "You fool," she whispers, but she is laughing. "He'll never ask you out now!"

Mina finds she doesn't have to lie to answer. "I don't care."

She turns to the broilga, still waiting by the balcony. Slowly, elegantly, the bird hangs its neck to the ground, and clicks its beak.

Mina recognises the movement. \_It's a mating thing.\_

The bird flicks its neck upwards, beak pointing to the ceiling. It opens its beak and crooks its wings outward. And the beak keeps opening, further and further, folding impossibly downwards around the up-stretched neck; and the silvery feathers are falling away from the wings; and in front of her stands Basia, her short pale hair as bright as her eyes, feathers that never reach the carpet falling away from her shoulders and hips.

Warm and quick, Basia grins. "Brave girl. I was beginning to think you might never come to your senses."

Mina gapes at her. "What are you?"

"I've told you my story already." Basia sits on the couch, wriggling her shoulders against its plush back. "But I've yours to tell, if you want."

#

"Once, in Broilga Country," the bird-girl says, "a woman conceived a baby. Through the Dry she bore it, cool nights and misty mornings while the rivers subsided, and the kites hung in the south-east winds.

"Then the days becoming bee-buzzing hot, and the woman squatting beneath her weight. The clouds gathering dark and heavy and stubborn, the bats squabbling in the flowering paperbarks. And finally the burst of relief: the flash of lightning and the heavy downpour. Rainwaters and floodwaters and

birthwaters.

"The father took the baby outside, and danced her in the falling floods. And the baby laughed and gurgled. But the mother shouted at him, and the child cried at such stridency, and at her father's curdled delight."

Basia falls silent.

Mina watches the bright play of lightning against the evening-bruised sky. "And so she grew up," she says quietly, not turning her head, "without learning how to dance."

"No," Basia says. "Every child born in Brolga Country has my Dreaming, and a responsibility to honour it. She grew up not daring."

The thunder is so distant Mina feels it, a pulse through her skin, rather than hears it. A static charge is waking and building in her blood, flickering to the music of the lightning.

"I've let you down," she says.

Basia watches her with a reflection of lightning in her eyes. "You won't always."

Faint as the silvery whisper of the north-west wind upon her skin, Mina feels joy creep into her mind.

#

When Mina opened her eyes, it took a moment for the knowledge to filter through the different layers of her: from her pores, through her blood, to her conscious mind. The air felt different. Cooler. And it smelt...quenched.

Rain!

Scrambling to her feet, she hurried to the living room. The room was dim, part early morning, part louring cloud. The air had a cool yellow glint to it, a diffuse illumination as the clouds forced the dawn light slantwise. The rain rushed past the balcony, its noise loud through the opened door.

She turned with a broad smile. "It's rai--"

The nest was gone.

Where the heaped mound of twigs and leaves and uprooted plant had lain there was now nothing, not a dropped feather nor a misplaced twig.

The brolga was gone. Basia was gone.

Her anger, her hurt, her habitual loneliness rose like a floodtide within her. She wanted to shout at the absent bird-girl. She wanted to weep. The tears obligingly brimmed hot and fresh in her eyes.

Instead, Mina stepped onto the wet balcony, into the rain which shivered across her skin like the kiss of grey feathers.

And in the falling floodwaters, she began to dance.

## **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.

### **Gayla Chaney**

Gayla Chaney's fiction has appeared in Potomac Review, Natural Bridge, Thema, Cicada, U.S. Catholic, 34th Parallel, Oklahoma Review, and Carve. Her work was recently included in the 2008 Best Modern Voices: Words for the New Millennium. She makes her home in central Texas with her husband and three sons.

### **Aliette de Bodard**

Aliette de Bodard is a half-French, half-Vietnamese author who lives in Paris, France, and writes speculative fiction in her spare time. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Realms of Fantasy, Interzone and Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show. She is a Campbell Award Finalist for 2009. Visit her website at <http://www.aliottedebodard.com>.

### **Deborah McDonnell**

Deb McDonnell wastes energy getting irate at database systems which refuse to acknowledge the medial capital in her surname, and other such absurdities. A graduate of Clarion South, she lives in Melbourne and has worked as an engineer, chemist, and technical writer. She holds sleep sacred above almost everything else.