

Alpha

By

Erin M. Kinch

The first time Callie saw Luke Hayes, her hackles rose. A cowbell clanked against the door of the Johnson Bar & Grill as he swaggered in, all tall shoulders, shaggy black hair, and ice blue eyes.

“Want me to take this one?” Millie drawled. Millie was a tough Texas broad who’d worked at the grill since Callie’s parents opened the place. Her weathered face and graying ponytail spoke of practicality and long hours outdoors.

Callie felt the interloper’s presence like a bonfire scorching her skin. “I’ve got it.” She took a deep breath and approached the stranger. “Get you a drink?”

“Glenfiddich on the rocks.”

Callie raised an eyebrow as she poured. “Not much call for this in Ryan. That’s six bucks.”

He slid his platinum card across the bar. “I’ll start a tab.”

She ran her thumb over the raised letters. “Sure, Luke.”

His hand flashed out and grabbed her wrist. Callie glared and her nostrils twitched; outsiders never touched her that way.

A smile softened his face as he released her. “Don’t I get to know your name?”

The warmth of his caressing gaze did her in. “I’m Callie.”

“Let me buy you a drink, Callie.” His slow grin shredded the remains of her modesty, and the low rumbling of his voice made her insides quiver. She was hyper-aware of his musky scent, the curve of his lips, and how his hair waved across his forehead.

At the other end of the bar, Millie slammed the beer cooler shut with a bang.

Callie blinked and retreated. “Maybe some other time.” She left his card by the cash register and headed for the back.

“Darrel ain’t gonna like this.” Millie cornered Callie in the hall. “Ain’t gonna like *him*.”

“I don’t care what Darrel likes.”

Millie grabbed Callie by the shoulders. “Your parents were Alpha. It’s all kinds of horrible that the accident took ’em, but the pack can’t go on like this. You’ve gotta make it official with Darrel. Or somebody.”

“Darrel can lead the pack. I don’t care!” Callie jerked free and hurried to her office, fighting tears.

Of course, Millie followed. She always did. “The pack looks to you, child. Whether you like it or not, you’re Alpha now. Unless someone puts up a challenge.”

"I want to abdicate." Barb and Joe Johnson smiled at Callie from a photo on the bookshelf, so happy, so in love. Callie slammed it face down.

"Your parents put this pack together from scavengers, misfits, and coydogs that had their tails between their legs. They made us strong, gave us a home. They made us *family*. Don't you care about that any more?" Millie watched Callie with solemn brown eyes, equal amounts of chiding and concern in her smoke-roughened voice.

Callie allowed her curtain of light brown hair to fall forward, shielding her from the gaze of the one person who could still make her deal with pack politics. "I love you all, but I'm not cut out to be Alpha."

"Sometimes there's more important things than what you want, Callie-girl. With your parents dead and your brother gone, who else have we got?"

"Darrel?" Callie spat his name like a curse.

"The pack will look to Darrel, if *you* look to Darrel."

The cowbell clanked again, interrupting the silence that stretched between them.

With a sigh, Millie went back to the bar to tend to business.

For the next hour, Callie hid in her office, ostensibly prepping the next week's orders, but really sitting in her father's desk chair staring into space. The comforting aroma of his pipe tobacco still clung to the upholstery six months later. The blank spot on the bookshelf gnawed at her. Finally, Callie righted the picture and faced her parents.

"What am I supposed to do?" Callie whispered.

In the next frame, her older brother glared at her from beneath his graduation cap. Rick hated growing up in Ryan. Joe groomed him to be Alpha, but Rick split the night after his high school graduation and hadn't been heard from since. Callie didn't even know where send him word about their parents' funeral.

She sensed Luke's presence before she saw him in the doorway. Her skin prickled and burned as a familiar musky scent wafted toward her.

"Frowning is bad for your looks." He touched his forehead. "Wrinkles. Too many and the fellas stop sniffing around." He winked, and Callie's stomach flip-flopped.

Callie planted her hands on her slender hips. "Planning to lighten my mood?"

"My ride's outside. I'll take you home and let you invite me in for coffee."

"Tempting, but it's happy hour." Callie pushed past Luke and felt his gaze on her backside as he followed her down the hall. She put a little extra sway into her stride.

"Let someone else handle it."

Warm, scotch-scented breath caressed her face. Callie knew she should move, but she didn't. One of his long fingers traced a fiery line down her jaw.

"Callie!"

She jerked away from Luke as a short, stocky man with spiky red hair pushed through the curtain separating the hall from the bar. He looked from Callie to Luke, his nostrils flaring. "Who are you?"

"Darrel," Callie answered, her voice flat, "this is Luke."

Luke just smirked.

"What's he doing here? The back is family only." The pitch of Darrel's voice rose until the last word was practically a yip.

“Back off, Darrel,” Callie warned, but it was too late. The brash, young werecoyote forced his way between “his” girl and the interloper.

Luke’s voice was little more than a growl. “I don’t have a problem with you; let’s leave it that way.”

“If you didn’t want a problem,” Darrel snarled, “you shouldn’t have messed with her!” He threw a left hook that Luke sidestepped more easily than should have been possible. Darrel might be shorter, but he had the preternaturally fast reflexes of the beast within.

Her own beast twitched restlessly; Callie’s brown eyes flashed golden as her coyote urged her to attack Darrel and force him into submission. She took a few deep breaths, forcing her beast to quiet down, then grabbed Luke’s hand, taking pleasure in the anger on Darrel’s face.

“We’re leaving,” Callie told Darrel. “Deal with it.”

Luke chuckled and allowed Callie to pull him through the curtain and out the door.

He mounted a black Harley Sportster with gleaming chrome that waited in the handicapped parking space. She straddled the leather seat behind him. Gravel sprayed as he gunned the motor and raced for the highway. She hollered directions over the thundering engine, then leaned back to let the rush of the wind blow her frustrations away. For the first time in weeks, months even, she felt free in her human form. The only other feeling that came close was racing through the countryside in coyote form, hunting rabbits and howling at the moon.

Too soon, they pulled into her driveway. Her parents had owned two hundred acres in the hill country outside of Ryan. The rocky, cedar-covered land wasn’t much for ranching or farming, but it made the perfect hunting ground for a pack of werecoyotes. Callie had refurnished the tiny two-room cabin, creating her own private sanctuary. Luke killed the bike’s motor and silence covered them like a blanket. Overhead, sunset painted the sky with dramatic streaks of pink and orange.

“Nice.”

She heard the genuine approval in his tone as he surveyed the property.

“Thanks.”

A porch wrapped around the cabin. She sat on the swing and gestured for Luke to join her. When he did, his long legs reached all the way to the porch rail.

“Thanks for the rescue back there,” she said.

“Is Darrel your boyfriend?”

Her short bark of laughter interrupted the crickets’ song. “He wishes.”

“I’m glad he isn’t.” He slid closer.

Callie knew she should stop him. She barely knew Luke. No one would approve, not Millie, certainly not Darrel, and definitely not her parents. His lips touched hers, and passion exploded. She pressed against him, plunging her tongue deep into his mouth. One of his hands cupped the back of her head while the other tugged her blouse out of her jeans. His jacket fell to the ground, and the heat of his skin singed her through his blue t-shirt.

Most of Callie’s limited romantic experience had been with members of the pack, but she had gone out with non-pack boys a time or two during college. Comparatively,

non-pack boys were timid. The more aroused Callie got, the more her beast wanted to come out and play. If Callie wasn't going to Change, the beast demanded satisfaction in other ways. That kind of aggression in a woman scared the non-pack boys, but Luke met her urge for urge.

Finally, that realization broke through the haze of passion, and Callie pushed against his chest. Luke chuckled and tugged her closer. Callie shoved him back.

"Get off!"

This time he retreated to his side of the swing with a mutinous expression. "What?"

The coyote inside howled with disappointment, begging for action; her muscles trembled as she fought down the wild emotions. Callie spoke between ragged pants.

"Your kiss, it's not normal."

"Normal is boring." Luke grinned, and his teeth glinted in the moonlight. Were his canines longer than before?

"Tell me the truth!" Her fingers itched as fingernails threatened to explode into claws, and her heart pounded in her ears.

His grin faded. "You already know."

"You're were?"

"Werewolf."

Her hackles rose again, this time in response to an intruder in her territory. Werecoyotes and werewolves were usually rivals. "This is coyote country. Why are you here?"

"Rick sent me."

Her brother's name twisted like a knife in her chest. The pounding in her ears became a roar, and her insides shifted; fangs filled her mouth. The half moon peeked over the tree line. She didn't have to Change, but she could. Her beast begged for freedom, promising that a run through the woods would clear the confusion and pain from her mind.

Large hands rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles. With a force of will, Callie held onto her humanity. Fangs shrank back into teeth, and claws retracted. Luke seemed to sense that the urge had passed and returned to his side of the swing.

"Thanks," Callie whispered. "How do you know Rick?"

"He works at my club in New York. I was passing through Texas, so he asked me to deliver this." Luke handed her a square of paper that she unfolded with trembling fingers. The brief note was scrawled in her brother's handwriting and included a phone number.

I heard about Mom and Dad, and I'm sorry. But don't let their dreams rule your life, Cal. There's a place for you in New York. You can trust Luke. He's a good guy, for all that he's a wolf. I love you.

Her eyes blurred with tears.

Luke sat with his feet propped on the railing, but the intensity of his gaze belied his casual pose. "Will you come?"

She couldn't answer.

"If you do, I'd like to see more of you." He covered her hand with his, and electricity shot all the way down to her toes, searing away her melancholy. Her beast grabbed the moment with all four paws, and Callie jumped him, smashing her lips against his. The more she felt, the less she had to think. Luke's hands on her bare skin made thinking impossible.

They sprang apart when they heard tires crunching on the gravel driveway. By the time they were presentable enough to descend the front steps, a semicircle of cars and pickup trucks surrounded them. Darrel exited first, followed by Shane and Kyle. Her father had called them the Trio, and they'd gotten into endless scrapes during high school. Only Joe's firm hand, and sometimes his claws, kept them in line back then. All of the pack had come, except for two young mothers and the pups.

"What is this?" Callie asked.

"The pack decided," Darrel said, "we don't want you with *him*. If you're not going to get rid of him, we will."

Next to her, Luke tensed.

"You all feel this way?" Callie surveyed the familiar faces and found no support. Even Millie looked determined, though she didn't meet Callie's eyes. "What if I say no?"

"Boys!" Darrel called, and then the Trio Changed, throwing off their clothes seconds before their beasts took over. Legs shortened, arms lengthened, noses extended into snouts, and teeth sharpened into fangs. Foreheads sloped back, ears grew, and fur sprouted all over. Kyle and Shane were brown, but Darrel's fur shone with a burnished red. The other pack males started the Change as well, but the females watched, seemingly content to stay human. Though their pack was small, it was still fourteen male coyotes against one wolf. Formidable as Luke must be as a wolf, those were bad odds.

"Get on your bike and go," she hissed. "I'll keep them here."

"Somehow, I get the feeling you don't have as much power over them as you think." Luke shed his clothes and began his own Change.

He was here because of her; she couldn't let him face down her pack alone. Callie released her beast from its cage. The coyote burst forth before Callie had time to strip. Fabric shredded and seams ripped as Callie morphed into a fifty-pound coyote with golden eyes and light brown fur. A long scar marred her left flank. She'd gotten it as a pup, fighting the other pups into submission, and her beast wore it as a badge of honor.

The Trio finished Changing first, but the others weren't far behind. As a wolf, Luke stood much taller than the largest coyote, his dramatic gray and white coloring and light blue eyes looking like a glamour shot from the cover of *National Geographic*.

Darrel growled. Luke's ears went back and he snarled, baring his teeth. Callie yipped her own rebuke, placing herself between the red coyote and the wolf.

Kyle launched himself at Luke, snarling and biting. Luke twisted and bit down on Kyle's neck, tossing the lighter animal into a nearby cedar. The coyote's head hit the tree with an audible crack, and when he landed, he didn't get back up. Callie moved closer to see if Kyle was still breathing. She whined with relief at the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

With Callie out of the way, the remaining members of the Trio sprang on Luke in a flash of fur and fangs. The coyotes pulled the wolf down, the pair of them equaling the giant wolf's weight. Luke hit the ground and rolled, the three combatants tumbling over and over, leaving a trail of crimson and bits of fur along the driveway. Luke freed himself and then ran into the woods, Shane and Darrel on his heels. The rest of the pack males, except two, followed.

One of the remaining two, Richard, paced protectively next to Kyle; the other, Art, placed himself between her and the path. She snarled, but Art, a middle-aged coyote with grizzled fur and a ragged left ear, didn't back down.

The beast within Callie raged, furious at her authority being questioned. Darrel and the others might have been insolent, but they had not disobeyed a direct command. With a snap of her jaws, Callie flew at Art. He might be bigger, but she was faster. She rammed him with the full force of her fifty pounds and knocked him to the ground. They rolled several times as Art tried to break free. Callie clamped her teeth around one of his front legs and bit down with all her might. He jerked, but Callie dug her teeth in more deeply. He pulled again, harder this time, and her fangs tore through a tendon. With a yelp of pain, Art hunkered down; she smelled his fear and howled. He crouched low in submission, looking anywhere but in her eyes. Callie let him up and turned to Richard, who ducked his head, as well. Behind them, some of the women clapped.

A wolf's howl slithered along the wind, echoing in the distance. Callie plunged headlong into the underbrush tracking her rogue pack. She smelled the pack before she saw them and took care to stay downwind.

The pack stood in a loose semicircle, the wolf between them and the pond. Blood stained the white fur of Luke's belly and dripped down one foreleg. Darrel and Shane advanced on him. Callie knew which one she had to deal with, and she was ready.

Callie burst into the middle of the coyotes with a crash of underbrush. Darrel growled, but Callie didn't give him time for more than that. She went straight for his throat. Darrel reared back, so she sank her teeth into his flank instead. They rolled, and she dug in with teeth and claws. When he shook her off, his blood stained her muzzle and glistened on her claws brighter than "I'm not a waitress" nail polish.

Darrel's fangs ripped through her ear, and she reeled back in pain. Behind her, Luke growled a warning at Darrel. Shane snarled a counter-warning at Luke. Callie took advantage of Darrel's distraction and launched herself at him. She had to finish this before Luke got involved. If he helped, she wouldn't truly be Alpha, something she finally knew she wanted.

The pair of coyotes moved so fast that a non-were couldn't have tracked all the bites and gouges. The only sounds in the clearing were the snarls and yelps of the combatants. She kept him on the move, wearing the larger coyote down. Then Callie sank her teeth into his side. Darrel yipped and wriggled away, but Callie lunged against him. They fell to the ground, and this time when the rolling stopped, Callie stood over Darrel, her fangs at his throat.

After a long moment, Callie loosened her grip just enough for him to roll over. Darrel snapped at her, so Callie clamped down until she tasted blood. Her beast urged

her to tear out his jugular and spill his lifeblood on the dirt. But then Joe and Barb's faces flashed in her mind. They wouldn't want this. Darrel was family, too.

He whimpered. Callie forced down her bestial urges long enough to release the pressure just a bit, but she didn't move until Darrel rolled over and exposed his belly in submission. Callie forced him to maintain that position until she was sure the pack understood; then she let him up, nuzzling him briefly before allowing him to slink off into the middle of the pack—her pack. She howled, and the other coyotes echoed the call. Back at the cabin, they found Kyle, Richard, and Art human again. A sling made from a pillowcase supported Art's arm; Kyle seemed groggy, but alert.

Millie waved Callie and Luke into the cabin. "Y'all Change and we'll take care of the rest." Under Millie's direction, several of the older women tended Luke in the bedroom while Millie herded Callie into the bathroom. Soon Callie found herself back in human form, wrapped in her blue terrycloth robe, with Millie fussing over her wounds.

"You gonna go off with that wolf now?" the older woman asked.

Callie shook her head. "I'm staying right here."

"With him?"

"Alone." Callie pulled her hair to one side so Millie could swab antiseptic over her ear. The damage was not as dramatic once her flesh had knitted itself back into a human-shaped ear, but it would be a long time before she could comfortably wear earrings again. "You were right. I am Alpha, and I'm not hiding from it anymore."

A smile wrinkled Millie's face. "I'm glad, Callie-girl." They hugged, and for a moment, Callie felt like she was in her mother's arms. After seeing to Callie, Millie took the first aid kit outside and called for the other women to follow. Callie heard Millie barking orders, and the thought flickered through Callie's mind that Millie would make a better co-Alpha than any mate Callie might take from within the pack. At least for now. Her pack had always been untraditional.

The bed creaked as Luke stood. Both Ace and gauze bandages wrapped his muscular chest; he winced when he pulled his T-shirt over his head. "You aren't coming to New York," he said. It was a statement, not a question.

Callie tightened her robe. Modesty seemed odd since he'd seen all of her shapes, but there it was anyway. "I have to stay. This is my pack."

"I had a pack once." Luke slipped his arm around her shoulder. "Keep yours strong."

"I will." She leaned against him for a moment, noticing how perfectly she fit in his arms.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. Heat pulsed between them, only slightly muted by mutual exhaustion, but Callie knew she couldn't have both Luke and her pack. Her decision was simple—the pack needed her. When Luke let go, she didn't protest.

Callie followed him outside. "Give Rick my love."

Luke straddled his bike and winked. The engine revved, and she watched his taillights until they disappeared. Millie waved at Callie from the window of her pickup. Art, Kyle, and Darrel all rode in the back. "Richard and me are takin' the boys to the doc. We'll call and let you know how they're doin'."

When she was finally alone, Callie turned off the lights and settled into the porch swing, letting her eyes adjust to the moonlight. She took a deep breath and relished the solitude.

The Texas wilderness grew quiet and sleepy, surrounding her with the familiar sounds and smells of her childhood—wildflowers, cedar, crickets chirping, mosquitoes buzzing. In the distance, Callie heard the staccato howl of a real coyote, and in her heart, she answered.

Her Own Skin

By

K. Bird Lincoln

In my prior existence, I was human. My widower father sold carved seals, both wooden and the more expensive ivory chops that only the Samurai Lords could afford. I kept house for him in our small village close to the Edo highway. Although I walked the streets everyday, I never exchanged anything more than formal greetings with the other shopkeepers and girls my age. My life was a series of days I barely seemed to inhabit. Soon, my father and I stopped talking about “when I would be married.”

One early morning, nearing thirty years old, I looked in the mirror and discovered my face was gone. Instead of the usual formations of eyes, nose, and mouth, my face was a shell-smooth, pale blank. Trembling fingers confirmed an utter lack of features. I knew life couldn’t go on like this. Yet, I felt angry, like losing my face was a punishment. It was unfair to heap more troubles on the head of a girl who never did any harm.

I was unsure of where or how I had lost my face, but I was sure that I could no longer keep house for my father. I hoped he wouldn’t be too upset. Maybe he would be relieved that the burden of his unmarried daughter had disappeared.

Instead of stoking the fire under the rice pot or cutting daikon radish for father’s miso soup, I put on a warm cotton robe in a sensible shade of brown, tied it with my second best obi, and walked out of the shop’s front door. Over the sliding door, the hanging curtain noren printed with the characters of my family name fluttered in a morning breeze. The name felt like someone I knew long ago.

The wind brought the salty tang of the Pacific Ocean with it, reminding me how I lacked eyes to make salty tears. Could Noppera-bo cry? The question occupied me as I made my way out of town, unseen by early rising inhabitants. I stopped at the outskirts in front of a farmer’s small shrine to Inari-sama, the rice god, attended by foxes molded from baked clay. I decided to try crying, thinking that was what anyone else would do. I thought of my father and my old life. I thought of my former dark eyes, which I always considered my finest feature. I thought of the daughters I would never have. Nothing. I pushed a little, as if squatting in an outhouse, but despite my efforts, no moisture came. Any normal person would have been crying. I was ashamed. Was I really this cold? No wonder I lost my face.

What to do now? I had never paid attention to Noppera-bo stories before, but that’s what I had become. Really I’d only heard about them from the itinerant entertainers who set up on the street near the town teashop. I should have paid more

attention. Was I supposed to hurt people like the oni, the demons? I didn't feel particularly clever like a trickster fox spirit or shape-changing tanuki badger. In the stories, the Noppera-bo only appeared to scare the unwary traveler. I couldn't remember the stories telling about what the Noppera-bo would do in between appearances.

Something tightened in my chest. I hadn't done much as a seal-carver's daughter. I should try harder as a Noppera-bo. If this were my fate, then I had better get on with it. I decided to walk down the main road that lead away from my village. There would be people at the inn on the Edo highway. If one of the maids or travelers caught my eye, I could wait until dark and try to scare someone.

"Kyra," Ella said, "let's go back inside. I want to try the sauna."

The geezers at the far corner of the rotemburo nudged each other again at Ella's English. With her smooth black hair, dark brown eyes, and stubby nose, most people in Japan assumed she was Japanese. It always frustrated them when she didn't understand them.

"You're such a liar," Kyra said. "You hate saunas. They make you sick. You just don't want to hang around here with these guys. Do they really make you that uncomfortable?"

"Yes, they do," Ella said. "The clerk said all the locals go to bed early. We should have had the rotemburo to ourselves." Ella regretted coming with Kyra, but it was the first time anybody had invited Ella on a trip. She was too shy to travel around by herself, and it was a waste to be in Japan and not see more of the country where her mother was raised.

"Okay, Ella," said Kyra. "I'll take care of it." She swam over to the geezers. They were grouped in a little inlet formed by fake rock jutting into the water in front of a fake waterfall. Kyra climbed on one of the rocks, standing up in full nude glory, and screamed English obscenities at them.

The geezers sat for a moment in stunned silence, probably more in shock over the sight of fully naked Kyra than her crazy antics. One of them laughed, and soon the whole lot of them were clambering out of the water, waving goodbye and shaking their heads in wonder.

"Was that really necessary?" Ella said.

"It worked, didn't it?" Kyra jumped back into the water, making a small tidal wave that washed over Ella's shoulders and chin. Her cheeks felt hot with more than just the steam rising off the water.

Ella sighed. She was envious of Kyra. It was so easy for her to play the foreigner card. Ella tried so hard to fit in, making tea in the morning with the other female teachers, staying late at her desk, and trying not to get into anyone's way. Kyra jumped around naked on rocks and never had to suffer tedious conversations in broken English with drunken male teachers.

Ella heard a soft, garbled sound. A murmur, perhaps. It came from behind the bamboo partition separating the women-only section of the hot springs from the co-ed rotemburo. She held her breath to listen again but only heard crickets chirping

punctuated by an occasional gust of wind. Ella was used to nighttime with a more modern set of noises. Living in Tokyo meant she fell asleep to the lullaby of sirens, revving of engines, and her neighborhood's familial disputes. While she sometimes felt cranky about losing sleep, the noises also gave her a feeling of belonging. If only she could feel that way when she was awake, too.

Kyra was strangely quiet. The outside lights flickered and went out. Slowly all the voices from inside faded away. In the dim light visible from the windows, the steam rising off the water obscured Kyra, changing her head into one of the rock formations. Ella tilted her head to look for stars. The giant pine trees surrounding the resort formed a canopy over the rotemburo, letting only a few bright stars peek through.

When Ella looked down, a woman sat, facing away, on one of the bamboo stools near the washing station. Masked by the dark and steam, the woman filled a pail with water and poured it over her long hair. The splashing sounds were muted, far away.

"Kyra," Ella said. "Let's go inside now." Ella's voice felt loud and out of place, but Kyra made no sound or movement. Ella pushed up onto the edge of the rotemburo. The chill hair made her shiver. "I'm going."

Kyra still didn't acknowledge her. Ella made an exasperated sound and stood, reaching for her towel. Kyra could just sit here until she turned into a raisin. She could be so selfish sometimes. As Ella approached the other woman, she mumbled "excuse me" in Japanese. The woman didn't turn around, give a little nod, or make any of the automatic gestures Japanese women made in these situations.

Opening the door to the bathhouse, Ella turned to give Kyra one last chance to come with her. It was then Ella caught a glimpse of the Japanese woman's face. At first, Ella couldn't understand what she was seeing. The woman's face was smooth, white, and devoid of features. With strands of wet hair hanging over the surface where her face should have been, she looked like the corpse of a drowned woman.

Ella's lungs squeezed for air, and she gave a strangled moan. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the loathsome sight. The faceless woman turned toward Ella, and Ella put her hands in front of her own face to block the horror. Heart pounding, Ella ran through the door, past the inside bath, and into the well-lit hallway of old men and women dressed in the resort's blue yukata robes. They looked at her with annoyance and surprise.

Ella was a troublesome mouse. I knew when I first saw her visiting an abandoned farmer's shrine near her school. I wanted to scratch those dark eyes of hers out of her face. I couldn't wait to give her a good scare. Of all the girls I'd been stuck to over the years, she was the most hopeless. That one good scare at the hot water springs should have jolted Ella right out of her morose skin, or at least sent her running home. Going home always helped the confused ones. Ella was certainly confused. Even now, a whole year after the hot springs incident, I could feel it in Ella's dreams at night as a restlessness that stayed, just under the surface, even in the daylight. I felt immersed in her restlessness like a too-hot bath. I watched Ella go to sushi restaurants and taste nothing of what passed her lips. Or sometimes Ella would watch TV and rub her arms

over and over again if Western actors appeared on the screen, until her skin turned red as sunburn.

Ella stayed and stayed even now that her job was almost over and her foreign friends had gone home. What did she think she would find here? Unlike all the others I'd been with over the years, I was uncomfortable around her. I couldn't summon up my usual rage. I felt only unreasonably annoyed. I wanted to kick her on to an airplane and out of Japan. Part of Ella was lost somewhere, maybe floating like a feather caught in currents of air and tossed in meaningless patterns, yet unable to drop to the ground. Ella did not quite fit inside her own skin. I felt embarrassed for her, an emotion painfully tangled up in memories of myself before I became a Noppera-bo.

Truthfully, I resented Ella. I wished I could go on to the next one so I wouldn't have to feel this way. Maybe it was the look in Ella's dark eyes, her best feature, or maybe I was tired. These days I constantly had the odor of butterbur blossoms around me, medicinal and bitter. I couldn't leave her alone in her five tatami apartment, rubbing herself raw. We were stuck with each other, for better or worse.

Ella watched the other women in the locker room out of the corner of her eye. Since she moved to Portland, she couldn't get over how blonde everyone was and how fleshy women seemed, tummies and breasts spilling over bras and jeans.

Her own petite body made her invisible in Japan, but here she fell back to feeling inadequate. Two Chinese ladies in the next row of lockers chattered away in Cantonese as they contorted under towels, putting on their swimsuits. The same pale skin, the same dark hair and eyes, the same flat chests as Ella, and yet with their permed hair and long, painted fingernails they made an island of belonging around themselves that excluded her. Ella looked down at her own chewed fingernails and sighed.

She would like a girlfriend to chat with in the gym locker. Being alone exposed you more. But all of the other female teachers at the language school seemed too busy. Standing at the coffee maker in the break room, Ella smiled and nodded at the right places when a teacher talked about her children's school antics or another complained about her boyfriend, but it felt fake. Ella's life felt like acting in a play where she didn't quite know the lines and her timing was off.

Ella was in no hurry to dress, and by the time she was in her clothes, a little girl was the only other person left in the dim room. Ella went to the toilet stalls, making sure not to accidentally meet the girl's eyes in the mirror as she passed. It was easier in these situations to keep to oneself.

When Ella exited the stall, her flush a jarring noise in the heavy silence of the locker room, the girl was carefully combing her long hair with a green comb. She straddled a bench, and bent over so her hair fell down over her face like a wet curtain.

Ella closed her jeans and went to stand in front of the mirror against the far wall. There were dark half-circles under her eyes. She scrounged her own comb out of her bag and started to coax the tangles out of her hair. Masami would be waiting at their apartment, watching a Seinfeld rerun for the hundredth time. He knew American sitcoms better than Ella, yet another thing that people remarked on when they found out he was Japanese and Ella was American. They would get an uncomfortable look in their

eyes, as if her ignorance of the last three years of U.S. movies or TV was some unimaginable social gulf they didn't have the time or inclination to bridge.

Ella's hair finally lay sleek against her head. She put the comb back in the bag and turned around to go. That's when she saw the girl's shoulders shaking and noticed her arms were clasped tightly around herself. Curious, Ella took a few steps towards her and the door. Now she heard faint sobs coming from the girl.

"Are you okay?" Ella asked. She stepped nearer to the girl. "Is your mother waiting for you? Should I go get someone?" Ella felt hesitant to get any closer, unsure of how much she could do before transgressing some boundary of politeness or custom she'd lost sight of in her years abroad.

Without lifting her head, the girl spoke in a soft voice. "Maigo desu." *I'm lost.*

Was she Japanese? "Daijyobu desu yo," Ella reassured her. Then, "Shall we go up to the front desk?" Ella put a hesitant hand on the girl's thin shoulder. The girl straightened and her hair fell away from her face.

It was the smooth ovoid of an egg, unmarred by any feature.

"Maigo desu. Kimi mo, watashi mo."

The words echoed in Ella's head as she backed out of the room, her mouth dry and her heart pounding. *Lost. Both of us, lost.*

I was pleased. Ella's hometown was nice. I liked how the buildings had wide sidewalks and how Americans were loud and familiar, filling up silences I had always felt awkward in before. Ella evoked in me less resentment and more exasperated affection today, as if she were a wayward toddler. When I followed Ella down one of the sidewalks crowded with skater-boys, urban mamas, old ladies in furred collars, I could feel myself expanding, as if it were no longer forbidden to inhabit the nooks and crannies of myself long ago abandoned by a spinster daughter.

Last night, after the locker room haunting, Ella'd gone home to Masami in tears. She'd pulled out old yearbooks and photo albums. She finally fell asleep, her fingers still stroking her own, black and white face.

Today I accompanied Ella to a café with steel beams in the ceiling and overstuffed couches arranged in little circles. Ella got a decaf latte and sat down to glance over someone's leftover newspaper. I felt antsy as the sweet bitterness of Ella's coffee settled over me.

Ella pulled out a novel in Japanese from her shoulder bag and began reading it, her brow wrinkling in concentration. I sighed and studied the dark circles that were a permanent fixture under Ella's eyes. Ella's nasal breathing and constant downward glances didn't annoy me. I felt tenderness, like a sweet ache beneath my ribs. This poor girl; I'd been tied to her for so long now. When did I come to understand her every flinch and sigh? Would things have turned out differently if I'd had someone like Ella before? I couldn't remember being able to read my father in this way.

A young stranger leaned across the sofa table behind Ella. "You can read that?" she asked Ella. Her sweatshirt had a local college name on it. Black, square-framed glasses perched on the end of a short, wide nose. She had dark eyes, with a trace of epicanthic fold, and thick hair cut short in a black brush that stood up from her head.

I winced. Ella usually had sarcastic replies ready for comments like that. It was her way of fending off the perils of social contact.

“Not really, I’m just pretending,” said Ella.

“I’m sorry, that sounded completely stupid,” said the woman. “It’s just that I’m in my second year of Japanese at school and I’m still in awe of anyone who knows more than ten kanji.”

Ella looked up at her in surprise.

“I’ve seen you here before, reading Japanese,” the woman added, almost stuttering. “I thought you might have some advice, or something. I mean it’s nice to talk to someone in the same boat.” The woman put a hand with chewed fingernails on the back of the couch.

Ella’s looked at the girl’s face, and then back down to her Japanese book. She picked a cuticle hanging from her thumb. What was this? Ella looked back up at the girl, eyes making contact for second. Did Ella see something in this girl? Something that kept her from being afraid?

I felt a familiar excitement and tension, the same feeling I’d had as a little girl when my father had called me over to unveil one of his finished carvings. For the first time since I’d become a Noppera-bo, I thought about how my father truly watched his daughter’s face. I saw how he breathed a sigh of relief when I smiled at his creations. I had been as blind as Ella.

Ella’s surprise turned into several beats of staring past the girl’s shoulder. The girl blushed. She lifted her own mug in Ella’s direction in a kind of farewell and turned to go. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

No, no Ella. Don’t leave it like this. I wanted to shake her, as if I could force her to stop building walls by breaking up her insides.

Ella sighed. She flushed red. She took a deep breath. A smile teased at the corner of her mouth.

“Yeah,” said Ella in a whisper. “It’s nice to talk to someone in the same boat.” Now I was confused, because Ella was laughing, but her eyes were shiny with unshed tears.

“Okay,” said Ella. And then again, louder, “Okay.”

It was an answer to some internal question, but I felt the word like a blow to the sternum. It shook me, loosening things, pushing other things aside, revealing a hard, smooth place. I looked at Ella, poor, hopeless, dear Ella, who could laugh like that, a self-mocking, but forgiving laugh. And the hard place cracked. Inside was a murky slush of memories. I remembered ignoring the morning greeting of the next-door neighbor’s son, flustered by his kindness. I remembered looking everywhere but at the customers’ eyes as I added up their purchases. And I remembered not going to sit by my father’s side as he lingered over his evening tea with a far away look in his eyes.

Inside me, something was melting. The melting feeling, not all that unpleasant, extended to my limbs, my skin wavering and swelling in odd places.

I saw Ella go after the young girl. The two women sat together and compared kanji dictionaries. Ella didn’t make an excuse to leave. She stuttered and fidgeted, but she stayed, speaking to the girl, her dark eyes large with her own daring.

The conversation continued as I flowed and rippled with heat. Finally, I burned so brightly, I knew no more. This was strange. This was not how it had ended with the others. The heat grew more intense until I felt incandescent. The patina and burden of years burned away.

Somewhere, I heard Ella laughing.

And here, something emerged from the brightness. It was a face. It had fine, dark eyes, just like Ella's. I reached out and pulled it on like a mask. I reached up to touch the face, and my fingertips felt wetness. I was crying.

The Other Magic

By
Gere McClellan

Meriadme stared at the tiny gears, her brow creased in bemused irritation. Why wouldn't the silly spell run its course? Granted, its works were ancient. But she'd spent the better part of the last week disassembling it, cleaning every delicate tooth, repairing every worn piece and oiling every moving part.

The spell had worked yesterday, when she'd finally finished putting it back together. But it had frozen up overnight, quite inexplicably, and that wouldn't do. Lios wanted it ready today, and he had all the patience typical of youth. None, that was to say.

It should have been vexing, but Meriadme smiled ever so slightly as she slowly, carefully began tracing the power train with an expert touch.

Ah! The chain on the counterweight had slipped slightly, probably when the mouse tried climbing it. She ought to have thought of that. She straightened the chain with the slightest touch of her forefinger and the spell spun back into life.

"Wonderful! You've got it working again!"

Meriadme glanced up as Lios rushed across the room, grinning at the tiny flakes starting to fall from somewhere just below the ceiling. "You said it was impossible, but I knew you could fix it. You can fix anything."

Meriadme bowed, brushing the creases out of her long, embroidered robe. "It was impossible, my lord; that's my specialty," she said, smiling at her own bravado. "Actually, it was more a matter of cleaning than of repairing, though," she admitted. "These old works can be rather exacting."

The flakes were bigger now, and falling more rapidly.

"How long will it take to fill the room?" Lios demanded. "Will it be ready tonight, for the dinner?"

"With the proper adjustments," Meriadme said, carefully closing the silver door that hid the spell's inner workings. "Someone will have to monitor the humidity levels so it doesn't end up dehydrating your guests. One of your mages should be able to manage it."

"Can't you?" Lios entreated. He brushed snow from his smooth brown hair. "Won't you stay?"

"My time is costly, Lios," she told him.

"I mean... as my special guest?" he tried, smiling shyly.

Inwardly, Meriadme sighed. Lios Erduin wasn't the first to try this line with her. But for all his charms, the handsome young lord was little more than a child. "I have several commissions awaiting my attention," she said. "I put them aside for a few days as a personal favor to your brother Tiam, but I must return to my workshop now that it's is done."

"But there's something else," Lios said softly.

"There's always something else."

"Beg pardon?"

"Please, Lios," Meriadme said. "Do you think you're the first one to implore me to repair some frippery and then suddenly decide it's time to invest the walls with a few extra defenses?"

"It's not that at all," the young man said.

"You fear you've been ensorcelled? You think I can make you king?"

"No, Meriadme. It's Tiam."

"What about Tiam?"

"I think he wants to marry Althilde."

The spellmaker flinched. "Althilde Gornam? Why? Surely he's not fooled by her?"

"I thought maybe she'd used a love philter on him or something, but you would have sensed that as soon as you saw him, wouldn't you?"

"Those things don't work anyhow, Lios; they're just a fraud. What put it in his head to marry *her*?"

"Please," Lios said, touching the sleeve of her robe, "at least stay for lunch and let me tell you what's been going on."

"Very well," Meriadme acquiesced, pulling her arm away. "I'll listen, at least."

Lord Lios Erduin served a simple lunch on a simple table — one that stood still on its own four legs and was set with plain china, not enchanted serving pieces. Chicken roasted with rosemary and sage waited quietly on its platter, not whistling so much as a note. That sort of thing was all the rage in Parsidon, but it was widely known Meriadme scorned such silliness.

Meriadme scorned many things, for that matter; her attitude was part of the reason her clients were willing to pay so much for her services. That, and the simple fact there were very few who could match her skills. Unlike most occult practitioners, she refused to limit herself to a single discipline. It was widely known she had studied witchcraft, sorcery, enchantments, magery and transformations. She'd even gone to the unheard-of length of familiarizing herself with the physical sciences. There were whispers she had dabbled in darker matters as well.

"Tell me why you think Tiam is interested in Althilde," Meriadme said as a servant removed the salad plates. "But first, explain why you waited until today to mention this."

"The dinner tonight was his idea, but he wouldn't tell me why," Lios explained. "I was so surprised that he'd suggested such a thing - that he actually wanted to see people socially - I wanted to do something special."

"Thus the snow-speller," Meriadme reasoned.

Lios nodded. "It wasn't until yesterday that he told me that he and Althilde had an announcement to make. They plan to tell everyone tonight."

"And he didn't say why?"

"He says it's what he wants, but I'm afraid he's doing it for me. A union of our two families would give me considerably more clout on the council."

"It had occurred to me."

"The price is too high," Lios said. "And Althilde wouldn't agree to it unless she thought it was to her greater advantage."

"Of course it's to her advantage. She has that rare ability to fool people into thinking she's interested in the common good," Meriadme agreed. "Very dangerous."

"And more dangerous if she has the Erduin name behind her."

"You could forbid it," Meriadme suggested.

"What if he really is in love with her, though? What if he sees something in her we don't?"

"People who count on a dragon's better nature seldom live to count beyond ten."

"This is Tiam we're talking about," Lios reminded her. "I owe him so much."

"You consider it a debt; he doesn't. He never wanted to be Lord Erduin."

"But if he's found something he *does* want, he will have it," Lios insisted. "Please, won't you speak with him?"

Meriadme shook her head. "What would Tiam tell me what he wouldn't tell you?"

"I'm still just his little brother. You're his friend."

"Is Althilde here yet? Perhaps I could speak with her."

Lios grinned. "She's in the guest suite right now. I'll have you announced."

"Well, Mistress Meriadme; I'd heard you were here," Althilde said, adjusting the waistline of the pale green gown she was wearing as greeted her guest. "I assumed you'd be busy this afternoon."

"I am."

"Oh?" Althilde said. She walked over to the long mirror. "Is this the right gown, do you think?"

"The color doesn't suit your fair hair, but it does signify fertility. Are you that anxious to get started on an Erduin heir?"

Althilde giggled. "Whatever are you talking about, Meri? This one makes my hips look big," she said. "Although you might think that signifies fertility, too, I guess." She giggled again. "Oh, Meri! You think the silliest things."

"Do I?"

"What would you say if I wanted to wear red, I wonder? Or black?"

"I notice you're not considering white."

Althilde laughed. "In the snow, dear? I'd blend right in."

"Of course," Meriadme said drily.

"Whyever are you so concerned about all of this?"

"I think Tiam's fooling himself."

The other woman smiled. "I don't concern myself with other peoples' motives, so long as I feel it's all for the best. This was his idea; I'd be foolish not to agree."

Meriadme gazed at her a long moment, long enough to make the other woman wonder if some spell was awork. "Wear gold then, Althilde; let them see what it is you really want."

When she left Althilde, Meriadme had every intention of going straight to Tiam, but she found herself going back upstairs to the ballroom instead, to check on the snow-speller. It was doing well; there was almost an inch of dry powder on the floor, and Lios' servants were carefully arranging candelabras and torchieres so as to ensure they'd be artfully draped in snowy white by the time guests arrived.

Meriadme opened the workings' silver door and stood staring at the tiny gears inside, watching for any fault or slipping.

As one gear turned, it pushed another. The second moved a third; each in minute, controlled increments. The movement of each gear affected every other gear; one tiny slip and the whole mechanism failed. But nothing moved at random. If a gear did slip, it did so for a reason, some failing in the spell.

"Meriadme?"

The low voice broke her reverie, but she did not look away from the gears. "I cannot find the pattern, Tiam," she said softly.

"Some patterns can only be seen from the proper perspective," the dark-bearded man said, grinning wryly.

"So tell me, then: Why Althilde Gornam?"

"Because no one else would do."

"It makes no sense," Meriadme said with unaccustomed vehemence as she spun to face Tiam.

"It makes no sense to *you*," Tiam corrected her. "There's a difference."

"I'm not even sure Althilde knows why you're doing this, Tiam; don't try to tell me it's for love."

"You asked Althilde about this?" Tiam asked, chuckling. "That must have been interesting."

"You're evading the question."

"But I am doing this for love, Meriadme," he said, smiling. "You just don't see it, do you?"

"Quit taunting me, Tiam!" Meriadme noted the snow around her was beginning to melt. She drew a deep breath; checked her temper. "This isn't a joke, Tiam; I thought you realized how dangerous a woman like Althilde can be."

"You are, of course, merely concerned for the dynastic stability of the Erduin line? Stability being good for business, of course."

She glared at him, oblivious as all the snow within several yards of her feet evaporated. "Tiam, I already apologized for what I said that day we...."

"And I accepted that apology," he said, cutting her off. "I'm sorry I brought it up. But I assure you, I know what I'm doing."

"You don't," she said. "You can't possibly."

He smiled again, that annoying, all-knowing smile of his that made her want to both slap his face and smile, too. "Do *you* know what you're doing?" he asked. "Or did you intend to melt all of the snow two hours before the guests arrive?"

Flustered, Meriadme glanced about. He was right; only the farthest corners of the room remained covered in white. Red-faced, she turned back to the spellworks; when she looked up again, he was gone.

Meriadme stood in a well-lit corner her guest chamber, beset by unfamiliar doubts. Other than on business, she did not attend social events; she had a strict policy against such things. She certainly hadn't thought to bring a gown suitable for such a gathering when Lios summoned her; not that she owned one, anyway. She could have worn her ordinary robes, perhaps; they were simple but finely made. But such somber clothing would have drawn attention, and that was the last thing she wanted.

So Lios had offered his staff's help in assembling a suitable ensemble, and skilled hands had quickly altered an old blue dress. Now properly dressed, she whispered a quick spell and her straight brown hair coiled itself into elaborate braids. With her right ring finger, she sketched a circle in the air around her face. A shimmering mask of her features appeared in the air before her. Working quickly, she added color: pink to the cheeks, a little kohl around the eyes and on the lashes, a glistening, soft red to the lips. Once satisfied, she carefully placed the mask over her pale, slender face. The mask vanished, leaving the cosmetics behind.

Meriadme crossed the room to check her work in the small mirror above the dry sink: quite acceptable, if barely recognizable.

She felt foolish, though, laden with all the trappings of feminine artifice. It might be wiser, she told herself, to leave Tiam to his sorry fate and go on back to her workshop. Might be? *Would* be. But the man was convinced he was making the right choice. Maybe if she stayed he'd see things differently.

Cursing her curiosity, Meriadme made her way back up to the ballroom, uncertain how to carry herself in the unfamiliar full skirt. The snow was still falling when she arrived. They'd had to run the spell at near-blizzard conditions for a while to make up for all that had melted. The results were not quite as graceful as one would have hoped, but the guests who already filled the hall seemed suitably impressed. Snow spellworks were notoriously cantankerous.

Tiam laughed when he saw Meriadme's futile attempts to keep her hem dry.

"Count yourself lucky I gave up curses," she growled at him, "or you'd have three heads and flipper feet right now. Where's Althilde?"

Tiam shrugged, unconcerned. "Late. Planning to make an entrance, I imagine."

Meriadme stared at him. "You don't care?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's typical of her, though she didn't know she'd miss seeing you arrive in full frippery."

"Damn you."

"You look lovely, by the way."

"I feel like a fool," she scowled, blinking away a snowflake that had landed in her thickened eyelashes.

"You shouldn't. What's wrong with being a woman instead of a wizard for a change?"

"I don't have to wear silk and facepaint to be a woman, Tiam."

"I'd noticed; I was just wondering if you had," he said, nodding a greeting to a passing guest.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at her. "I thought I'd made that clear once before."

She glared at him, exasperated. "We agreed to put that day behind us."

"We agreed to put that particular argument behind us. The underlying issue remains unresolved," he said calmly. "Please don't melt the snow again."

"Quit with the mysteries, Tiam: What are you up to?" Meriadme said, glancing at the bare floor near her feet. At least her hem might dry now. "What is it I'm missing?"

"Listen, Meri, you've been a good friend. You're concerned; you spoke your piece. I listened. Why does it still matter what I do?"

"Because you don't love her. You can't. And I don't know why else you'd do this to me."

"To you?"

"Damn it, Tiam. You know what I mean." Thanks to the damp fabric around her ankles, she was quite literally steaming, she realized with chagrin.

Ignoring that, Tiam smiled and glanced toward the door, where there was a flurry of movement. A flourish of trumpets greeted Althilde's arrival, and Meriadme's heart froze. The woman had selected a blue gown in the end, just a shade darker than Meriadme's. But Althilde's was draped in jewels and gold, and the falling snow sparkled on her delicate shoulders as Lios formally greeted her near the door.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Tiam whispered; a smattering of voices throughout the room echoed him. The crowd watched as Althilde crossed the room.

"Stop it, Tiam," Meriadme whispered, and the snow fell more heavily. "Please."

He glanced at her and hesitated before stepping forward to greet Althilde, cautiously, for the floor nearest Meriadme was suddenly coated with ice.

"Welcome, Miss Gornam," he said. "I am so glad you could join us this evening."

"The pleasure is mine, Sir Tiam," Althilde purred, bowing slightly.

"You honor us," Tiam replied, lowering his voice. "But I'm afraid I must beg your pardon for a moment."

"Oh?" Althilde asked merrily, glancing at Meriadme. "But I've just arrived."

"My sincerest apologies, m'lady."

"Of course, then, sir; our matters will keep."

With a nod, Tiam headed toward the door. After a moment, Meriadme followed uncertainly, treading carefully across the ice.

A few people greeted her as she passed; all would-be clients. To those with no current need of her services, she was as good as invisible. For once, she was thankful for that.

She found Tiam seated on a bench in the quiet hallway, hands covering his face, and stood before him silently, waiting.

"I'm sorry," he said at length. "I should have known it was a bad idea when Althilde agreed to it so readily."

"That surprised you?" she asked, amazed.

"It's not what you think," he said, bending low enough to hide his face. "I'm sorry. I told Lios we had an announcement to make, that's all; I thought that would be enough to make you curious. The rest... just happened. We're not betrothed. We're founding a charity, she and I."

"And you let me think —"

He looked up. "I wanted you to think that. I wanted you —"

"Wanted what?" Meriadme demanded, blue sparks cracking the air around her.

"I wanted you," he whispered. "I love you. I thought maybe I could make you listen for once."

"By all that Is, Tiam, I already told you that's just not possible," Meriadme swore. "I'm too busy to marry, and you need a fine lady at your side."

"Don't you tell people the impossible is your specialty?"

Meriadme scowled; she hesitated; she closed her eyes and sighed. Then she smiled slightly.

"I stand corrected, Tiam. Apparently it's yours."

Riding Fourth

By

Margaret Yang and Harry R. Champion

The police station was one square room, divided into cubicles, with a reception area the size of a welcome mat. Walter peered through the tiny window in the door until someone decided he was harmless enough, or persistent enough, and buzzed him in. He stood inside, grateful for the warmth, and waited to be noticed.

The officer, female and petite, looked like a high-school kid, except for the very adult weapon she wore holstered on her uniform belt. She stared at Walter's tie. "Yeah?"

"I'm a fourth," Walter said. "I was picked up in Novi for a ride downtown. The occupants of the car robbed me."

"How much they get?"

Walter stared down at the officer. Her name was embroidered on a patch above her shirt pocket. Linden. "What difference does that make?"

"Well, you know, there's robbery, and there's felonious larceny."

A hundred and twenty dollars for the round trip. Enough for his wife's meds for a week plus some to chip away at the hospital bills. They owed him that much. He sighed. "They took sixty dollars, the entire morning's fee, and dumped me. I have their first names, and the last name of one of them, although that could be a fake. I have the license plate number."

Linden shifted from foot to foot. "So, they didn't actually take anything of yours, they just stiffed you for the fourthing fee?"

"The fee was mine!"

Heads prairie-dogged above the cubicles at his outburst. A tall cop propped an elbow on the divider. "You need any help, Linden?"

Linden put her hands on her hips. "Nope. I can handle him. Your name, sir?"

Walter looked at the other cops, all young like Linden, although most of them much bigger. They waited, hiding smiles. Once again, Walter found himself the morning entertainment.

"Walter Glass," he said.

"Mr. Glass here isn't going to give me any trouble. Are you, Mr. Glass?"

Walter dropped his shoulders and put on his fourthing face. Pleasant. Non-

threatening. The other cops disappeared behind the dividers to the sound of keyboards and ringtones. Somewhere in the background, a loud printer spat out hardcopy. He turned to Officer Linden. "You mentioned a report?"

Linden put one hand to her cheek and tilted her head to the side. "That's the thing, see? I'm not sure what kind of report to fill out, here. I know it's not a T-41. Maybe a 38?" She pulled out a hand-held and scrolled through screens. "Hold on a sec." She called over one of the dividers. "Hey, Bennett, what was that thing you had last year, where the working woman was stiffed by her john? What form did you use?"

Walter drew himself up to his full height and stared down his nose. "Fourthing is legal, Officer Linden. Half the city wouldn't get to work without us."

Linden shrugged. "Do you want to fill out the form or not?"

Walter gritted his teeth. "Yes."

"I had her fill out a UNU-38," said Bennett from his cubicle.

"Right. That's the one." Linden beamed at Walter. "I'm going to have you fill out a UNU-38 report. If you'll give me your e-dress, I'll text it to you."

Walter gave her the e-dress and pulled out his hand-held. He dutifully filled in the blanks in the form, knowing that the police wouldn't even file it, much less act on it. The money was gone, half a day's work was gone. It was already 9:35. He should have been sitting in a nice, warm coffee shop by now, texting all of his data processing, figuring out the accounting for someone else's problem. He glanced out the window. No bus stop, the monorail was kilometers away, and he couldn't afford a taxi, even if one would come down here.

He turned his attention back to the form, typing, erasing, retyping, trying to tell them what had happened.

The space beside the on-ramp, a strip of cracked and shifted paving, was only twenty square meters. Not much room for the seven men who stood there, but Walter had added himself to the group, offering a charitable nod to two others he recognized. In better weather, they might have spread onto the grassy verge that sloped down to frame the highway, but that was a mistake. You looked odd standing on the slope, too angular, and if you sat down, looking like you were resting, worse. No one got chosen off the grass. And Detroit in January? A moot point. The city's assiduous salting of the roads coated the grass with a grimy slush that wrecked your shoes.

Walter checked his watch - 6:31 a.m. - and concentrated on looking alert, but not anxious. Enthusiastic, but not eager. The right frame of mind was important. A ride would be nice, but I don't need it. The traffic's tempo picked up and even the less experienced among the other men stood a little straighter. Walter changed his stance and faced the ramp directly: man waiting for bus. Without a trace of impatience, ignoring the quiet tsk he heard behind him, he kept his eyes on the cars as they approached.

A cream BMW. The headlights behind it picked out only three silhouettes before the wash of the overhead streetlamps turned the windshield into a glare of reflected light. It slowed.

It was always tempting to take a step forward, but here was the test. If everyone surged forward like puppies in a shop window, the choice became random, exasperated, and ultimately, a matter of take-it-or-leave-it. He held himself back and waited. The passenger window slid down and the man inside tilted his head in Walter's direction.

Walter took three purposeful strides to the car. "There and back?"

"One hundred at six o'clock."

Cheap bastards. "Sixty dollars, twice."

"Hugh! We'll be late," said the woman at the wheel. "Make a deal and let's go."

Walter was already opening the Beamer's rear door. He slid in next to an older fellow reading an honest-to-God magazine. He hadn't gotten much of a look at the guy in shotgun and now all he could see was the back of a head, blond hair shorn close in a standard executive cut. The smell of coffee hit him hard, from the travel cup held by the driver, a blond woman. She put down her cup and leaned into the mirror to search for a gap in the line of cars.

Walter spared a quick look at the other fourths he'd left behind. Now all of them were fronting up as he had, indifferent poses forgotten in the face of his success. Amateurs. He took the trio of twenty-dollar bills handed to him and folded them once, putting them in the breast pocket of his suit.

The man in the back seat watched Walter the entire time, as if he couldn't believe his cash was disappearing into a fourth's pocket. As the car surged forward and into a gap barely long enough to admit both bumpers, the man stuck out a hand to him. "Lorne Vandessy."

"Walter," he said, gauging the hand he was holding before applying firm pressure in return. "Walter Glass."

Lorne barked sudden laughter, exposing an array of artificially-whitened teeth, then tapped his knuckles against his chin as if to keep back further mirth. "Forgive me," he said with a grin. "I'm a lover of puns."

"Me too." He wasn't, but the phonetic coincidence of his name made for a conversational opening. "It runs in the family."

Lorne went for it. "Oh?"

"All the way from Grandma Crystal down to little baby Stained."

"So, Walter, what do you do?" Shotgun—Hugh—entering the conversation.

"Accounting. Office-free." He shrugged as if to say, these days, what else? "Mostly straight number crunch, but every once in a while, something interesting." Get over to them, quick. "Do you all work together?"

The driver punctuated a heavy pause with a sigh, and Walter wondered what conversational minefield he was entering. "No."

"We live in the same neighborhood," Lorne amplified.

Walter put on a smile he didn't feel. Great. A downtown scatter. It always made pickup more complex. The ideal carpool had people who worked together and also lived near each other, but that was rare. Second best were co-workers, with one downtown drop-off. Going to two or three workplaces increased the chance that they'd miss Walter, or take the surface streets home, or hire another fourth. He'd be stuck

downtown.

The driver turned her head for a beat and said briskly, "Claire." She looked to be in her mid-thirties, with neatly bobbed hair and a precise suit. She took another sip of coffee, and Walter swallowed back his longing for some. Sharilyn had felt well enough for some toast and tea this morning, so he'd joined her. No coffee.

"Pleased to meet you, Claire." Politeness connected them for the few seconds it took to flash down the on-ramp, past signs spelling out the minimum passenger laws, reminding drivers that violators were subject to heavy fines.

The revitalization of Detroit as the automobile capital of the world had produced some peculiar side-effects. Expanding the city limits to include the suburban sprawl around it, transforming vast tracts of the once-great neighborhoods from their abandonment and decay into soothing greenswards, forging a new city identity out of disparate cultural mixes, all had required certain sacrifices. In the Motor City, public transportation would never lose its stigma and the overcrowded roadways, coupled with the spike in prices of every kind of fuel, allowed the passage of the Minimum Passenger Requirement Act.

Commuter traffic once again flowed smoothly because every lane of every highway required at least four passengers per car, no matter the make or model. Incomplete carpools either took surface streets or hired extra riders—fourths—to fill the quota. Fourths who saw themselves as place-holders and space-fillers soon lost out to fourths like Walter, who knew that people paying upward of twenty dollars apiece just to get to work on time expected a charming social chameleon. Walter was able to carry on a conversation about everything from football to the war in Persia to women's handbags.

Lorne folded the magazine he'd been reading and tapped it against his thigh. A business digest, one of the glossies, which meant big auto or big pharma. "Damned unions are trying to screw us again," he said.

Ah. That would be big pharma. The auto unions had lost power decades ago. The pharma unions were just getting started. "China?" Walter asked. "Or Kenya?"

"Kenya," Lorne said. "The Chinese know their place."

Hugh turned around. "And what place would that be?"

"You know, their place."

"No, I don't know. Do you, Claire? Do you, Walter?" Hugh glanced at Walter with raised eyebrows, eyes sparkling, inviting him to join in.

So, they wanted a lively debate. Fun. It ate up a long commute so much better than inane pleasantries. "Rexo-Pharm, right?" Walter asked. "They've got you by the short and curlies, Lorne. Too many of the products are time-sensitive. Every day of strike will cost the pharm-factories a year in productivity."

"Like I said," Lorne insisted. "They're trying to screw us."

"As opposed to them getting screwed?"

"They're independent contractors. Not one of them is an employee of Rexo-Pharm. What do they need a union for?"

Walter glanced at Claire, who continued to drive in silence. So far, he was taking it as consent, but she was hard to read. "Fourths are forming a union," he tried. "At the

last meeting we—”

“They’re what?!”

“Lorne. . .” Claire warned.

“But it’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!”

“I don’t care,” Claire said. “Just keep it down.”

Even Hugh looked dismayed. “Fourths don’t need a union. That’s all there is to it.”

Walter sat back and folded his arms. He’d found the button to push. Let the debate begin.

Lorne glared at Walter, but continued more quietly. “Tell me, Waterboy, just who they expect to do any collective bargaining with?”

Walter shifted his feet to a more comfortable position in the footwell. “It isn’t about rates. Well it is, but it’s more than that.” It’s about respect, he wanted to say, but did not. Lorne was too touchy. He hadn’t expected the name-calling to start so soon. “If we get organized, we can have standard rates, standard pick-up places, maybe even one of those bus shelters.”

Lorne scoffed. “What’s next, health insurance? You’re moonlighters. Nobody does this for a standard job.”

Which would be fine if he had benefits from his other job, if Sharilyn didn’t have cancer, and a hundred other ifs. He saw Lorne staring at him under down-pointing eyebrows, waiting for his response. Time to give a little. “Wouldn’t it be easier for carpools to know in advance where to get a fourth and exactly how much it would cost?”

Hugh snorted. “But the sport of haggling—”

“You mean the art,” Lorne said.

“You mean the pain in the behind,” Claire said.

Walter’s head bobbed up and down. “My point exactly.”

Claire tilted her rearview mirror so she could see the back seat. Her stare knifed into Walter. “I meant you.”

“Me?” Walter froze. Time to backpedal. But to where?

“Yes, you,” Claire said. “All I want is a peaceful ride to work. Is that too much to ask? But no, you have to come in here, in my car, and rile these two up. I mediate all day at work. I come home and mediate between my kids. I am so done with mediating.”

“But we were just talking,” Walter said. “Just a friendly debate.”

Claire tapped angrily on the lid of her coffee cup. “You should know better.”

She was right. He should have known better. Never antagonize the driver. Every fourth knew that as well as he knew how to knot a tie.

Hugh put a calming hand on Claire’s shoulder. “There’s not much you can do about it now. We bought him, we paid for him, he’s ours for the duration.”

“Like hell.” Claire shook off Hugh’s hand, put on her signal and drove toward the nearest exit.

“You can’t leave him,” Lorne said. “We’ll be late.”

Claire punched the GPS on her dashboard. “It’s my car. I’m driving. I say he goes. We take the surface streets from here on in.” She guided the car down the off-ramp.

Walter stared out the window. Not here. Anywhere but here. This was the first ring, the no-man's land between the haves of downtown and the haves of the suburbs. Here, twenty kilometers from Detroit proper, was the realm of the have-nots—too far to walk, not far enough to drive. He looked desperately for landmarks. Few open businesses stood between dark and broken buildings. A storefront church, a police sub-station, an electronics recycler. Hand-lettered signs in front of a massage parlor advertised temporary work. As opposed to what? Walter wondered.

He knew he had to apologize, and quick, but to whom, and by saying what? Claire hated his guts, yet to take her side meant alienating Hugh and Lorne, who would then campaign for his ejection.

"I'm sorry," Walter said, trying to take in the entire car.

"Get on with it, Claire," Lorne said. "We're in a crappy neighborhood, we're about to lose our fourth, and I don't need to be late for work on top of it."

Claire parked near a house with warped siding and a sagging roof. She dropped the lock on his door. "Out."

"I am so sorry," Walter said. "I promise, I won't say another word."

"Not good enough," Claire said. "Sick of you. Bye-bye."

Walter put one hand on the door handle, eyes down, shoulders slumped, the picture of contriteness. "Please," he nearly whispered. "Please don't do this. I have a sick wife and no insurance. I need the work."

"Oh, come on, like we've never heard that one before."

"No, really!"

"Wait," Hugh said.

Yes, wait! Walter felt the moist sweat on his upper lip and forehead. This tiny cage of steel and plastic was his only haven, his only way back home. He gripped the door handle, squeezing all his tension into it.

Hugh turned in his seat and regarded Walter. "He didn't get us all the way downtown. I say he owes us a refund."

"What? No!" Out of the question. He'd already lost the fee for the ride home, he wasn't about to give up the sixty dollars in his pocket too.

"That's right," Claire said. "He didn't get us all the way downtown."

"C'mon, fourth, give it up," Lorne said, leaning into him.

Walter backed away and popped the door handle, but before he could exit the car, Lorne leaned over and grabbed his suit lapels. He snaked a hand into Walter's pocket and grabbed the cash, then shoved Walter away.

No. Unacceptable. Walter couldn't decide which was worse, losing the money, or letting these well-heeled idiots fleece him. He lunged at Lorne, too late, as Lorne was already out the car from the other side. Walter followed, chasing him around the car like a Chinese fire-drill gone bad. Too late, he realized that he'd left his door open on the other side, and already knew, seconds before it happened, that Lorne would hop in and Claire would hit the accelerator.

They left him standing in the street, shouting curses after the retreating BMW. Through the rear window, he could see Lorne lean forward to pat Hugh on the back. Congratulatory. He wondered, was he their first conquest, or was this a daily game?

And did the fourths ever win?

Walter sent back the police form, waiting for Officer Linden's confirmation, which finally came twenty minutes later.

Walter walked around the divider to stand in front of Linden's desk. "So now what?"

Linden looked up from her hand-held. "Oh, you may go."

Go? Where was there to go? And more importantly, how? "So, what about the car? The people who robbed me? Will you even try to find them?"

"Of course."

"Of course," he echoed. "Of course."

"But you have to understand, Mr. Glass, with the resources that we have—and even if we do find them, it's your word against theirs."

"And the word of a fourth . . ."

"Ah," said Linden. "You do understand."

Walter remained standing in her cubicle, understanding nothing. He waited. He was a fourth. Waiting was one of his most useful skills. He did not threaten. He did not loom. He waited with head and shoulders down, eyes cast to the floor. This had to work.

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Glass?"

"Just one question."

Linden smiled, obviously relieved that he wasn't going to make any more demands. "Go ahead."

Walter smiled back. "I was just wondering..."

"Yes, Mr. Glass?"

Best fourthing face. Pleasant. This *had* to work. "Can I have a ride?"

Grinding to a Halt

By

Gerri Leen

We should have known something was wrong when they solved the Black Dahlia murder. How many years had it been, and suddenly her diary just pops out of the earth after a little earthquake (by L.A. standards), and they learn some sleazeball porn financier had invited her to his house for the weekend, and that led them to find his diary buried in the cellar of the rest home he died in? I mean how often does that happen? Only we weren't paying attention to how weird it was (probably because nothing defines weird like the whole Black Dahlia thing). We just watched. Movies-of-the-weeks were made, Elizabeth Short became a household word again for about nine months, and then life went back to normal.

Only, not really.

About a week after that, over in Scotland, old Nessie finally popped to the surface and stayed awhile. News crews came; photos were snapped. She turned out to be some survivor from an Apatosaurusy water dinosaur clan. It was in all the papers, and she even turned out to like dogs. I mean to play with, not to eat. She was a vegetarian, lived on lake algae and the occasional head of lettuce thrown in by wasted picnickers. Nessie was all the rage for a while, then life went back to normal.

Only, not really.

Then they figured out crop circles. Wasn't UFOs at all but this retarded-looking stealth plane the government had dreamed up. Kind of looked like a flying garbage can. Only a schmooshed up one, 'cause it wasn't very tall, just round with a lid thing. You know, UFO-like. Been around since the forties and they'd never had one crash--at least not where they couldn't do damage control. This one made an uncontrolled landing as they like to say. Bounced its way across a Bucks County field not far from where they filmed *Signs*. Everyone thought it was ironic. And then life went back to normal.

Only--hell, you get the idea.

Then it seemed like stuff started to solve itself, almost all on its own, like how many lone gunmen there really were, and what the Nazca lines meant, and how the pyramids were built. They found out what Stonehenge was really for. (An ancient disco: who would have guessed?) Easter Island turned out to be early abstract art.

Mona Lisa wasn't smiling because she had no teeth. The only unexpected books in the Vatican library were some eighteenth-century porn (they'd read it for the articles, of course). And Richard the Third didn't off his nephews. Even back then, babysitters were saying: "Someone's going to end up getting hurt." Only roughhousing in the Tower had proved fatal, and this babysitter knew she was going to take the heat. So she ran off after shoving the kids' bodies into the crawlspace under the stairwell: voila, a historical mystery for the ages solved.

We found out Anne Boleyn didn't have a sixth finger, Rasputin wasn't crazy, and Marilyn Monroe died just the way Spoto said she did. Jack the Ripper was the prince's doctor, after all; Shakespeare turned out to have written his own plays; virgin queen Elizabeth the First was not a hermaphrodite (or a virgin); and the Bermuda Triangle was actually one of several terrestrial black holes, which explained Amelia Earhart and the *Marie-Celeste*, as well as a whole lot of other things.

But it was the day Elvis showed up at the Dubuque *Wal-Mart* that we knew something big was happening. Things just sort of went to hell for a while then. People went nuts and panicked, buying up milk and bread the way they do before a snowstorm back east. (Oh, and cat litter, even if they don't have cats.) Other folks tried desperately to cling to their routine, going to work and eating lunch at noon like always (although not with bread because the panickers had bought all of it out, even that weird Pennsylvania Dutch potato bread that tastes really good but is sort of an unnatural color of yellow).

I was one of those who decided to live in the middle. I didn't see the point of showing up at my going-nowhere job at the video store, but I also wasn't going to waste my time looting the Seven-Eleven for pork rinds and beef jerky to go with my *Big Gulp* (or sitting in my dump of an apartment with bread and milk and cat litter). So I settled back with my best friend Eric in his mom's basement--she even provided her normal accompaniment of "When are you two deadbeats going to get off your asses and do something?"--and waited for what would come (sort of like those guys in *Shaun of the Dead*, harpy mom and all, only no cute girlfriend in sight).

We waited.

And waited.

We learned later that we were the lucky ones. In other parts of the country, stuff just started to wink out. I don't mean the lights went out. I mean the place that was, say, Eugene, Oregon just suddenly didn't exist. At first they thought there was a sort of order--Ephrata, Eugene, Eureka--and it was being perpetrated by some "E"-hating terrorist. But then Manassas disappeared and shot that theory to hell.

Some scientists thought the terrestrial black holes were to blame, and a bunch of people went down to take readings near the Bermuda Triangle. But then Key Largo vanished and so did the scientist's base camp and they came home really fast.

After that, no one wanted to go anywhere. What was left of the television and radio services had people on all the time, trying to predict what area was going to go next. They'd say Brooklyn was a goner, and then BAM! Honolulu was history. No one knew what to expect, and me and Eric pretty much sat in his basement drinking Bud

and watching what was left of life, and even his mom quit bitching at us and started to ask us if we wanted something to eat.

It was pretty damned depressing.

Some Christians commandeered the local access channel and said it was the Rapture. Then another group came on and said they were smoking weed or something, 'cause the Rapture just meant people were going to be taken up, not entire chunks of the country. And then the Vatican got on somehow--I guess if the Pope wants to access Channel Eight, he can--and said it was because our country was so sinful that it was being destroyed piece by piece.

We all were feeling pretty picked upon as Americans. And I had a hard time seeing that people in Ephrata were any more sinful than those partiers in Venice come Carnival time. They may not show body parts for beads like we do here, but they don't call it a revel for nothing. But then everything changed, and the Pope stopped telling us how bad we were 'cause the Pope up and disappeared along with everything north of the toe and heel of Italy and south of Austria.

It was a little scary seeing that big a hunk of the world just taken off the map the next day on the TV news. In fact, all over the map there were huge chunks of land just gone.

We weren't sure if it was scarier to have to wait for it to happen or to be the ones who were yanked out of existence.

That was the next series of debates: "Where did they go and what did they find?" "Is there any there there?" People tried desperately to understand what was happening. They turned to physicists first. But like always, each of them had their own idea and no one could agree. So they brought them all together onto one stage near Biloxi to hash it out, and that might have worked except the stage and most of the Gulf Coast disappeared. So maybe they're hashing it out in the other dimension. Or maybe they're just dead.

The only thing we know for sure is that we're running out of beer. The Bud is long gone, and we're down to a case of malt liquor we found in Eric's mom's basement. She's a recovering alcoholic, and God bless her, she's still off the sauce. Me, I'd be running down to the Glow Room for a pick-me-up, but she's sure the Lord has a plan for us.

I bet the Vatican thought that, too. And the Mormons--before Salt Lake City was swallowed up by nothingness. Mecca and Jerusalem are gone, too. The Ganges is still pretty much intact, and people are bathing like crazy.

"Dude!" Eric comes running down the stairs and I'm sure he's found beer finally. I look up and he's got this weird look on his face. "You have to see this."

He leads me upstairs, and his mom is cracking open a cold one and sucking it back, so I know it's bad. And we stand on his front porch and look into...nothing. It's not just dark. It's thick and it smells like empty houses, and it's cold like an open refrigerator door when you've been staring in thinking about what you want and your dad (before he died, anyway) yells at you to close it 'cause you're letting all the cold air out.

Eric's mom sits down on the porch step, her bare toes almost touching the nothingness, and starts to cry. I look on either side and see Eric's neighbors out on their yards and porches. Suddenly a bird flies right into the darkness. It's eerie. We hear it coming, making a weird, happy-sounding noise, and it flies right by my head so I hear its wings clear as day, and then it's just gone. No flapping noise. No happy song. Just...nothing.

Mister Jessup, who lives two houses down from Eric and has always hated us, looks our way. He waves, a pretty sad little wave with his hand just sort of sitting there, as if he's not sure what to do.

"You got everything you need, sir?" I yell out to him, even though I hate the old coot.

"I'm fine, kid. Thanks." Kid--even after nineteen years of chasing us off his property, he still doesn't know my name.

But he doesn't look fine, and then we hear a weird creaking sound (sort of like what the *Titanic* made in the movie before Cameron upended it and made the longest drowning ever, all so teenage girls could swoon) and suddenly Mister Jessup and his house and everything for the next half block is gone.

Eric's mom buries her head in her arms and makes noises that I think are prayers. I'm feeling sort of close to calling for some heavenly help, myself, only I'm not sure God can do anything. Because wouldn't he have done it by now? Or maybe he is doing it--maybe he's doing *this*? Maybe we are all sinners and this is judgment day?

"Boys," Eric's mom says, finally looking up at us. "You're good kids. I want you to know that. Damn fine young men." And then she stands up and dives right into the blackness.

I've never seen Eric cry. Not in my whole life. Not even when Mary Rittenauer kicked him in the nuts that time in seventh grade. He came close, but he didn't cry.

He cries now and suddenly I'm scared, and I grab him to make sure he doesn't try to follow his mom. But he doesn't try, he just sort of collapses into my arms and for a second I worry that someone will see us and call us gay or whatever, but then I realize there's hardly anyone left to see us. So I hold onto him and wonder if my old house is left, with the rose bush my mom planted before she got cancer and the swing my dad kicked to pieces after the funeral, just before he started the long job of drinking himself to death.

And then I start to cry, and Eric and I just stand there, holding on tight, and crying like two big girls until I realize there's this weird noise coming from behind us. And I look up, and it's like someone is re-making *The Birds*, 'cause there are tons of birds on the roof, staring at the blackness. And then one by one they take off and make that happy freakin' sound and just wink out of existence.

And we watch as more birds circle around until there's room enough to land, and they just keep flying into the hole in the world.

"You think they know something?" Eric wipes at his eyes, and he doesn't really look at me, so I know he's pretty embarrassed about the whole crying and hugging thing.

"Birds aren't exactly the brainstrust of the animal kingdom."

"I know but...they sound pretty happy."

"When don't they?" But he's right. They do sound extra happy. I just don't like where he seems to be heading: a swan dive into the void.

"What do you think is out there?" We've sat in his basement for days and never talked about it. We've listened to newscasters and ministers and scientists, and occasionally made a sound that meant "Yeah, right," or "Hmmm, maybe." But he and I have never talked about it.

"I don't know." I sound pissed and freaked, and my voice jumps the way it hasn't done since junior high. "And I don't want to find out."

But then there's the creak and the birds all rise up in a big wave of blackness, the way they do sometimes when you're driving and you nearly go off the road watching them zig and zag in one big group-think motion. And the birds start the happy cry again, and I look at Eric and smile (only my mouth shakes) and he smiles, too (and his mouth is shaking even worse than mine).

"Good times, huh?" It's the only thing I can think to say.

"The best, man. The best."

And I fling the can I'm still holding into the blackness, and I yell, "Okay, you son of a bitch. We're ready for you." And I'm glad I made it *we*, because Eric's my best friend in all the world, and if I'm going to have to die some weird death with spazzed-out birds, I'm glad he'll be there with me.

And I look at my watch, and as the cold hits me, I see the second hand stop just before everything goes black.

It stays black. For a second, anyway. My heart beats really fast, so I know I'm not dead, but I worry that I might be soon because it feels like my heart's going to pump itself out of my chest. Then the blackness is gone, just like a light was switched back on, and I see Mister Jessup still standing on his porch, and Eric's mom lying laughing on the grass below the steps, and the birds are flying all over like crazy things, only none of them poops on us.

"Is this heaven?" I ask Eric's mom.

She's looking up at us and shrugs, then she goes to get the beer can I chucked. And I look down at my watch and the second hand is moving again. Only it's running the wrong way. And I wonder if I'm getting younger suddenly, but I don't feel any different. I run into the house and turn on the water and stop it up so it collects, and then I let it drain. It's running the wrong way, too. And then I look outside, and the sky has gotten all dark and sort of orange the way it does in the winter just before a snowstorm starts. Only it was summer a few minutes ago.

Eric is looking out the window, and he turns and shakes his head. "You think it's summer in Australia?"

"Yeah, and maybe the water runs our way down there now."

He turns on the radio. The old mysteries may be solved, but it seems that where we are, what the hell happened to us, and how we'll ultimately be affected is now the biggest unsolved mystery of all.

"Weird, huh?" I look at Eric and we clasp hands for a second, and then I head out to see how my old house fared.

It's still standing, and the dog that lives there barks at me the same as ever. There are the roses my mom planted, and if time really was running backwards, I could stand here until she showed back up, and smiled at me, and ran her hand through my hair and muttered something about getting the scissors. But I don't think time is running backwards. I think it's just running different.

My mom's still dead. My dad, too. And I'm still me.

The damned dog's still barking like a fiend, too. The new owner comes out. His stare's just the same as ever, which is sort of comforting, and then he calls in his dog and shuts the door.

I think about my apartment and my job and all the things I probably should be doing now that there appears to be time for them again.

I could go back to school.

I could learn a trade.

I could do something--anything--with my life.

I turn and head back to Eric's and the news. I'll pick up some Buds on the way if I can find an open store. My future--now that I seem to have one again--can wait.

All Kinds of Monsters*By*

Matthew Howe

With a grunt, the fat man bent and yanked his bag off the carousel. Jacob watched him, his eyes wide with 11-year-old curiosity. The man was strange looking, gigantically fat, pale and doughy, with tiny eyes. He hadn't been on the plane with Jacob and his mom and dad, their luggage was coming up on another carousel.

The man set his bag on the floor. It was big. It was black, like so many other bags were, but different somehow. Blacker. As if it ate the light that fell upon it. There was something Jacob didn't like about the bag. Just looking at it gave him the chills. He was about to turn away when the bag squirmed.

That's the only way he could describe it. A shudder ran through the fabric as if it wasn't cloth, stitching, and a handle, but something breathing and alive.

Jacob shook his head and turned to his mother and father who were still scanning for their own luggage. They hadn't seen the fat man's bag move. Of course they hadn't. Even if they'd been looking that way, they still wouldn't have seen it. Jacob understood a few things about the world. One of them was that by the time you got old enough to have children, you forgot how to really see things.

He turned back to the fat man's bag. He stepped closer, studying it. As he did, he saw the fabric twitch, fast, like the blinking of an eye.

The fat man put his hand on his suitcase and stroked it with a motion that reminded Jacob of someone petting a favorite cat.

Jacob looked up. The fat man was staring at him, a smile drawn across his features. There was nothing friendly in that smile. It was the grin of a jungle animal about to feast.

Jacob stepped back until he fetched up against his mother.

There was something wrong with the fat man. Something bad. Jacob could almost smell it, like meat that had been left in the fridge too long and had gone all green and stinky.

"Jacob, help me with this." It was his father, pulling one of their suitcases off the belt while another came into view around the corner.

Jacob got a hand on the bag, raised the handle, and wheeled it out of the way, giving dad room to land the next.

As he did, Jacob's eyes returned to the fat man. The fat man was hauling another bag off the belt. A normal bag with a strap that he slung over his shoulder.

Jacob could see the difference at once. The bag on the fat man's shoulder was just a bag. The other one was something else. Something bad. Something bad that was just pretending to be a suitcase.

"Okay, let's do it." Jacob turned as his dad spoke. They had all their luggage and started off toward the elevators that would take them up to the Airtrain station.

Jacob felt a sudden shiver run down his back and looked behind him. The fat man was walking the same direction they were.

He had his big bag with him. He carried it. Everyone else in the airport had bags that rolled, but the fat man carried his by a thick, leather handle. The suitcase knocked against his thighs as he puffed along.

As they stepped into the elevator, Jacob saw that the fat man was going to get on with them. He felt sudden panic. Fear of being closed in with the fat man and his bag reared up over him, like a creature out of the muck.

But it was too late. Jacob and his parents were pressed toward the back, hemmed in by people on all sides. There was nowhere to go.

The fat man got on. As he did, Jacob felt the elevator settle, as if the fat man weighed even more than his size suggested. Jacob felt the air suddenly cool, as if someone had switched on an air conditioner.

The doors closed. Jacob felt nervous fingers tickle the inside of his belly. He pushed closer to his mom, shivering.

Everyone else on the elevator looked ahead, or at the person they were with.

Jacob watched the fat man's bag.

The fat man stroked his suitcase, slowly, lovingly. As Jacob watched, a tendril of material broke off the bag. It resembled a spider's leg, only with hundreds of joints so it moved like a snake. It had tiny hairs all over it, and a sharp talon at the end. The thing rose from the bag's surface and twined itself around the fat man's finger like a black vine.

Jacob gasped.

The fat man flicked his finger, the tendril retracted.

Jacob looked up. The fat man was staring at him again, his tiny, piggish eyes hard and cold. He wasn't smiling.

Jacob knew he had seen something he wasn't supposed to see. He dropped his gaze, looked at his feet, scrunching as far away from the fat man as he could in the crowded elevator. He counted his heartbeats which now slammed loudly in his ears. *One... two... three...*

He prayed to himself. *Don't let him hurt me. Don't let him hurt my mom or my dad.* He understood now, the fat man wanted to hurt him, wanted to hurt all of them.

The elevator lurched to a halt. As the doors opened to reveal the Airtrain station, Jacob felt a sweet rush of relief.

The fat man got off first, picking up his suitcase and huffing out the door without even a last look back.

Jacob watched the bag, saw it bulge and shiver again.

He followed his mom and dad off the elevator, hoping the fat man wouldn't be taking the train they'd be taking, hoping he'd be going the other direction.

But he saw the fat man walk to the same side of the platform his mom and dad were heading for.

Jacob stopped dead. His mother and father looked down. "Come on, Jake," his dad said.

"There's something wrong," Jacob whispered.

"What? What's wrong? Did you forget something?" His Mom's darting eyes quickly tallied their luggage and carry-ons.

Jacob stepped closer to them. "That man," he whispered. "The fat man with the black bag."

Jacob looked over their shoulders. The man was staring at him again, his lips stretched into a flat grin, like someone had sliced his featureless face open with a knife.

"The bag, it's not a bag," Jacob said.

"What is it?" his dad asked.

Jacob was silent for a second. What to say? What else could he say? "It's a monster," Jacob said.

His mom and dad exchanged a puzzled look. "A monster?" his dad asked. "That man is a monster?"

"Not the man," Jacob whispered. "His suitcase. His suitcase is a monster. I saw it move."

His mom sighed. "Oh, Jake, you're tired."

His dad ruffled his hair. "What an imagination my kid has, huh?"

Jacob wanted to scream and yell, but knew that wouldn't help. "Mom, dad please," Jacob said as seriously as he could. "I saw it move, I swear. It had some kind of claw. It's a monster. There's something wrong. We have to call the police. I think something bad's gonna happen."

His mom touched his cheek with soft fingers. "Jake, there's no such things as monsters."

Jacob sighed. There's no such thing as monsters. That's what they always said.

"Jake," his dad said softly. "What's going on, buddy?"

Jacob leaned closer. He had to make them understand. "It's a monster, dad. I saw it move and I saw it touch him and I think..." Jacob felt his eyes watering, his nose clogging. He fought to stop himself from crying. "I think it's hungry," he whispered.

"Well, I'll say one thing." His mom threw an angry glance at his dad. "No more horror movies for you two."

Jacob stared at her. What could he say? How could he convince her? His brain spun, but came up with nothing. If only they'd seen it. But they hadn't seen it. He was the only one who had and no one was listening to him.

With a swoosh of brakes, a train pulled into the station. A chime sounded as the doors opened.

“Come on, Jake,” his dad said. “Let’s go home. Everything will be fine, I promise.” He stood and pulled Jacob toward the train. Jacob scanned the platform. The fat man was gone.

He felt a swell of relief and walked to the train with his dad.

As they approached the door, Jacob looked inside.

The fat man was there, seated against the far wall in the middle of the car, his bag on the floor between his knees.

He was staring at Jacob. That predatory smile was back - a smile that spoke as plainly as words: *They’ll never believe you. They’ll never believe you and you’ll be mine.*

Jacob stopped four feet from the open doors, yanking so hard on his dad’s hand that his dad almost fell over as he spun around. His mom turned.

“Hurry up, Jacob,” she said. “The doors are going to close.”

“Don’t get on,” he said.

“Jacob.” His father’s voice was edged with annoyance, annoyance drifting toward anger. He let go of his son’s hand and stepped toward the train. “Come on.”

“No, dad,” Jacob said. “Don’t go in there.”

A man pushed past his father with an angry grunt. Jacob saw his dad’s eyes narrow. “Stop this foolishness right now,” he said.

Jacob looked at his mom. He felt his eyes tearing up again. “Mom please, please, don’t get on the train.”

His mother leaned closer. “He’s really scared,” she said. More people filed on the train behind her. It was filling quickly.

His father snorted and reached a hand to seize Jacob’s arm. Jacob knew what was coming next. His father would grab him, and drag him on the train with some angry words.

And they’d all die.

He knew that for sure. If they got on the train, they were going to die. Everyone in the car with the fat man and his bag was going to die. He had to do something. He had to save them, but he knew he couldn’t. He was just a boy, he could say whatever he wanted, and no one would believe him. His parents wouldn’t believe him. None of the people on the train would believe him. They were all grownups and grownups didn’t believe in monsters.

Except there were all kinds of monsters.

Jacob ducked away from his dad, raised a finger, pointed it at the fat man. “Bomb!” Jacob yelled as loud as he could. “He’s got a bomb!”

Everyone on the platform, everyone in the train car turned to him as if yanked with hidden strings. His father went white. Jacob kept shouting. “I saw it. In his suitcase. He’s got a bomb. He’s got a bomb in his suitcase!”

His father jerked back as if slapped. “Jacob, stop that right now.”

On the train, a few of the passengers turned nervously to each other. Three college-aged girls who were about to get on stepped away. A man and woman backed out the far set of open doors.

The fat man's smile vanished. He popped up from his seat, his eyes boring into Jacob.

Jacob dodged as his father lunged for him again. "Get off the train," Jacob yelled. "He's got a bomb. He's going to kill everyone."

His father grabbed at him, Jacob ducked back. People were streaming off the train faster now.

The fat man grabbed up his suitcase, moved toward the door, but the other people on the train blocked him as they rushed the exit. The fat man raised a pudgy arm, trying to push through them, fighting his way to the door.

Coming for Jacob. Jacob met the fat man's eyes. "Bomb." Jacob's voice echoed. "Bomb."

A chime rang.

"Jacob! Come here this instant." His father, furious, reaching for him.

Jacob looked back at the train. The fat man's face was twisted in anger as he knocked another man aside and lunged at the train doors.

They closed in his face.

The fat man slapped up against them. He glared at Jacob through the glass, and then his expression softened into a knowing smile. Jacob read that smile: *another time, perhaps?*

The fat man pulled himself away from the doors and moved to the center of the train. Of the thirty or so who had been on the train, only a few remained. They looked around nervously, unsure of what to do as, with a whirr, the train began to move.

A hand grabbed his arm. His father - as angry as Jacob had ever seen him. He spun Jacob to him and knelt, bringing them face to face. "What do you think you're doing, young man? What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you know how much trouble you're in for this?"

The hard words slapped at him, but Jacob didn't listen. He leaned past his dad to watch as the train pulled out toward the end of the platform.

Jacob could see the fat man. He was no longer looking at Jacob; he was staring down - at his suitcase. There were five other people on the train with him. A part of Jacob's mind counted them. For the rest of his life, he would remember the positions in which they stood as they rolled past.

Then, as the car pulled out of the station and was nearly lost to sight, Jacob saw a sudden explosion of blackness inside the train. A writhing mass filled the car. Blood splattered the windows. For a fraction on an instant, Jacob watched as a businessman was thrown against the glass, a tentacle wrapped around his face, tearing his skin off in wide strips.

And then the train was gone, lost to sight behind the platform wall.

Jacob's dad shook him. "You are in big trouble, Jacob, big..."

A scream split the air.

Jacob and his dad turned. One of the young women who had gotten off the train was pointing to the place where the train had disappeared from view. Her face was white. Her outstretched hand shook.

“His face,” she said. “His face. It was eating his face. Oh my God, I saw it and it was eating his face.” She gave a strangled gurgle and collapsed to the tiles.

Jacob’s dad shot to his feet and ran to her. “Give her room,” his dad shouted. “Give her room.”

Jacob watched the scene as if through the wrong end of a telescope, watched as his dad shoved his cell phone at one of the girls and commanded her to call 911.

A warm hand fell on his shoulder as his mom leaned down to him. He looked into her eyes, and he knew - she had seen it too.

“Jake,” she said. “What... what was it?”

A storm of black tentacles. A man’s skin torn away from bone. Blood spraying as the thing fed.

Jacob began to cry, hot tears running down his cheek.

“Monster,” Jacob whispered.

The Quantum Mechanic, er, Psychic

By
Lesley L. Smith

My hands shook as I tried to unlock the door of my new storefront. I got distracted by the beautiful sign I'd painted on the front window: 'The Quantum Mechanic'.

"Earth to Anna," Marco said. "Are you unlocking the front door or what? I need to get to work."

I turned to him and smiled. "I'm so excited. This is gonna' be so great--my own business. It's gonna' be totally successful!" It had better be totally successful because I'd been unemployed since I'd lost my job at the university.

Marco smiled back at me. "I hope you're right." He waved his coffee-holding hand in the air. "Now, are you going to take this cup of 'good luck coffee' I brought you?"

"Definitely. You know I love the coffee." I plucked a cup out of his hand. "And I'm sure it'll be fortuitous, too." I took a sip. It was just the right temperature to showcase its hearty roasty body. Over the top of the cup, my eyes scanned Marco, he had a roasting-hot body and a lot of heart, too. I grinned.

"What?" he asked. "What's that look?"

I figured Marco might not like being compared to a cup of coffee--again. "Uh, just thanks a lot for the coffee. I'll see you after work?"

After a quick kiss, he was off.

I went inside and got all settled at my desk. I checked my email (there wasn't any). I drank my coffee. I checked my ad in the paper (it was fine). I checked the headlines (there were a bunch, but not any potential cases that I could see). I twiddled my thumbs. Being a quantum mechanic was pretty boring. I didn't understand; where were all the customers? I checked to see if the phone had a dial tone (it did). The morning dragged by with no customers to be found.

I was awakened by a man opening the door. A customer! Quickly, I jumped up out of my chair. "Hello, sir. Welcome! How can I help you? What can I do for you?"

He took a step back. Maybe I'd scared him? Note to future self: don't ambush potential customers.

I sat down at the desk and waved my hand calmly at the other chair. "Sit down--if you like."

The middle-aged man, in jeans and t-shirt looked around the store as he approached my desk. He scratched his head. "I need a mechanic. You all got any mechanics here?" He looked confused.

I smiled. "Me. I'm a quantum mechanic. What can I do for you? Please have a seat."

The man took another step forward. "It's my truck. There's something off with the transmission. Can you fix that?"

Despite my sign, I hadn't actually considered fixing cars or trucks, but I didn't see any reason why I couldn't. "Maybe," I said. "Please sit down and I'll tell you how we work here."

Reluctantly, the man sat.

"I'm actually a quantum mechanic," I said. "Not an auto mechanic."

The man put his hands on his knees and leaned forward. "Isn't a mechanic a mechanic?"

"Not exactly." I smiled in what I hoped was a helpful manner. "I use a branch of physics, quantum mechanics, to collapse the probabilistic wavefunctions and instantiate a particular reality."

The man said, "Huh? Physics? Is that like psychics?"

"No. Physics, not psychics." I tried again. "Quantum mechanics says there are infinite possibilities. The Copenhagen Interpretation says it takes a conscious human mind to collapse the wavefunction and pick one out."

The man's face started getting red. "Look. Do you have a mechanic here who can fix my truck or not?"

I looked at him for several moments. This was going to be harder than I thought. Clearly he was not my demographic. Maybe I should just try to get rid of him? He might be scaring off all the other customers who would understand quantum mechanics. Finally I said, "Yes. We can use our quantum technology to fix your truck for only three thousand dollars."

The man bolted out of the chair. "You're crazy." As he went out the door he added, "That's way too much."

I waited around the office quite a while for more customers before my hunger pains finally forced me to pop out to get some lunch. I couldn't understand why more people hadn't shown up to take advantage of what I was offering. As a quantum mechanic, I could do anything except time-travel.

Or maybe fix trucks.

As I walked back up to my office, with another cup of coffee (despite it's lack of luckiness so far) and half a hot dog in my mouth, I spied a woman peering into the window. It figured! As soon as I'd left, the customers must have started coming. I wondered how many I'd missed. "Yeth," I said to the woman.

"What?" the woman asked, frowning. Her eyes were red and her face was puffy as if she'd been crying recently.

I took the hot dog out of my mouth. Note to future self: don't try to reel in customers with a hot dog in your mouth. "Sorry. I work here. Can I help you with something?"

"I'm not sure." The woman crossed her arms in front of her.

Even I couldn't help noticing the woman was wearing one white shoe and one black shoe. Personally, I hardly ever mismatched my shoes. This woman must be really upset. "Please come on in," I said, gesturing inside. "Please sit down."

The woman sank down onto the chair. "I'm not sure what I'm doing here. But I'm desperate."

"Do you need a quantum mechanic?" I asked, carefully emphasizing the word quantum.

"I don't know," the woman said. "I guess so. My friend Nancy who works over at the university said you might be able to help me. I don't know."

"Why don't you tell me what the problem is for starters," I said.

"It's my daughter! She's gone!" The woman bit back a sob.

"Oh, my God," I said. "That's horrible. I'm so sorry." I dropped my hot dog on the desk and barely even noticed. "I might be able to help. But, did you go to the police?"

The woman nodded. "Yes. They're looking for her."

"Why don't we start from the beginning," I said. "I'm Dr. Anna Martinez. What's your name?"

The woman took a deep breath. "I'm Trish, Trisha, Rivas."

"And your daughter?"

"My daughter's name is Maria. She's only three-and-a-half, no, three-and-nine-months. She's almost four-years-old."

"And? What happened?"

"She was on a field trip yesterday with her daycare and they ...lost her." Trish started the waterworks, but I couldn't blame her. The poor woman. And her poor daughter; I wondered where she was and I hoped she was okay.

"I would be happy to try and help you find her," I said gently.

Trish nodded. "Thanks. Good. What do we need to do?"

"The way it works is I focus on Maria and collapse the wavefunction to instantiate the reality in which I'm with her."

"Huh?" Trish said. "You focus on her?"

"I need to learn all about her," I said. "Maybe you could show me some home movies? That type of stuff. And then I choose among all the quantum possibilities to be with her."

"I'm not sure I understand," Trish said. "Is it like a psychic?"

I looked at Trish. I wasn't sure she understood either. I was beginning to wonder if anyone without a Ph.D. in physics would understand.

Trish wiped her face with a tissue. She was a real customer and I thought I could help her. I couldn't let her get away.

"Uh, yeah," I finally said. "It's like a psychic."

"So, you need to come to our house and see her things and stuff?" Trish asked. I nodded. "Yep." I stood. "Let's go." I was going to find this little girl or die trying. Er, that didn't sound so good. How about I was going to find this little girl or become pretty seriously injured trying.

I spent the next hour looking at Maria's bedroom, her clothes, her dolls, her general cute-little-girl-things, pictures of her and movies of her. I thought she had a good understanding of who Maria was (adorable, among other things). Any more research would just be wasting time. I squared my shoulders. "Okay. I'm ready."

Trish had been sitting on the couch and she stood up. "Okay. What do we do now?"

"You get ready to answer the phone," I said. I took a breath and started concentrating on Maria. The room filled with a white mist until the walls and ceiling and even the furniture disappeared.

I had been quantum limbo before; I knew I was surrounded by a fog of possibilities. I focused on Maria, cute little Maria. "Come on, Maria. Where are you?" I concentrated.

Gradually, the mist started clearing, and I found myself in an actual clearing filled with weeds and miscellaneous trash. "Maria!" I yelled, scanning the surroundings.

A little head popped up from behind an old tire.

Thank God. "Maria?" I sprinted over to the girl. "Are you okay? You're Maria Rivas aren't you?"

The little girl, face covered with dirt, nodded.

"I'm calling help right now." I already had my cell and my dialing finger out.

Soon, a police car zoomed up, siren blazing, and Trish jumped out before it even stopped moving. "Maria!!" She ran across the field, arms outstretched.

Maria ran for her mom. They crashed into one another in a collision of hugs and both burst into tears.

I got a little teary myself, truth be told. This business rocked!

The police officer ambled over to me. "So, you just happened to be out here and found a little girl?" He scrutinized me.

"Uh," I said cleverly. Did he suspect me of something? Maybe there were some details I still needed to work out with this new business.

Trish, clutching Maria to her, came over to us. "This is Dr. Martinez. She helped. I hired her. She's a quan-something--some kind of psychic."

"You're a psychic?" the officer asked.

People didn't seem to get the quantum thing. Why fight it? I shrugged. "Okay."

I was scraping 'Mechanic' off the window in preparation for painting 'Psychic' on it, when Marco arrived.

"So, mi amor, how was the first day?" he asked.

"Mi amor? That's nice." I snuggled into his arms for a kiss, or two, or who-the-heck-knows-how-many. When we came up for air, I said, "My day was excellent. I had a case. I found a lost girl!"

"That's great!" Marco said. He hugged me again. Once we extricated ourselves, he continued, "And how much did you get paid for this excellent case?"

"Uh," I said intelligently. Yes, there were definitely some kinks to work out with the business.

"And what are you doing to your pretty sign?"

Just then a patrol car rolled up and an officer got out.

Marco looked surprised, and I probably looked nervous as the officer approached me.

"You the psychic?" the officer asked.

After a moment, I nodded.

"Here." The officer handed me an envelope. "There was a reward for the girl."

"Awesome!" I said. "I knew it!"

Marco looked proud.

I may have jumped up and down a little--but some occasions really call for it, don't they? "I am psychic!"

Enchanted Turns the Spyglass Both Ways

By

Marty Mapes

The best fantasy movie since *Electric Spec's* last issue has been the DVD release of *Enchanted*. It is a fish-out-of-water story, an offshoot of speculative fiction wherein a character from one universe is magically transferred to another, offering insight into both.

Some Day My Prince Will Come

The first ten minutes of *Enchanted* are set in Andalasia, a 2-D cartoon world blended from every fairy tale movie since *Snow White*. Giselle (Amy Adams) is pining away in her room for her dream prince. She's so giddy with anticipation that she bursts into song.

Meanwhile, across the kingdom, gallant goofus Prince Edward (James Marsden) is slaying ogres with his sidekick Nathaniel (Timothy Spall) and *his* sidekick Pip (a talking chipmunk). He hears Giselle's song and dashes to her window, followed by the ogre who dutifully tries to eat her. After the tussle and chase, Edward saves Giselle and they arrange to be married on the morrow.

Edmund's wicked stepmother, a witch-queen (Susan Sarandon), wants to foil the wedding. If Edmund doesn't marry, she can continue to rule Andalasia. So when Giselle arrives for the wedding, the queen takes her aside and pushes her down a deep, dark well, banishing her forever to...

... modern day, 3-dimensional, real-life New York City.

Giselle's golly-gee innocence and ridiculous layer-cake dress make her a freak in the city. Luckily it's New York, where a little freakishness is tolerated. Even luckier, she runs into Robert (Patrick Dempsey), a divorce attorney who has enough pity for the mentally ill that he takes Giselle into his care just long enough—he hopes—to get her on the nearest bus or plane back to the Midwest where she probably came from.

Fantastic Pedigree

As speculative fiction, *Enchanted* is in good company. Some of its relatives are *The Amber Spyglass*, *E.T.*, *Stardust* (a book by Neil Gaiman and a movie released last year), and The Narnia books. If you want, you can look back even further to Mark Twain (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*) or even to Dante (*The Divine Comedy*, aka *Dante's Inferno*).

The fish-out-of-water story is like a spyglass (amber or otherwise); you see different things when you turn it around. Put the eyepiece to your eye and you get a glimpse into another, distant world: send Dante to Hell and have him report back on what it's like. Point the eyepiece away from you, and suddenly you see your own world from a fresh perspective, distorted and strange: bring *E.T.* to our world to illuminate just how paranoid and mistrusting we can be (and just how lucky we are to have Reese's Pieces).

Enchanted turns the spyglass both ways.

New York through the Eyes of an Innocent

Since Giselle comes to our universe, the spyglass is pointed backwards. It shows us our own world through the eyes of a visitor from an innocent, childlike world. Emerging from a manhole in Times Square, Giselle nearly gets run over in her first ten seconds in our world. The neon lights are dazzling, and the mob of staring humanity is intimidating. When the camera pulls back to reveal the neon, New York looks exciting and glamorous, but in close-up and at street level, it's overwhelming.

Swept out of Times Square by the mob, Giselle loses her tiara to an old thief with no teeth, and then finds herself walking past an all-night liquor store on an empty street. We get a sense of dread, knowing she's a sitting duck for muggers or worse. Giselle can't even imagine what kind of danger she's in, but these are our streets, and we take them for granted.

When Robert finally gets her to safety, he becomes condescending. Clearly, Giselle must be mentally defective because nobody is naïve enough to believe in goodness and True Love as sincerely as she does. The fact that Robert makes a very good living by helping people divorce, well, that's just how our world works. Every sane person knows that.

When Traveling to Andalusia...

Screenwriter Kevin Lima also turns the spyglass around. We get to see how things work in Andalusia when he allows a little bit of Giselle's magic to creep into our universe.

Did you know that in Andalusia woodland creatures handle common household chores? Andalusians sing the right introductory notes and the creatures come running. The singer segues into a working song, and the creatures begin to sweep, dust, wash, and dry, assembly-line style. In Andalusia, you get fawns and chipmunks and bluebirds; whereas in New York City there are really only about three common "woodland" creatures, none of which we associate with cleanliness.

Andalusians have an interesting way of handling uncontrollable emotion. When they overflow with feeling, they let it all out in a song. When they do, anyone in the vicinity—including crabs, hippos, and flamingos—will join in the raucous calypso number. Luckily, in Central Park, lots of people sing for spare change and dance at the drop of a hat, and these people are also susceptible to the Andalusian's spell.

Perhaps the most interesting fact about Andalasians is the role of love. In our world, love is an emotion programmed into us by evolution for sexual reproduction and family stability. We don't know whether Andalasians actually reproduce, but *Enchanted* offers one insightful piece of evidence against the notion that they are sexual beings. When Giselle sings about finding the perfect lips for her True Love's Kiss, she repeats the refrain, "That's the reason we need lips so much / For lips are the only things that touch." Either Andalasians are more different than we thought, or perhaps Giselle is simply still too young to know about the birds and the bees.

The Truth about Andalusia

Fish-out-of-water stories can be very enlightening, but they probably offer more genuine insight when both worlds actually exist. An Australian crocodile wrestler coming to New York City, or a missionary going to a remote jungle probably have more to offer than screenwriters and novelists of science fiction and fantasy.

Still, a self-referential look at the fiction aimed at girls tells us a lot about ourselves and what we want our daughters to believe. We want them to believe in True Love's Kiss. We want them to anticipate their wedding day as the most important and magical day of their life. We want them to believe that people are good and kind, except for the villains, who can always be vanquished in 90 minutes or less.

Like the best fish-out-of-water stories, *Enchanted* tells us about ourselves. New York City will get our daughters soon enough. We just want them to believe in Andalusia for a little while longer.