

A CHIMP OF FEW WORDS

an unpublished short story by Michael Coney

Author's note This jolly tale is the third in a series. The first two appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction titled *Tea and Hamsters and Werewolves in Sheep's Clothing*. I've used the heroine of the series, the redoubtable Mrs. Masterson, in other stories — but thinly disguised with a pseudonym. In fact she appears in *Foul Play at Duffy's Marina* as Mrs. Rooke-Challenger, on this very website.

I haven't submitted this story to F&SF because, after it was written, I heard through the grapevine that the current editor is not enthusiastic about my work. I have no desire to invite rejection so the story has been languishing on my computer ever since.

Three days before Grace Goodenough was due to leave Earth, her talking chimpanzee, Montgolfier, went insane.

It was a serious blow. How could she function as Director of Linguistics on the planet Gareth — responsible for teaching aliens all the riches of the human tongue — when her showpiece chimp's vocabulary now consisted solely of the word 'oof'?

And more immediately, how could she handle tomorrow's big 3V show on Simian Speech Patterns, with Montgolfier sitting sullen and mute?

It would reflect on her credibility.

And it had happened so unexpectedly....

Montgolfier had already mastered seventy-six words perfectly and was able to use them in short sentences expressing simple concepts. The seventy-seventh word was the last in the current series, and was quite insignificant except in colloquial usage. Once Montgolfier had grasped it, they would move on toward exciting new frontiers. Abstract arguments, complex concepts, philosophy, math.... Grace could see no limit to the possibilities.

She squatted before Montgolfier. She carefully enunciated the word. She attempted to demonstrate its meaning with simple gestures. That was always the hardest part.

Montgolfier watched her with deep-set and slightly crazed eyes.

The eyes had always bothered her. If she'd seen them staring out of a human face, she'd have suspected their owner of homicidal tendencies. But — she always told herself — chimps were just like children, innocent and friendly. Nevertheless she kept Montgolfier away from the tool shed where the ax was stored. There was no point in putting temptation in a chimp's way.

She repeated the word and the gestures.

Montgolfier watched her inscrutably, silently, fiddling with the nest of branches he'd gathered for his night's sleep. She arranged her own branches too;

in order to gain a chimp's confidence one must behave in a chimplike manner. She scratched her flank and grunted a little.

She repeated word and actions.

In the twilight it seemed that Montgolfier's eyes glittered insanely for an instant. His lips worked as though tasting the word and rejecting it. Then he flung himself onto his back and began to thrash and scream like a child in the throes of a temper tantrum.

"Montgolfier!"

He beat his chest with his fists. He lurched to his feet, empty-eyed. His rubbery lips shaped up for speech.

He said, "Oof, oof, oof."

"No, that wasn't the word. Go on, Montgolfier. You can do it."

"Oof." He staggered, bandy-legged.

A terrible suspicion took hold of her. She seized his limp paw. "Speak to me, Montgolfier!" she cried. "For God's sake, say something!"

"Oof." He toppled forward and lay face down, twitching, hairy fingers plucking at his nest of branches. Grace threw herself down beside him in despair, trying to roll him over. He clung to the branches. Made brutal by panic, she seized a branch, thrust it under him and levered him onto his back. He lay still, staring vacantly at the distant stars.

"Oof," he said quietly, as though thinking purely chimp thoughts, and simplistic ones at that. "Oof."

Looking into those eyes empty of intelligence, empty even of homicidal intent, Grace knew the worst. She'd overloaded her chimp's brain. The seventy-seventh word had been the last straw. Her life's work was all for nothing. Montgolfier's reason had snapped and now he was tragically less than a chimp.

This would take some explaining on tomorrow's 3V show, let alone on the planet Gareth.

The peculiar nature of Space makes it impossible to pinpoint an exact instant of universal time, but it was within a few days of the moment when Montgolfier finally went ape, as it were, that old Admiral Bannock and his elderly daughter Rachel Masterson were quarreling with Vera Fisk, the Director of Social Development at the resort of Coconut Meadows on the planet Gareth.

"You've hired Grace Goodenough, Fisk?" Mrs. Masterson was shouting. "By God, if I'd known that, I'd never have brought Father here! I've had the misfortune to meet that Goodenough woman, and I assure you she is nothing better than a charlatan, she and that damned chimp of hers. Two of a kind! Chump and chimp!"

"We are civilized people here on Gareth," Vera Fisk said coldly. "Through the work of Grace Goodenough we shall soon be able to communicate with the indigent population and bring them the benefits of our culture and technology. I understand Grace had the Boshdi speaking our language in three standard weeks, and discussing the Greek philosophers within the month."

“The Boshdi are telepathic. Teach one, you teach them all. Any fool could have done it. The point is, is Coconut Meadows suitable for my father’s convalescence?”

“Have no fear, Mrs. Masterson. I like to think of Coconut Meadows as a little corner of dear Earth herself. A place where weary space travelers can enjoy rest and relaxation in surroundings that—”

“Exactly! This place is clearly designed to appeal to Earthsick milksops who can’t handle the rigors of Space! Not at all what I’d been led to believe!”

The resort of Coconut Meadows on the planet Gareth consisted of a vast clearing among imported palms, set on the sandy shore of a broad lake extending beyond the horizon. Umbrella-like structures roofed with palm fronds shaded several hundred elderly guests. The most mobile twenty or so were exercising withered flesh and arthritic joints in a game of volleyball. Nearby, paramedics attended to a casualty. Standard dwelling units gleamed silvery among the trees. A Sol-type sun shone relentlessly; all clouds had been swept from the sky.

“I’m sure your father will be very happy here,” Vera Fisk said as they strolled to the water’s edge. “But there’s just one little thing. You say he suffers from acrophilia. I can’t say I’m familiar with the, uh, affliction.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t be, Miss Fisk, having been Earthbound for much of your life. Acrophilia is a love of heights; in a lesser man than my father you might almost call it an obsession. A subconscious corner of his mind yearns for the freedom of Space. Quite simply, he cannot get used to firm ground under his feet and the pull of gravity.”

“So it doesn’t have any, uh, sexual basis. I’m very relieved to hear that, Mrs. Masterson. Our residents are elderly, as you know, and we protect them from any, uh, unhealthy excitement. Sex, I am pleased to say, is virtually unknown at Coconut Meadows.”

“To each his own.... What’s that thing, for God’s sake?” Mrs. Masterson was staring at a curious machine working its way through the shallows.

“Oh, that’s our little harvester.”

“What’s it doing?”

“It’s maintaining the beach in perfect condition for the pleasure of our guests, Mrs. Masterson. The lake is rich in nature’s bounty, which is as it should be, but we do like to keep the beach area clear of weeds. For bathing, you see.”

“Your brochure said nothing about weeds. Your brochure specified crystal clear waters.”

“And crystal clear they will be, Mrs. Masterson, once the harvester has passed by and the silt has settled.”

But Mrs. Masterson’s suspicions had been aroused, a common enough occurrence. “Those weeds seem to be *snapping* at the harvester as it passes. You notice that, Father?” She nudged the Admiral, whose mind was elsewhere, as it often was these days, poor old fellow. “They have *mouths*, for heaven’s sake. What exactly are they, Miss Fisk?”

“*Dionaea Muscipula Aquadinglei*,” said Vera rapidly.

“A kind of Venus’s Flytrap,” translated Mrs. Masterson, nobody’s fool. “I should be interested to observe them more closely. No doubt you have a glass-bottomed boat to go with the trappings of this place.”

“I’m afraid not. We’ve never felt the need, actually.”

“Guests of a sensitive nature might find the feeding habits of *aquadinglei* distressing?” suggested Mrs. Masterson. She turned to her father. “This place is not quite so characterless as it seems. Perhaps our time will not be wasted after all.”

The admiral grunted vaguely, unconsciously mimicking the entire vocabulary of the chimp Montgolfier.

“Really, Mrs. Masterson, the weeds are not a matter of significance to your father’s enjoyment of Coconut Meadows. We keep them well under control.”

“A few liters of herbicide would do the job more effectively. Which reminds me, you must drop by for a drink as soon as we’re settled in. I have some trophies that may interest you.”

“T-trophies?”

“If humans are to be leaders of the Galaxy we must learn about its creatures. I maintain a small collection of those creatures for study purposes. I kill them first, of course. You can’t be too careful with aliens, the tricky bastards.”

“We like to live in harmony with our gentle hosts on Gareth,” Vera Fisk stammered, appalled. “In no way should they be considered potential trophies. You will be meeting them at dinner, casual dress tonight, formal on Sundays. We use a seven day week here, I think it’s appropriate. The faeries perform for us every evening, a delightful feast of sight and sound.”

Mrs. Masterson snorted. “Faeries, eh? If they’re as intelligent as you seem to think, I’d like to know how your corporation got around the noninterference regulations.”

Vera smiled confidently; she’d answered this one many times. “Coconut Meadows is not a colony, Mrs. Masterson. It’s a resort. We do not exploit the faeries. They share their culture with us willingly and joyfully. And we will share ours with them, once Grace Goodenough arrives. Oh, look!” she exclaimed. “Here comes one of our little hosts right now!”

A small winged creature was flitting among the palms. It reached the clearing, rose over the Polynesian structure of the community building and dropped to the sand before them. It stood about a meter tall, pink-skinned, and humanoid apart from four translucent wings set in pairs on its back, insect-like.

“You may be surprised,” said Vera quickly, “that the little fellow is, uh, shamelessly naked. But you will note that mercifully it does not have external sex organs.”

“That must be a relief for your residents.” The faery was the kind of flimsy apology for an alien that one might expect in a place like this, thought Mrs. Masterson. “And these are the creatures Grace Goodenough is going to teach?” she asked. “Good luck to her. The thing looks like a blithering idiot to me.”

“Say something to Mrs. Masterson,” said Vera.

“Welcome to Coconut Meadows,” the alien obliged in piping tones.

Although taken aback, the elderly lady recovered quickly. Fixing the alien with a penetrating stare, she asked, “What do you know of the life cycle of *Dionaea Muscipula Aquadinglei*?”

“Welcome to Coconut Meadows.” piped the alien.

“Its vocabulary is somewhat limited,” explained Vera quickly.

“Limited to four words, you mean?”

“Well, yes, more or less, although Grace Goodenough will flesh that out. Even I can detect meaningful differences in pitch. But much of their complex language consists of wing flutterings almost too rapid for the human eye to follow. It’s difficult for me, an unqualified person, to teach the little fellows terrestrial equivalents of their words and actions.”

“Wing flutterings? How do you know they’re not simply trying to get off the ground?”

Vera looked offended. “Really, Mrs. Masterson! Grace Goodenough will have the faeries chattering away within the month, I’m sure. It’s just a question of the right approach. Oh, here comes your luggage. My word, you’ve brought a lot of stuff.”

The Fisk woman drifted away. Despite herself, Mrs. Masterson felt a lifting of the spirits. Things could be worse. Now she and her father could get back among their comfortable furniture and trophies. She’d enjoy showing off the trophies to the old fools in the other units. Make them sit up and take notice....

The following morning a small deputation awaited the arrival of Grace Goodenough at the transmatter hangar.

“She was a great success on Earth 3V,” said Vera. “The best ratings of the month, so I’m told.”

Mrs. Masterson was in skeptical mood. “You surprise me, Fisk. I should have thought good ratings were the last thing you wanted.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Good ratings can only have a sexual basis. Pornography is what sells, mark my words!” Her attention was caught by the sight of a Godlike figure striding rapidly towards them. “Great heavens, who is this?”

He was humanoid, possibly even human. He stood well over two meters tall. His uniform, a perfect fit, hinted at muscles like cannonballs. His posture was so upright that a straightedge could have been laid from his neck to his heels, and his face might have been hewn from a slab of granite by a practitioner of cubist art.

Recognizing rank, he halted before Admiral Bannock. His head interceded between the Admiral and the sky, at which the old man was gazing wistfully. Startled, the Admiral threw up an involuntary salute.

“Dack Zermatt,” said the godlike one.

“Huh?”

“I am Dack Zermatt, Captain of Balloons. You are?”

“Am I?”

“Your name, sir!”

“Ah. Bannock, Admiral.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Admiral. Heard a lot about you. And this must be your daughter. Good day to you, Madam.”

Vera Fisk, meanwhile, had been quietly coming to the boil. “What’s can possibly be pornographic about a selfless woman spending years of her life teaching a chimp to talk?”

“Allow me to answer that one, Mrs. Masterson,” said Zermatt easily. “I take it we’re speaking of Grace Goodenough. I saw her on 3V. Here’s a woman who’s lived alone with an adult male chimp for years, sharing food and accommodation, the two of them together every minute. I think we all know what happens in such circumstances. The blossoming friendship, the meaningful glances, the first shy, tentative touch, the—”

“Has anyone ever told you you have a dirty mind, Dack?” Vera snapped.

“Not I. It’s the audience that has the dirty mind. All the time they were watching that show, they were trying to assess the exact relationship between Grace Goodenough and her goddamned chimp. So did the chimp speak? The audience didn’t care. They were looking for meaningful glances. That’s what I call dirty.”

“Did *you* notice any meaningful glances?” asked Mrs. Masterson, interested.

“All the time. You always do, with chimps. It’s those deep-set eyes. The animal magnetism.”

At this interesting point in the conversation a bell rang and a green light blinked at the far end of the hangar. A door opened. Two humanoid forms approached; one tall and angular in flowing robes, the other squat and bandy-legged in T-shirt and shorts.

Vera stepped forward and greeted the taller one. “Grace Goodenough, I presume. Welcome to Coconut Meadows.”

“You’ll be Vera Fisk.”

“And this will be Mr. Montgolfier, your chimp.” Vera hesitated. “When I say *your* chimp, I don’t mean to imply possession. He is very much his own animal, I’m sure. Welcome to Coconut Meadows, Mr. Montgolfier.”

“Oof.”

“And I believe you’ve already met Mrs. Rachel Masterson.”

“I didn’t know you were here, Mrs. Masterson.” Grace Goodenough’s lips tightened.

“Purely on a temporary basis while the Admiral settles in, I can assure you.” The elderly lady jabbed a finger at the chimp. “Now you’re both here, perhaps Montgolfier would demonstrate these, uh, speech patterns you speak of.”

“Well, really, Mrs. Masterson! They’ve only just got here!”

Grace Goodenough held up her hand. “No, it’s quite all right, Vera. I’m sure Montgolfier would be delighted. If he has anything he wishes to say, of course. Allow me to explain. For all his native intelligence, Montgolfier is still a chimp, with all that implies.”

“And what does it imply, Miss Goodenough?”

“At present he thinks in simple concepts. If you, Mrs. Masterson, were a chimp with a chimp’s mind, and you were well fed and well cared for, why would you need to speak? All this will change as I teach Montgolfier abstract concepts. The words to go with them will come naturally.” Her voice rose. “These words will herald a new relationship between Man and Chimp. But at present Montgolfier has nothing he considers worth sharing with us.”

“But can’t you ask Montgolfier, quite simply, to *say something*?” asked Zermatt.

“Like what?”

“Well, *I* don’t know. Anything. One of the seventy-six words that he’s supposed to be able to say.”

“Montgolfier is a proud beast, Mr. Zermatt. A chimp of few words. He does not perform to commands like a circus animal. He needs a valid reason.”

“Well, give him one, then.” Zermatt’s patience showed signs of disintegration. “Kick him or something.”

“Mr. *Zermatt!*”

Montgolfier clung to Grace Goodenough’s robes. She put an arm around him. They rested like that, cheek to thigh. “You’ve frightened him,” said Grace Goodenough reprovingly. “You can’t expect him to talk now.”

Mrs. Masterson said nastily, “If he ever does. I ask you, do we *need* a new relationship between Man and Chimp? What’s wrong with the old relationship? We don’t need animals anthropomorphosized and we don’t need pornography, do we?”

“You must be tired, Grace,” said Vera hastily. “The transmatter can be *so* exhausting. I’ll show you your unit. You’ll be dying for a little nap. Come this way. We are a close-knit group at Coconut Meadows, Grace; I like to think of us as one big happy family,” said Vera a moment later as they strolled among the palms. “You and Mr. Montgolfier will fit in very well, I’m sure. You will share the same unit?”

“Of course we will. Why the hell not?” Grace Goodenough, feeling fragile after reconstitution, was sensitive about that particular issue.

“Why not indeed?” Aware that she’d committed some kind of gaffe, Vera began to babble. “It’s no different from sharing your apartment with a cat, is it? Although cats don’t talk. A parrot, say.”

“Are you suggesting Montgolfier merely repeats words parrot-fashion?”

“Absolutely not. We’re all looking forward to many an interesting chat with Mr. Montgolfier. We know so little of simian culture, don’t you think? Life in the trees, the extended family, the resolution of territorial differences.... We humans have a lot to learn from the chimps.”

“I’ve always said so.”

In the early hours the next morning on Coconut Meadows, Mrs. Masterson was awakened by a curious sound from outside the unit. Through the mists of sleep she half-remembered the sound as being mildly explosive, yet somehow sticky,

like a glue-soaked wad of paper being projected against a wall by a miniature cannon. She'd had just such a cannon as a child; it had been useful for establishing dominance over family pets.

She lay still for a moment, riffling through memories of alien creatures she'd known and shot. Were any of them capable of such a distinctive sound? No, this was something new to her. She slipped her hand beneath the pillow and gripped the laser pistol she always kept close at hand. It was a comfort, that pistol. A woman should never let her guard down.

Annoyingly, she found that wretched song running through her head; the song the faeries had sung at the welcoming supper. Really, after the buildup that Fisk woman had given, she'd expected more than the words 'Welcome to Coconut Meadows' repeated ad nauseum, in varying pitches and chords, by half a dozen naked little perverts fluttering among the trees.

And then there had been that damned bug, like a giant caterpillar, that had tried to crawl up her leg. It had given her a nasty nip before she'd been able to knock it off and flatten it. She'd noticed several of them around. There had been nothing in the brochure about *them*.

A whiff of smoke from the bedding warned her that her finger had tightened on the laser button. Then all angry thoughts were banished from her mind by a repeat of the sound that had awakened her in the first place.

Pzot!

Pzot? What kind of creature made a sound like that? A kind of expectoration followed by a smack; and was that a tiny cry of distress? Perhaps Coconut Meadows had more to offer than she'd realized. It sounded as though some kind of hunting was going on out there, with a worthwhile success rate. Pulling on a dressing gown and a pair of stout boots, she opened the door and clumped off in the direction from which the sound had come. The beach was bathed in an eerie light, caused by the diffusion of low sunlight by massed fog banks in the distance; the sun itself being well below the horizon. A faery fluttered near; she considered shooting it down but it looked a poor specimen.

Pzot!

She ducked as something half-seen whipped overhead. The faery uttered a squeal of fright. Then, as she watched, it hurtled toward the sea, captured by some kind of elastic thong....

A huge toadlike creature squatted in the shallows some ten meters away, cavernous maw agape.

The faery, attached to a chameleon-like tongue, disappeared inside. The mouth closed with an audible snap. After a ruminative pause it opened again and spat out crumpled wings. Great round eyes closed. The fat throat convulsed in a gulp. The eyes opened again, scanning the skies. Mrs. Masterson watched, fascinated and delighted. The thing must have weighed at least half a ton. Its underparts were clear of the water and an immense male organ of generation was clearly visible. Its greenish skin was covered with warts and it wore an expression of mindless brutality.

In short, it was her kind of creature.

The eyes alighted on her. The mouth opened and the tongue extended a couple of meters, quivering. A sticky blob decorated its tip. The eyes narrowed, sighting along it.

Mrs. Masterson raised her laser pistol. It was a standoff, but did the brute realize that?

Then the great mouth dropped open a little. The tongue stopped quivering. The blob drooped.

“Welcome to Coconut Meadows,” the creature said in a deep and resonant voice.

Mrs. Masterson was awakened for the second time by her father exclaiming, “Wow!” Her door was open and she could see him standing at the living room window staring out, his mouth slackly agape as it usually was these days, poor old chap.

She whisked through the hygenic chamber and dressed quickly, assuming he’d seen one of the toadlike creatures in action and wanted her to share his joy. He got little enjoyment out of life since the acrophilia had become such a problem. Well, a few weeks hunting faeries on the solid ground of Coconut Meadows should set him right.

“Just look at that, Rachel!” he said, rheumy old eyes gleaming with excitement.

They stepped outside to get a better view. The air was chilly and damp; the fog-bank had rolled in and they could barely make out the nearest unit. But about a hundred meters above the ground, three huge multicolored spheres could be seen glowing through the mist like fireballs as they caught the early sunlight. Suspended between them were vast rippling sheets that looked very much like the sails of an ancient square-rigger. On the upper curve of the central balloon a god-like figure stood with legs astride, hair golden in the low sun. The vision came and went as pockets of fog rolled by.

It was an astonishing sight and, Mrs. Masterson had to admit, quite beautiful in an obvious, unsubtle way.

“That’s Zermatt up there. Goddamned fool,” She said for her father’s benefit. Zermatt’s gravity-defying performance was not the best thing for the Admiral to see in his present state of health. It could arouse all kinds of unhealthy temptations in that teetering old mind.

“You like our mist balloons?” Vera Fisk joined them.

“What are they, for heaven’s sake?”

“Quite simply, they are our water supply. We get very little rain here at Coconut Meadows, but a morning fog always rolls in from the lake as the land heats up. The sails you see hanging between the balloons are actually a fine porous fabric that traps the moisture. Soon large drops of water form and roll down the sails, to be caught in long gutters running across the sails’ base. From there the water runs down the tubes that anchor the balloons to the ground, and into storage tanks.” She smiled at them proudly.

“Why not simply drink lake water?”

“It’s best not to drink the lake water.”

“The brochure said nothing about the lake water being unsafe!”

Vera sighed. What an exasperating woman Rachel Masterson was! She watched the silly old admiral wander off as though sleepwalking. “The lake water is perfectly safe, provided you don’t drink it.”

“So the lake is poisonous, is what you’re trying to say. And what was that monstrous creature I saw squatting in the shallows last night, answer me that!”

“You saw a tode. They are a less aesthetic component of the mosaic of life at Coconut Meadows, largely nocturnal. It’s best not to go near the lake at night. We switch on a laser fence, just as a sensible precaution, you understand.”

“Those creatures are killers, I see.”

“So are we all, Mrs. Masterson. So are we all. Who are we to judge? Ah, here are dear Grace and Mr. Montgolfier.” Her attention was drawn elsewhere. “Excuse me, Mrs. Masterson, but the Admiral seems to be jumping up and down on the roof of your unit. Not that he isn’t perfectly entitled to. He’s quite spry for an old fellow.”

“I take it you’re fishing for some kind of an explanation,” snarled Mrs. Masterson. “You can’t let the poor old man alone, can you?”

Vera colored. “Really, Mrs. Masterson, it’s none of our business what activities the Admiral might indulge in, I assure you! Although I’m concerned he may do himself a mischief. We’re not covered against guests falling off roofs. I’d never considered the possibility, before.”

“What you see is a symptom of my father’s acrophilia.”

“Tragic,” sighed Vera. “We must always make allowances for those less fortunate than ourselves.”

“My father is a damned sight more fortunate than any of us!” snapped the old lady. “He receives a pension with which he could buy out this trumpery establishment ten times over, if he so chose, which I’m sure he wouldn’t. He is in excellent physical health, mental too, apart from the acrophilia, of course. If he senses you are trying to patronize him, Miss Fisk, beware! He’s accustomed to a lifetime of command and enforcement!”

“I’m sure he is,” twittered Vera, eyes fixed on the bouncing Admiral as though hypnotized.

The days were going badly for Grace Goodenough.

It was all the fault of that dreadful old woman, Grace thought. Montgolfier’s little breakdown had clearly been exacerbated by Mrs. Masterson’s skepticism. He was maintaining an embarrassing silence as, daily, the educational party made their way through the trees in search of pupils. Furthermore, Grace’s teaching methods were being challenged on an ongoing basis by Mrs. Masterson, a mere laywoman who had never trained so much as a French poodle in her life.

“Exactly how do you propose to instill the elements of our language into these flimsy dolts?” Mrs. Masterson had asked initially.

“I repeat certain basic words to them, and when I judge that they have grasped the word and its meaning, I reward them with a chocolate bar. That is the

accepted principle in linguistic education. Repetition, response, reward. The three R's"

"Balderdash!" The vile old woman produced a curious object from the capacious bag she carried over her shoulder. "Here is your ideal teaching aid! Do the job in half the time."

"What is that thing?" asked Grace nervously, backing away from the brandished item.

"An extremely effective high-voltage baton used in riot control. Perfect for teaching the meaning of respect. A jolt from this would make an elephant talk." She chuckled reminiscently. "I used this baton selectively on the Zethozii of Altair IV and established a meaningful communication within ten seconds flat! Chocolate bars? Faugh! Allow me to demonstrate on your chimp."

"Stay away from Montgolfier!"

"I can't understand why you should possess such a weapon, Rachel," Vera Fisk remarked worriedly, as they set off on yet another expedition. "I hope your unit does not constitute an *armory*. We're not in favor of weapons at Coconut Meadows."

"You never know what to expect," said the old lady darkly, "when you find yourself in an alien culture. Or even in a human culture, these days. *Prepared!* That's the family motto, and my ancestors knew a thing or two...."

Grace found Mrs. Masterson's racist attitude towards aliens intolerable, and she suspected the faeries must think likewise because they were obviously giving the educational team a wide berth. They hadn't encountered a faery in days, and even the dinner show had been thinly attended by the little fellows, who quickly made themselves scarce once the coffee and brandy were served. Grace had begun to wonder if, like the Boshdi, the faeries were telepathic and were picking up bad vibes from the dreadful old woman.

If so, it would actually make her job easier once meaningful contact was established — if Mrs. Masterson could be excluded from the team. This proved simpler than expected due to a difference of opinion at dinner that night.

Dack Zermatt, relaxing with a brandy, had a suggestion. "I sometimes find faeries caught in my mist sails," he said. "Generally I let them flush down into the tanks. Fine source of protein. Builds up our weaker residents. Maybe I can save a few for your experiments, Miss Goodenough."

"Research," she corrected him automatically, pushing away her glass of water and regarding him in reluctant admiration. It was her first opportunity to talk to him since the day of her arrival, and she found herself speaking quickly as though he might at any moment stride purposefully away. "So you're actually in charge of that, uh, skyborne assembly we see in the mornings?"

"I am. Responsible task. The resort's lifeblood. Twenty men under me. Plus support staff."

"You go up there yourself?"

"Certainly."

"It looks terribly dangerous."

"He's going to take me up soon," said the Admiral happily.

“My pleasure. Any time, once I’ve installed a couple more safety lines. Well, good hunting!” Nodding briskly to the group, Zermatt downed his brandy, rose and strode purposefully away in, it seemed, one single movement.

“A fine figure of a man,” observed Grace.

“He impresses the guests, certainly” said Vera. “But somehow he doesn’t seem quite *real*, if you know what I mean. As though all the round edges of him had got squared off by the transmatter.”

Meanwhile the Admiral was watching the last of the evening faery display. As the final notes of ‘Welcome to Coconut Meadows’ died away and the aliens melted into the twilight, he said thoughtfully, “Easy enough to snare a few of the little guys at their evening show. Build a trap, bait it with whatever they eat, in they go, then snap!” He produced a convincing report with his dry old fingers. “Cages, too,” he added, developing his theme.

“Basketwork cages,” suggested his daughter. “Give the residents something to do with their hands. A recognized therapy.”

“We could build a dozen or so cages, keep a good supply of the little chaps on hand. Get a scientific team in.” The old man’s eyes were gleaming with enthusiasm. “Research. Enormous potential.”

“They’re humanoid, you see,” explained Mrs. Masterson. “They could have many links with our own race; links that nobody has thought to establish. It’s crystal clear that progress has been painfully slow on Gareth. I’ll get in touch with one of the more progressive Galactic outfits.”

“You will not!” Vera’s patience snapped at last. “Must I remind you that you’re a guest on this planet, Mrs. Masterson? Really, I find your views on the ethics of alien communication questionable, and I’m sure I speak for every one of our residents. The last thing we want is some corporate giant setting up camp on our world.”

“And might I remind you, Miss Fisk,” snarled Mrs. Masterson, coming to a decision that had been building in her mind for some days, “that I have paid you, and paid you well, for accommodating my father at your trumpety establishment. After this short trial period I have come to the conclusion that it is totally unsuited to him. His mind is quite as nimble as it ever was, and he would die of boredom here. I shall be making a written demand for a refund this very night. We shall leave on the morrow!”

“The morrow?” said her father anxiously. “Which morrow? I was hoping to go up on the balloons the day after tomorrow.”

“There is no question of you leaving tomorrow or the day after, Mrs. Masterson,” said Vera firmly. “The transmatter is fully booked for the next three days.”

“Be that as it may, our refund will run as from this minute. And as from this minute, I wash my hands of your pathetic attempts to communicate with those wretched little aliens. My days are too valuable to waste tramping around this jungle. From now on, you can wander around without my guidance, and good luck to you!”

Fortunately, the old lady did not hear Grace Goodenough's heartfelt sigh of relief.

Grace's opportunity came the following day. It was close to lunch time and she was returning with Montgolfier from a brief excursion into the forest, when she saw a delicate creature winging its way towards her.

"Welcome to Coconut Meadows!" It alighted, fluttering prettily, just below the large WELCOME TO COCONUT MEADOWS sign on the track from the transmatter hanger.

This was it! Grace motioned Montgolfier behind her and approached the faery with quiet and gliding steps, like a cross-country skier. The creature watched her impassively, showing no fear.

"Hello, there!" For one nightmare moment it seemed the creature had spoken with the voice of Vera Fisk, but then the Director herself appeared from the opposite direction, smiling brightly. Grace felt a moment of panic. She hadn't bargained on having to teach before an audience. There would be no chance of a cover-up if the faeries were in fact unintelligent, as Mrs. Masterson had surmised.... The whole project a waste of time! A fortune in Company transmatter fare down the drain. They would seek a scapegoat. Her. Yet she couldn't let this opportunity slip.

Completely unnerved, she tapped herself on the chest. "Me, Grace."

"Welcome to Coconut Meadows," replied the faery.

"I taught it to welcome our guests," said Vera.

Presumably Vera was proud of this simple achievement, but to Grace's fevered mind it sounded like a challenge. She became aggressive.

"You taught by rote, Vera. Does the creature know what the words mean? Would any animal?"

Mrs. Masterson appeared at that moment, accompanied by the Admiral. *The horrible old woman seems to have an unerring nose for conflict*, thought Grace wildly.

"I'm surprised to hear you speak like that in front of Montgolfier," said the old lady dryly. "But then his capacity for understanding is, shall we say, open to speculation."

Montgolfier, hearing his name, said, "Oof."

"Tell me what that's supposed to mean, if you please."

"It was a wordless sound of disagreement, Mrs. Masterson," explained Grace, "just as you yourself might say 'faugh.'"

"You're saying that brute has the temerity to *argue* with me? By God, where did I put my baton?"

"Steady, Rachel," murmured the Admiral, stepping between his daughter and the offending chimp.

"We're getting nowhere," said Grace angrily. "I agreed to your presence at my educational opportunities because you appeared interested in my methods, Mrs. Masterson. I must insist on your silence while I interview this creature."

“In point of fact,” said the ghastly old woman, “I’m here because I disagree with your methods.”

“You’ve never even observed my methods!”

“Let me make myself clear. I disagree with *any* methods. These creatures are perfectly happy as they are. Let them be, I say. Once you try to communicate with them, you are acknowledging them as equals. Next, they will want the benefits of our society: the education, the technology, the indexed pensions. And having got what they want, they’ll kick us off their world and back into Space on a technicality based on our own legal system! Why do you think the policy of non-interference came about?”

“To protect alien species from such as you, Mrs. Masterson!”

“No, it was to protect us from them!”

It was incredible. The horrible old woman *believed* what she was saying. Grace sought a response, but her mind had gone blank.

Into the silence, Vera Fisk said, “Why not ask Mr. Montgolfier what he thinks?”

“Good thinking!” shouted Mrs. Masterson triumphantly. “Ask the chimp for his views on the policy of noninterference!”

“That is completely unfair and you know it, Mrs. Masterson,” said Grace. “Montgolfier and I have never discussed the policy, so how can he have views on it?”

“All right, let’s discuss it with him here and now!”

“This is neither the time nor the place. We are here, if you remember, to take the first steps towards establishing communication with the faeries. Here is a faery. I propose to establish communication. If you don’t approve of this, then I suggest you leave.”

“I certainly shall! I have better things to do that waste my time with a charlatan and her dupe!” Mrs. Masterson called to her father, but he was involved in an intricate hand-slapping game with Montgolfier and ignored her. Snorting with disgust, she stomped away through the trees.

Grace resumed the task of educating the faery, but her heart was not in it. Her confidence was shot. Montgolfier was behaving more and more like a chimp, positively *gamboling* around with Admiral Bannock, uttering animal grunts of pleasure.

And it all stemmed from that goddamned seventy-seventh word. Why couldn’t she have picked a more useful word; one that would have broadened his outlook and his sensibilities? Such a worthless little word, and so ironic that it had triggered Montgolfier’s insanity. It had been a moment of total irresponsibility on her part, and Montgolfier, with that peculiar instinct of animals, had known it was wrong. Torn between his love for her and his contempt for the word, his reason had snapped.

Or had it? Had she been deluding herself all this time? Had Montgolfier ever really said anything, or had she merely heard what she’d wanted to hear in his grunts? Certainly one needed a trained ear to understand him.

But did she possess a trained ear? Or was it a deluded ear?

Confidence at the low ebb, Grace showed the faery a chocolate bar.

As Grace watched Mrs. Masterson stuffing herself at the dinner table that evening, she allowed herself a small smile of triumph. The day had been an unexpected success despite the unpromising beginning. The first hurdle had been: would the faery take to the chocolate bar? Well, it had, to the extent that other faeries had come fluttering in to join the fun. It was possible that this demonstrated telepathic ability, in which case educating the little fellows would be as simple as educating the Boshdi.

On the other hand, it might have demonstrated a good sense of smell, a gentle breeze having been wafting the chocolate scent through the forest. That remained to be seen. Whatever the reason, the faeries were clearly responsive, now that the aura of Mrs. Masterson had been removed. Twittering happily, they shared the chocolate bar, taking it in turns for a suck, the way one might share a cannabis joint.

Grace's only regret was that Montgolfier had left the scene with the Admiral, the two having bonded over the past day or so. It wasn't a bad thing, actually. Montgolfier had been a disruptive influence, screeching and showing signs of jealousy while she was befriending the faeries.

Faced with a dozen or so almost identical creatures she had chosen the most intelligent-looking on the basis of apparent head diameter, and concentrated her teaching on him, or her. She'd named it Flitter. To ensure future recognition, she had touched the creature's wings with a few spots of red paint, a can of which she'd found in the storage area of the transmatter hangar.

She using the same standard abbreviated vocabulary with Flitter as she used with Montgolfier. Flitter seemed to absorb the words and repeat them recognizably as she said them, but was a little short on long-term memory. That would come. It was all a matter of practice. The sun was warm. The transmatter's conveyor belt rumbled quietly in the background, bringing in supplies from Earth. Mrs. Masterson was nowhere to be seen. All was well. Grace persevered with Flitter, happy in the knowledge that she was bestowing the benefits of a higher civilization on these pleasant little natives.

She would not have been so happy if she'd overheard the conversation going on between Mrs. Masterson and the Admiral.

"I've had a bellyful of Grace Goodenough and her flimsy fools, Father. The time has come for action!"

"Action!" The word appealed to the military man. He savored it on his tongue. "Action, eh? Nothing like a spot of action."

"Grace Goodenough must be exposed for the charlatan she is. We have three possible courses of action. One, we discredit her work. That shouldn't be difficult; her current project bears the seeds of self-destruction within. Put simply, she doesn't have the intelligence to realize that her pupils have no intelligence at all. Over a period of time this will become apparent even to Vera Fisk. But that is a long-term solution, and we are short of time."

"Absolutely!" The old man tried to look alert and intelligent.

“Option Two, we strike at her through Montgolfier. We already know the ape is a fraud. I doubt that he’s ever spoken a coherent word in his life. We work towards a public revelation of the true facts.”

“Public revelation?”

“We put the ape in such a position that he is obliged to display his lack of talent.”

“How?” The old man’s mouth had dropped slackly open, intensifying his gormless expression.

“For heaven’s sake, Father, I expect better from you than this. Does it matter how? Invite him to be the guest speaker at dinner, or something. There must be a thousand ways for Montgolfier to find himself speechless in public. Chimps do it all the time. We can flesh out the details later.”

The Admiral’s expression firmed up. “I wouldn’t want to embarrass Montgolfier in public. It’s not appropriate. Montgolfier is a fine animal.”

“Which brings us to Option Three. Now listen carefully, Father, because I think you’re going to like this one....”

Grace was looking forward to the evening show with more than usual enthusiasm, wondering if Flitter would be among the performers.

“Here they come!” cried Vera, clapping her hands rhythmically.

The music and lyrics of ‘Welcome to Coconut Meadows’ could be heard from the forest, repeated endlessly in different keys. A few of the less senile residents took up the chant, attempting to harmonize. A few clapped in unison with Vera.

A dozen faeries appeared among the imported palms, zooming around the hanging lanterns like moths. Grace was delighted to see Flitter prominently among them.

“That’s odd,” said Vera suddenly. “Do you hear something else?”

“I wish I did,” said Mrs. Masterson, “but it sounds like the same damned thing to me. No, wait a moment. Good grief!”

Flitter floated past, clearly enunciating, “Me Grace!”

Other faeries took up the word, using it as a counterpoint to the chorus.

The elderly lady uttered a bark of laughter. “So they’ve got the hang of the vocabulary, Miss Goodenough. What comes next? Grammar?”

Grace was saved the necessity of replying by an unexpected development.

“They’re kissing!” Vera exclaimed. “I’ve never seen them do that before. Isn’t it sweet!”

The faeries had paired off and sat among the palm fronds with their arms around each other, mouths pressed together. The residents were groaning with sentimentality.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Mrs. Masterson. “Dirty little devils!”

“An innocent show of affection,” said Vera reprovingly.

“Innocent my foot! Don’t you understand, woman? Just take a look at them. They have no external sex organs in the human sense, so how do they procreate? Obviously, by use of the mouths. They’re not kissing, they’re fornicating,

right in front of your residents. Fluids are doubtless being exchanged. Conception may well be taking place.” She suppressed a delighted chuckle. “Shameless! I’m not sitting around to watch this kind of filth, and neither is the Admiral!”

The Admiral had been watching the performance listlessly, but when he heard his daughter’s analysis he brightened and regarded the faeries with more interest. “Fornicating, eh? Well, I’ll be beggared!”

“Come, Father.” She rose from the table, took his arm and began to lead him away. Once they were clear of the illuminated dining area, she stopped. “We will await events.”

“What events?”

“For heaven’s sake, Father, have you forgotten already? Option Three is about to unfold.”

In fact Option Three unfolded as she spoke.

Pzot!

A pair of faeries, locked in close embrace, where whisked from their perch by what looked like a gigantic ball of mucus on the end of a whip. Cries of alarm rose from the residents.

“Oh, Jesus, the todes are at the gates!” someone screamed.

Pzot!

“The fence must be down!” cried Vera. “Don’t be alarmed, my friends. The todes are harmless to humans.”

“They’re not harmless to faeries,” shouted Grace angrily. “Get the fence on, right now! Oh, my God, there goes Flitter!”

Pzot!

“Get Zermatt!” People were shouting. “Zermatt’s the man to handle this!”

Vera was talking into her communicator. She raised a tearful face to Grace. “Dack says he can’t do anything. He says the todes are beyond his sphere of authority and in any case...” She listened further, “...in any case, short of physically grappling with them, which he has no desire to do, he fails to see how they can be removed.”

“Just tell him to kill the bastards!” shouted Grace.

Pzot!

“He can’t do that, obviously, because it would be in contravention of Galactic Law. The todes are simply doing what comes naturally to them, Grace. No.” Vera visibly pulled herself together. “No, we do not kill, at Coconut Meadows. We live in harmony with the creatures of Gareth.”

“Pity they don’t live in harmony with one another!”

“The villain of the piece, if there is one, is the inactive laser fence.”

“Yes, and we all know who switched it off, don’t we!”

“Well, no, we don’t, Grace.” Simultaneous Pzots took care of the remaining faeries and a stunned and mourning silence fell, broken only by the sound of resonant belches from the undergrowth. “I had no intention of pointing fingers. I may well have forgotten to switch the fence on myself. We must not jump to conclusions.”

Mrs. Masterson stepped out of the shadows and pointed dramatically at Montgolfier, seated beside Grace. "There is your culprit!"

"Montgolfier? Don't be ridiculous."

"Rachel!" the Admiral cried. "You never told me—"

"Be quiet, Father. As I was about to say, I saw Montgolfier sneaking back from the power unit not an hour ago, guilt written in every line of his face." Her voice rose, quelling a few scattered outbursts of disbelief. "And if you care to give it a moment's thought, Montgolfier is the obvious perpetrator of this night's tragic events. His is the telling motive. For years he has been this woman's favorite. They have lived together. They have learned together, eaten together, slept together."

"That is a bloody slander!"

"And now this poor creature finds himself dropped like a hot potato. His mentor has found new friends and abandoned him. Crazy with grief, he conceives a simple plan to rid the forest of his enemies and restore his mistress to his side. He plans. He acts. But little does he know of the extent to which he has been betrayed. Deprived of her new favorites, she will simply enlist more from the forest. The chimp cannot win!"

Grace Goodenough was on her feet. "I've never heard such nonsense in all my life! Montgolfier would never have switched the power off. It's ridiculous. He wouldn't know how to!"

"Look at his face, woman! You see that expression! If that's not guilt, I'm a Dutchman!"

"He's just looking the way chimps always look, for God's sake!"

Mrs. Masterson allowed herself a triumphant smile. "Be that as it may, there's a simple way to find out. Let the chimp speak in his own defense!"

"That's hardly fair. I doubt if he's understood the accusation."

"Then explain it to him in words of one syllable, Miss Goodenough. Take your time. I think I speak for us all when I say we'd like to get to the bottom of this."

Cracked and senile shouts of agreement rose from the residents.

With obvious reluctance Grace explained the situation carefully to Montgolfier.

He took it in, watching her intently from under heavy brows, blinking at her hands as she gesticulated to make the finer points clear. From time he nodded. Finally she finished and he sat slumped in contemplation for a moment. Then he looked up. His back straightened. His lips writhed experimentally. He spoke.

"Oof."

Seated on an electric invalid carriage, Grace Goodenough trundled unsteadily through the forest examining the trees for signs of faeries. So far her search had been unsuccessful and she'd come to the conclusion that the little fellows must be territorial. Probably the whole population of this particular territory had been wiped out last night. It could be weeks before other faeries moved in and filled the gap. There was no normal transport at Coconut Meadows apart from the low

loader used to bring larger items from the transmitter hangar, so exploration was tedious and time-consuming.

That morning, she'd asked Vera to ship in a hovercar.

"Oh, no, we can't do that," the Director of Social Development had twittered, shooting her an unfriendly look. "We hadn't budgeted for that kind of expense. And we have a strict rule against vehicles here, apart from invalid carriages, of course. We don't want to pollute the pristine air of our world, do we?"

Analyzing the unfriendly look, Grace had come to the conclusion that Vera, incredibly, believed the foul accusations of that ghastly old woman. Montgolfier was now in disgrace, confined to a large basketwork cage woven by a team of troubled residents some months ago. If only he'd spoken up in his own defense! But no, since his little breakdown he'd remained silent. It didn't help his cause. Would he ever speak again?

"May Mrs. Masterson rot in hell!" Grace shouted to the trees.

"...rot in hell," came the faint answer of some distant faery.

"Grace! Grace!" came another shout. The forest was full of voices this morning. "Grace, is that you?"

The voice had a human ring to it. "I'm here!" she shouted back, swinging around.

Vera came rolling up behind her. "It's Montgolfier!" she jerked out as she bounced over potholes.

An icy dread clutched at Grace. "He's all right, is he?"

"He's escaped from his cage! He's rampaging around the resort! The residents are terrified of him. He keeps picking things up and throwing them, and making dreadful noises. Aggressive noises. We don't favor aggression at Coconut Meadows."

"He needs me, the poor chap." Grace reversed her invalid carriage to and fro until she was facing back the way she'd come. "I told you he wouldn't take to being caged like an animal. Montgolfier values his dignity."

When they arrived at the resort they found a scene of destruction. Tables had been overturned, lamps and chairs scattered, wiring pulled from the trees. Frightened faces peered from the windows of housing units.

"Where's Montgolfier?" shouted Grace.

Fingers pointed. "The beach!" someone shouted back. "He rushed off towards the beach. He was dragging a chair."

The two women emerged from the trees to find a third woman standing at the water's edge. Hearing their approach, Mrs. Masterson swung around angrily. "I suggest you bring your animal under control, Goodenough, before he causes any more damage. I shudder to think of the effect he has had on the more sensitive residents of this resort."

"You never cared about the sensitivity of the residents before, you silly old fool!" yelled Grace. "This is a personal vendetta against Montgolfier, and you know it!"

Meanwhile the chimp had set his chair down nearby and was jumping up and down on the seat, gibbering. The morning mist had dispersed and Dack Zer-

montgolfier's three huge balloons hung some fifty meters out to sea. The vast sails drooped limply from ropes between them, now dry, glowing in the sunlight. On top of the central balloon, within a circular safety railing, stood the impressive figure of Zermatt himself. Beside him stood Admiral Bannock. Montgolfier seemed to be gesticulating at them as he bounced on his chair.

"What in heaven's name is the admiral doing up there?" exclaimed Vera. "Guests are not permitted on the balloons."

"I believe your man Zermatt invited him, so the responsibility is yours," replied the elderly lady. "Furthermore, you knew of my father's acrophilia, and you should have safeguarded him against temptation. If he comes to any harm I shall sue you for every penny you possess. Instruct Zermatt to lower him down into a boat immediately, if you please!"

"Impossible, I'm afraid. The balance is extremely sensitive. Your father must stay there while the balloons are partially deflated and hauled down. It takes time."

"Montgolfier!" cried Grace suddenly.

The chimp had abandoned his chair and, running clumsily along the beach, had seized one of the guy ropes. He began to climb rapidly towards the left-hand balloon, which bucked and wobbled.

"Get him off there!" shouted Vera.

But Montgolfier ignored her, climbing on. Reaching the balloon, he swung onto the mist sail and began to run nimbly along the rope from which it hung, making for the central balloon. The lightweight fabric began to bounce with his weight, causing the central balloon to bounce too. Zermatt and the admiral clung to the safety rail. Montgolfier reached them and leaped happily into Admiral Bannock's arms.

The admiral lost his grip on the rail.

The two of them slid down the curve of the balloon, gathering speed. Zermatt watched them helplessly. The watchers on the beach were yelling with alarm.

As he fell free of the balloon, with the sea a terrifying distance below, Montgolfier came to the dim realization that he might be responsible for the death of both his hero and himself. It was too much for a mere ape to handle, and for the first time in many days he verbalized, loud and clear.

"Oh, ****!" he cried.

As Admiral Bannock plummeted toward the sea he had time to think. His first thought was: Experts said hitting water from this height was like hitting concrete. Next he ruminated on the appalling nature of gravity, and how the Universe would be a far better place without it....

Pzot!

Something soft struck the small of his back, adhered firmly and lowered him gently into the shallows. He stood. He opened his eyes.

A tode crouched nearby, retracting its tongue.

"Welcome to Coconut Meadows," it said in a manly baritone.

“Glad to be back,” said the Admiral, much relieved. “Thanks for your help.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What!” exclaimed the Admiral, amazed.

“No sweat,” said the tode.

At that moment Montgolfier landed, also with the assistance of a tode. “Hey, Monty!” called the Admiral. “These big guys can talk!”

“Only when we have something useful to say,” said the tode.

Montgolfier regarded the huge and ugly creatures for a moment. Then he shook his head sadly, waded silently back to the beach and took hold of Grace’s hand. After a brief chat with the todes the admiral followed, *aquadinglei* snapping at his heels, and the group stood in silence, busy with their thoughts as they watched Dack Zermatt wind down the balloons.

Finally the admiral said, “Marvelous beasts. Just marvelous. Big, strong, can talk up a storm. We must reconsider our views on this place, Rachel. I’m going to enjoy my stay here.”

With a sly glance at Vera, Mrs. Masterson pronounced, “Such a mistake to assume that humanoid equates with intelligence. It wouldn’t surprise me if the todes were telepathic, too, learning the language at a distance in such facile manner. You must be delighted at the opportunity to come to grips with tode culture, Vera. We can forget about those puny pretenders in the trees, now. Out there in the shallows is the real thing!”

After one appalled glance in the direction of the todes during which she noted their distinct facial resemblance to Mrs. Masterson, Vera addressed Grace coldly. “It appears that your work here will not be necessary. The whole thing is very unfortunate. We shall pay for your passage home, of course.”

“I have a service contract with your resort, Vera,” said Grace, equally coldly.

“I’m sure we can agree on compensation.”

“I’m sure we can.” Grace regarded the waving palms, the clear blue sky, the golden sands, and was aware of a lightening of spirit. It would be good to get away from this sham paradise and back into the African jungle reserve with Montgolfier. She felt a spring to her step as she strode away, hand in hand with her faithful companion. Clearly the dear fellow had recovered his reason and was a whole animal once more. He’d uttered that goddamned stupid seventy-seventh word at last, and with that hurdle out of the way his education could progress by leaps and bounds. There would be no limit to their achievements....

“Well!” exclaimed Vera. “I’m glad we’ve seen the last of her and that foul-mouthed animal. The mind boggles at what she might have taught the faeries to say. And listen to her now. She’s laughing, for heaven’s sake.”

“A temporary euphoria,” Mrs. Masterson assured her. “She’s looking forward to resuming her research — or whatever she does with Montgolfier — in their little grass hut. But she’s in for a disappointment, because that chimp is nobody’s fool. He’s all animal, and you saw how he reacted when the tode spoke. If ever I saw contempt in a chimp’s face, I saw it then. The anthropomorphism dis-

gusted him. As she once said, he's a proud beast. Mark my words, Montgolfier will never speak again."

"Thank heaven for that," said Vera.

CROSSING PENDHU BRIDGE

an unpublished story by Michael Coney

Author's note: For a change of pace, here is a serious story about a kindly alien — or is it? Well, it's certainly about superstition, or religion, or courage or something. Sometimes I wish I knew what was going on in my own mind when I'm plotting a story. Perhaps the story is simply a satire on Cornish attitudes. Most of my ancestors were from Cornwall, and the alien world in this story has many similarities to that English county. The story was accepted by a magazine that ceased publication soon afterward, and has been lying dormant on my computer ever since.

Whenever I fed the Moderator my pleasure was almost orgasmic.

I emptied my sacks of soygel onto the floor of the cage and threw the switch. The drum revolved. The cable paid out as the cage began its descent into the bowels of the earth — or at least to the level of the ancient mine where the Moderator and His assistant lived. Then I stood in the morning sunshine, high on the flat top of tiny Pendhu Isle on my world of Zena-3, breathing in the good sea air and waiting for the Moderator's gratitude.

Soon His thanks washed into my very being like a slow wave, warming me through, tingling in my every nerve ending. I bathed in it, drank it, breathed it, lived it. There was nothing in our world to compare with the Moderator's gratitude — and I mean *nothing*. And I was the only person in Kernow sector who ever felt it. It happened every time I fed Him. It was the Moderator's special thanks to me just for doing my job.

And the earthquake took it all from me, and more besides.

Later I climbed down the precipitous path to the sea, rowed across the short distance to the mainland and climbed up to the soyfields. A tump watched me mindlessly from the cliff top, munching.

"Get out of there!" I shouted, waving my arms.

Tumps can be a nuisance, cutting a broad swathe through our crops, eating everything in their way. I suppose we only have ourselves to blame. We introduced the animals to Zena-3 long ago as a source of meat — and that very word 'meat' makes me want to gag. A tump feels no pain and can be *harvested*, as I believe people used to call it — which means cutting a chunk of flesh off the poor creature, roasting and eating it.

Ugh! We humans were primitive animals in preModerate days, weren't we? So now the tumps eat our crops instead of us eating them, and as Moderates we are

unable to dispose of them. Fortunately they breed very slowly. But they live almost forever.

The tump blinked its tiny eyes and began to swivel its huge hippo-like body with shuffling movements of eight stumpy legs. I'd done it a favor. If I hadn't turned it aside, it might well have lumbered mindlessly over the edge of the cliff. Maybe I should have left it alone, but to allow it to die was almost as impossible as killing it. The Moderator teaches that there is a place for us all on this new young world.

As the tump turned away I saw something so unthinkable that at first I thought it must be a trick of the light.

I ran my hand over the animal's tough hide. Yes, that was a fresh scar on its flank. Half a meter long, running diagonally, the cut of a knife. Tumps heal quickly, but I could feel a dent beneath the scar; this was not an accidental scratch.

Someone in our settlement had been eating meat.

I know what anger is. I've seen people lose their tempers on the old cautionary videos. But as Moderates we do not lose our tempers, thank God. What I felt was a deep, disturbing unease. And a resolve to report this outrage to Preacher Tresize, and to shame the culprit. I thought I knew who the culprit was.

Filled with righteous intent, I strode off toward the settlement....

And at that very moment the earthquake hit.

At first I thought the world was ending. The earth bounded beneath my feet. The soyfields rippled like the waves of the sea. The tump trembled and grunted, outraged by this freakish quirk of nature. The ancient trestle bridge, which spans a hundred meters between the cliff top and the tiny islet of Pendhu, heaved and twisted. Baulks of timber broke free and tumbled to the water far below, bouncing off horizontal struts on the way down, bouncing and tumbling just like my best friend Frank Whitta did, a few years ago. And I heard again as if in a dream, those terrible words that drove him to his death: *Go on, let me see what kind of a man you are.* Beyond the bridge, the ruined pump house and tall vent of Wheal Pendhu itself seemed to shudder. Fleeting, I wondered what the Moderator thought of it all, down there in His cavern.

That earthquake day, a Threeday in Month Six, went down in Kernow sector's parlance as *The Day Things Changed*. Hardly an inspired title for such a momentous occasion, but at least the world didn't end. That particular threat still hung over us. Preacher Tresize had always said the world would end, one day. But not yet.

After a while the echoes of the last crash of falling timber died away and the tump peered around with anxious, stupid eyes. For a few moments everything was very quiet and still. Then the animal resumed grazing. The hot sun broke through the clouds and the insects started to twitter and croak again as though nothing had happened.

And I began to breathe again although my heart was still bumping painfully. It was my first earthquake, and I hope it will be my last. I staggered to my feet and turned toward the village, weak-kneed. I needed to talk to people about this; to

share views, to ease the fear in the way our community does, in discussion and prayer. I needed to see Janie, my girl. I needed reassurance and normalcy. I should have chased the tump out of the soyfields but I didn't even think of it. I'd taken maybe a dozen steps away from the cliff top when I heard a strange sound from behind me, something between a hiss and a roar, and terribly loud. As I swung around the ground shook to a crashing explosion. A wall of water reared skywards, at least twenty meters higher than the cliff itself, curling towards me. I turned and ran. Water rained down on me and the ground was instantly drenched and slick. I slipped and fell, sliding some distance before crashing headfirst into a granite boulder. Stunned, I buried my head in my hands and waited for the roar of falling water to cease. It was minutes before my head cleared and I rolled over, huddled under a protective overhang of rock.

Sunlight gleamed on the grassy crown of Pendhu Isle. The tall vent still rose to the sky beside the gaunt gray three-story pump house. The conical heaps of spoil looked a little flattened but that could have been my imagination; I was looking for change where there was none. The giant mechanical mole still lay on the grass, glittering and obsolete. Grummets wheeled and circled above, yelling at the sight of silvery fish stranded by the tidal wave.

A new fear clutched at me, heart-stopping, snatching the breath from me.

How were things with the Moderator, down there in the mine shaft? Was He still safe?

The Moderator meant everything to the village, and to all of Kernow Sector. He was the greatest influence on our lives, our protection against a new Dark Age.

I could not conceive of life without Him.

The settlement of Polzuan lies a scant five kilometers inland from Pendhu Isle, couched in a valley amid trees imported from Earth long ago; quite different country from the endless soyfields of the uplands. Here the little brook Tew winds down from the highlands of Goonhilly, breeding vegetation as it runs into more sheltered terrain. By the time it reaches Polzuan the local people dignify it with the title of river. And when the winter storms lash the uplands it can swell terrifyingly. The runoff rages through the settlement, lapping to the very doorsteps of the housing units, dangerous to approach, carrying drowned tumps with it.

Although the Moderator does His best, He can't keep us safe from nature's fury. And when I topped the last ridge I saw below me a scene of devastation that even He could not have alleviated. The neatly groomed units of Polzuan were awash in swirling waters. The tidal wave had traveled all the way up the valley, uprooting trees which now nuzzled the units as they drifted seawards on the ebb.

And at least half the units had been destroyed either by earthquake or tsunami, little aluminum boxes open to the sky and crumpled around the edges. Some floated in midstream. It was a dreadful sight. They had withstood centuries of storms and flash floods, only to be wiped out in a few minutes.

My first thought was for Janie, my girl. Her parents' unit was one of those lying awash and in ruins. So was mine. Also Tom Whitta's unit, which did not dis-

please me. I'd detested old man Whitta ever since he taunted his son Frank into that stupid escapade on Pendhu bridge that led to his death.

I felt a desperate need to hear the soothing tones of Preacher Tresize, but all I heard was the wailing of the villagers as they scrambled clear of the water and turned to look back at the devastation of their homes. I hurried toward them. I couldn't see Janie or her parents among the little crowd.

That old fool Whitta was holding forth already. He's well over sixty, born almost twenty years before the Moderator arrived, and therefore regarded as just a little suspect, a little unpredictable. And rightly so.

"Yes, in the old days they'd have had the emergency services here by now. The firemen, the coast rescue, the police, the medics, mebbe even the Space Corps. All helping out. Blankets and hot drinks. Fixing up accommodation. Shipping the injured off to hospital. Rebuilding. Boats, helicopters. But not now. Not these days. Speed's dangerous, they say."

"Please, Tom," someone said mildly. "That's enough about the old days, eh? We've heard all that stuff before. We're better off now, in spite of all this mess. We'll get through it."

There was a chorus of agreement, and Whitta said hastily, "I'm not denying that. I'm just telling you the way things were, back when I was a kid. Just the facts, that's all I'm telling you. And help'll come soon enough. I've no doubt Preacher'll say a prayer for us meanwhile."

I thought I detected a certain sarcasm in his final words; but perhaps I was alone. A lot of people didn't see through Whitta's hypocrisy.

"Has anyone seen Janie Devoran?" I asked, as the quiet weeping resumed and people scanned the receding waters.

"She'll be all right, Bill," said Mary Oakes, who runs the settlement's supply center. "See, when the earthquake hit, most people got out of their units." She paused, homely face suddenly uncertain. "A few were unlucky, I guess. Some ran up this way, some up the other side. By the time the flood came the units were mostly empty. You were up top feeding the Moderator? You were lucky. It's not a thing I'd want to see again, the way the sea came rushing up the valley in one great wave." She shivered. "I do so wish Preacher was here. I could use a few of his words right now. But he's on the other side." She gazed longingly towards the crowd of people gathered around the ancient succorium which stood well clear of the water on the opposite hillside.

"We'll be able to cross the bridge inside the hour," observed Whitta.

"If the bridge is still there under all that water," said Hiller of the Polzuan Inn gloomily. The inn still stood, but I'm sure he was concerned for his stock; the casks of lemon, orange and lime juice in his flooded cellars, to say nothing of the hundreds of bottles of fizzy drinks being washed about and broken.

"The bridge is sound," said Whitta in his didactic tones. "Those old concrete arch bridges were built to take all kinds of pressure. I checked it out only last year. It's stood for a couple of centuries and it's good for many more."

There were murmurs of relief. Give the old fool his due, when it comes to engineering Whitta knows what he's talking about. His father was manager of Wheal

Pendhu long ago in the days when it was still producing ore, and Tom Whitta had been trained to take over from him when he retired. But then the Moderator came, and a different use was found for the old mine.

“My granddad died soon after,” Whitta’s son Frank told me once, as we sat outside the Polzuan Inn drinking apple juice and watching half a dozen children exercising under the watchful eyes of their parents. Young limbs can easily be overstressed. “He lived long enough to oversee the work of getting the Moderator settled in, but I reckon he kind of lost heart after. He wasn’t needed any more, see? The mine had been his life.”

“He could have stayed there, couldn’t he? Looked after the maintenance and so on? The wooden bridge is falling apart.” I wish I’d put it more strongly at the time; I might have saved Frank’s life.

Whitta’s braying voice broke into my thoughts. “Although why anyone should want to listen to Preacher I don’t know. He’s useless. Goddamned useless. I mean, what the hell can he do about all this, eh? Eh? If you ask me, all he wants is to be top man around here, cock of the midden. He makes out he has a direct line to the Moderator, and believe me that’s all bullshit. It’s just so he can lord it over people. Well, I tell you, he doesn’t lord it over me! Why, Bill here knows more about the Moderator than ever Preacher does.”

I’ve been the Moderator’s Provider for a couple of years now, solely responsible for His sustenance. It’s one of the most important functions in the settlement, and dangerous too, since it involves using the rowboat. Whitta, taking advantage of his flattery, addressed me.

“That right, Bill?”

I took him aside. “You’ve been harvesting tumps, haven’t you?”

“What, me? Never!”

I told him what I’d seen. “It’s you or one of the other PreModerates. There’s only a few of you. We’ll talk to Preacher and get to the bottom of this.”

“All right. All right. No need to involve Preacher.” He adopted a wheedling tone. “You don’t know what it’s like, Bill. The craving for a decent meal. Only PreModerates understand, and nobody makes any allowances for us. Times have changed, and some of us are too old to change with them. Remember I was already twenty years old when the Moderator came. Twenty formative years eating meat and thinking nothing wrong with it. You don’t sweep those years under the carpet so easily, Bill.”

The sun had slipped behind a cloud and the parents were dressing the children in sweaters in case they caught chills. There was no disguising the look of scorn on Whitta’s face. “Namby-pamby little beggars. When I was a lad, half the year we’d be dressed in nothing but a pair of shorts and no worse for it, and we’d be swimming, sailing, climbing the cliffs, playing in the old workings at Pendhu — they go right out under the sea, did you know that? But not now. Too dangerous. Might get hurt. Did I ever tell you my old dad played soccer for Trura? Had a trial for Wilton United in Mercia Sector once, he did. When I was a lad, it was my ambi-

tion to play for the United. But there's no United now. No football. Too dangerous."

It gets tedious, the way the preModerate oldsters ramble on about old times. I might have challenged him but I let it go. Others had drifted near and this was the time for standing together against adversity. "I've seen United on old videos," someone said mildly. "It's scary. People used to break their legs playing soccer." "It was the other fellow's leg you broke, if you were any bloody good at all," Whitta snapped. His eyes closed for a moment and he gave a reminiscent smile. Oldsters go through that performance quite often. "I'd give worlds for a beer." It's almost a catch-phrase among PreModerates: 'I'd give worlds for a beer.' The words will die with them, thankfully. It's an insult to any normal man's intelligence to hear them speak so longingly of a substance that dulled their senses and provoked them to violence.

All this, and Whitta had killed his own son. You'd think he'd have learned his lesson.

Something about the thought of beer, or perhaps the sight of those children, loosened his tongue further. The sun had come out again and the mothers had taken their sweaters off again and were leading them in stretching exercises. Stretching is important, otherwise little muscles can become stiff.

Eyeing them balefully, Whitta said, "Me and my dad installed The Moderator, you know. He was heavy as all hell and growing fast, right there on the grass outside the old pump house. He looked like a big floppy white balloon, like —" he struggled to find the words — "like a goddamned great haggis. Twitching. We rolled Him into the cage and took Him down to the lower levels, Dad and me. We made Him comfortable with straw and such and built a frame around Him, and a fine mesh in case of rodents. We didn't know then, see, that His influence included animals as well. We didn't know much about Him."

There was something more than a little profane about Whitta's description of the Moderator, but I let it go. "So how did you know what to do? Did you leave it all to His assistant?"

His old eyes were faraway, looking back over the years. "I don't remember. We just knew. Like knowing how to breathe. Or how to screw a woman, although there are plenty that've forgotten that nowadays, seems to me. We did what we had to. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, they used to say in the old movies. You don't get movies like that nowadays. Just pap."

He was into his nostalgia kick, so I cut him off again. "Why house him in the mine? He'd be better off in the succorium, where people can see Him and praise Him, wouldn't He?"

"Maybe now. But back then, before people got used to His influence, there was some resentment, see? Coming down from another world like that, and telling people to look after Him. It would have been risky to have Him in full view. The other Sectors hid their Moderators away, too. Maybe they shouldn't have."

"But we could bring Him up now."

"Maybe. He might have grown too big. Difficult to get Him into the manlift cage."

“So He’s stuck down there forever, just living in the dark.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that, Bill. Nothing lives forever.”

I had a sudden horrifying vision of life with the Moderator dead, and people slipping back into the old ways: arguing, risking their lives on a whim, hitting one another, playing soccer and worse; armed rivalry between Sectors and building bombs to wipe out settlements and kill people. It must have been a terrible mixed-up world in the old days.

The water ebbed away leaving a disgusting slime over everything, and weird life-forms in unexpected places. We crossed the slippery bridge and climbed to the succorium where some two hundred people milled around, desperate for reassurance. Despite what Mary Oakes had said there were a few missing faces, and nearby a small cluster of people were tending to a half dozen casualties lying on the grass.

“Mary Nettle!” someone was shouting anxiously. “Mary, are you here?”

“Jim? Anyone seen Jim?”

“Open up the doors, Preacher! Lead us in prayer!”

Preacher Tresize stood before the closed steel doors, gazing over our heads. I turned and followed his gaze. As I said before, the succorium is some way up the hillside and from here we could see over the opposite rise to the sea, a wide horizon interrupted by the jagged outline of Wheal Pendhu. Preacher was gazing at the distant mine buildings, as though to gain strength from the power of the Moderator.

Preacher Jacob Tresize was an impressive figure. I would put his age at around sixty; tall and powerfully built with a thick shock of white hair, a pale craggy face and a commanding presence. As people often said, you don’t mess with Preacher. His influence extended beyond matters Moderate and religious. Over the years people had allowed him to become their representative on various local bodies, and he was the village’s official delegate on the Sector Council.

His bright blue eyes suddenly refocused as he scanned the crowd before him. “Yes, of course,” he said. “We must pray. I’ve called Aid Services and they’ve promised to have help here within the hour. Meanwhile prayer is our best course.” Eng Springer, our oldest resident, called out, “Shouldn’t we be searching for missing folk? They could be trapped under the rubble.” A younger man wouldn’t have had the temerity to gainsay Preacher.

Preacher smiled. “If that’s what you want to do, Eng, by all means do it. That goes for any of you. But...” He pointed downhill. The river was still in spate. Floodwater still swirled around the units. “It could be dangerous,” he said.

It certainly looked dangerous. I shuddered at the thought of wading among the rubble of battered units in a fruitless search for survivors. Anyone down there would have drowned by now, anyway.

“We must pray for them!” someone shouted, and there was a chorus of agreement. Preacher flung open the succorium doors and people surged in. We who had come over the bridge were last, and by the time I reached the doors all the pews were full and there was standing room only at the back. I remained outside

in the sunshine while the soothing tones of Preacher Tresize flowed out of the succorium doors like warm honey.

He spoke of our blessings; of the plenty that had resulted from people spending their energies improving the lot of Mankind instead of fighting their neighbors or, as a substitute, competing in pointless and dangerous sports. "There is no hunger on Zena-3," he assured us. "There is no poverty. There is just Mankind living in harmony with himself. With the aid of the Moderator we have created a perfect world far from mother Earth." We'd heard it all before many times, but it was always reassuring to hear it again. "And when disaster strikes us, it comes from Nature and not from our fellow people. So now we shall unite to repair the damage she has wrought. With the help of the Moderator and Aid Services, we shall rebuild!"

Janie squeezed through the crowd at the door to stand by my side; she'd been carried into the succorium by the initial press. "I felt we should listen to him together," she whispered.

Dear Janie. We've been seeing one another in secluded locations for two years now, and our love seems to grow ever stronger. One day we may even have a child, provided Janie can persuade me to disregard the dangers associated with pregnancy and childbirth. And provided I can summon up the peculiar aggression needed to perform the sex act. I put my arm around her, adding the assurance of my love to the words of comfort from Preacher Tresize.

And one of his prayers was answered within minutes. I heard a distant whine of speed governors and a yellow Aid Services vehicle came trundling down the valley road, towing several huge rectangular trailers as fast as the law permitted. The murmur of relief from the crowd grew to a muted cheer. Now we would have medical attention for the injured, food and temporary accommodation for the homeless, teams of trained personnel to help search the wreckage for survivors and, eventually, help with rebuilding.

"Thank God," whispered Janie.

It was a moment of quiet gratitude, but it came to an end all too soon. I was suddenly struck by a strange sensation; at first I thought I was going to faint. The ground seemed to heave under me, and just for a second the succorium doors assumed an odd angle, as though I was falling. Janie stumbled, nearly pulling me over, and people began to scream.

"Earthquake!" someone shouted, and a swarm of people rushed from the succorium to the safety of the open air. The ground shook again as I was forced downhill by the mob, losing Janie somewhere among them.

"It's all right, everybody!" shouted Preacher Tresize, last out of the door. "Just an aftershock. It'll be over in a minute."

And it was. We stood trembling like frightened tumps, waiting for more, but it didn't come. The earth was still and, just for a moment, everything seemed to be normal again.

Then someone screamed, "Look!" It was Rebecka upJod, white-faced, arm outstretched. She was pointing towards Pendhu Isle. Where the gaunt outline of Wheal Pendhu had stood starkly against the horizon, now there was little more

than a low heap of rubble. The aftershock had been the final blow to the old mine buildings already weakened by the earthquake. The landscape had changed forever, but for a second or two we didn't realize the full import.

Then Preacher cried, "My God, what about the Moderator!" His voice was strange and choked, and he was clutching his head in his hands, rocking it from side to side as though trying to clear water from his ears. His voice rose to a roar. "The Moderator! The Moderator's trapped down there!"

And people stared at one another in horror.

Preacher recovered himself within seconds, drawing himself up and taking a deep breath. "We must save the Moderator!" he cried in ringing tones. "He has protected us for all these years, and now we must show our gratitude."

"How?" someone asked nervously. People were shuffling their feet and gazing longingly down at the Aids Services trailers, now halted in the muddy village street. There would be hot drinks there, and kindly nurses to tend the injured. There would be aid workers to help clean the mud out of the units and to get the reparations started.

"We must move the rubble away and dig down to Him, if necessary. We must heal Him if he is injured. We must feed Him. We owe it to Him. I won't pretend it will be an easy task, but it must be done. It is a test of our love for Him."

"But how do we get to the island? The bridge isn't safe."

"There's Bill's boat. He uses it regularly on his visits to feed Him. I use it too, from time to time. It's perfectly sound."

"A boat.... A boat...." People muttered the words unhappily. Boats were cockleshell affairs that got swamped, drowning people. And then there were the big Earth boats of olden days, which struck icebergs and sank with the loss of thousands. We'd seen them on the cautionary videos shown from time to time in the village hall. I knew what people were thinking. Boats were perilous.

"My boat is safe!" I shouted quickly. "The crossing to Pendhu Isle is less than a hundred meters and I can take six of you at a time, easily. I've made the trip a thousand times to feed the Moderator and I've never had a drop of water come over the gunwales!"

But people were moving away, drifting down towards the big trailers. Hot drink dispensers were being set up there.

"Listen to me!" shouted Preacher Tresize desperately. "If you allow the Moderator to die, evil will come to the village. You'll find your personalities changing, bit by bit. You'll become quarrelsome and aggressive as the blessed influence of the Moderator fades from your minds. You'll become as people were in the olden days. Decades ago the Moderators came from Zena-4 to lead you out of that vile morass. Do you want to slide back into the old ways that caused so much sorrow and threatened to destroy your very planet? Is that really what you want?"

"You're overstating your case, Preacher. We can always move to another Sector and live under their Moderator. There are plenty of empty units around, these days."

"Are you challenging my authority, Tom Whitta?"

“Perish the thought,” the old reprobate said, holding his ground as Preacher stepped towards him and others retreated, horrified by Whitta’s temerity. As they say, you don’t mess with Preacher. “I was just pointing out that the death of one Moderator doesn’t mean the end of the world.”

“Be quiet, Tom Whitta, you silly old fool,” said Farmer Enderby as Preacher opened his mouth to rebut. “Preacher needs our help. After all he’s done for us, I see no reason to argue the toss over this. You know the workings of Wheal Pendhu better than anybody, Tom, so you go with Bill and take a look at the damage, and see what can be done. When we know the full picture, maybe we’ll figure out a way of dealing with it.”

“Risk my life on a boat?” An odd expression came over Whitta’s face. He thought for a moment. “Aye... Aye... Maybe it’s the least I can do for the settlement.”

“For the whole Sector, Tom.” Enderby pointed out.

“Lead the way, Bill,” Preacher Tresize told me firmly.

We three were the only settlers with the courage for the work. Courage? That’s an ancient concept, and one that most people had forgotten.

The three of us set out less than an hour later. We each wore a backpack with emergency rations supplied by Aid Services in case we found a big task ahead of us, and we carried long coils of rope slung over our shoulders, also supplied by Aid Services. It was the least they could have done. Preacher Tresize had had a distressing conversation with them, shortly before we left. He’d asked them for a support team to help clear the debris. They’d refused.

“You call yourselves Aid Services,” he’d pointed out acidly. “Well, we need aid. There’s a mountain of rubble over on Pendhu Isle, and it’ll take we three a long time to clear a way to the shaft. Meanwhile the Moderator is suffering, maybe dying.”

“I have every sympathy,” said the Aid Coordinator, a huge fellow with a face like a loaf of bread. “But I can’t ask my people to undertake such a mission. There are risks involved.”

“There are no risks.”

“There’s the boat. And the climb to the top of the island. Even you will admit there’s a chance of injury.”

“A very faint chance.”

“There you are, then. Anyway, your own settlement refused to help, so why should we?”

I wouldn’t say Preacher got angry. Only preModerates get angry, and then hardly ever, thank God. But he certainly raised his voice. “Because you call yourselves Aid Services, that’s why!” Realizing he’d come full circle, he changed tack. “The Moderator is not a just a local responsibility. The whole region is dependent on Him. I’m asking you to undertake a task vital to the survival of civilization in this Sector!”

And the Coordinator just smiled, and turned away to deal with a matter of sleeping-bag distribution.

“Sometimes I wish there were a few more preModerates around,” Preacher sighed. It was the most amazing statement for him to make, and I was still mulling it over as we reached the cliff top.

We paused for a moment to survey the bridge. It had stood for a century of Zena-3 years, but time and the earthquake had taken its toll and it had lost its strength and symmetry. A couple of generations ago it had carried hoppers of ore from the island to the mainland, and it was also used by the miners going to and from work. A monorail had run across the bridge and thence to the coastal settlement of Porthstan where tin and copper were extracted from the ore and shipped to our industrial heartland. It’s impossible for us to conceive the terrifying conditions under which those miners must have guided and maintained their massive drilling mole, in leaking tunnels under the sea with a billion tons of water overhead.

Then the Moderators came from Zena-4 and demand for raw materials fell off as they persuaded our society into a different technology and philosophy.

Now the bridge was little more than a slender rickety platform with gaps in the roadbed where cross-timbers had fallen away, the whole braced by four long diagonal timbers, two from the foot of the cliff above which we stood, and two from the base of Pendhu Isle. At least the braces, set in concrete pads, looked secure.

“Pity about the state of the bridge,” said Preacher. “That could have saved us a great deal of climbing.”

“Don’t talk about it,” I said, shuddering. *Go on, let me see what kind of a man you are....*

Meanwhile a large party of settlers had followed us up the hill at a respectful distance. Janie stepped forward and hugged me. I could feel her body trembling.

“Be careful, Bill,” she said.

I kissed her, detached myself from her embrace with some difficulty, and followed Whitta and Preacher down the cliff path.

Nobody other than Preacher and myself had trodden that path for decades. It ran steeply downhill with the crumbling cliff face to our left. To our right the ground dropped almost sheer to the churning waters between mainland and island. I watched Whitta’s back and wondered what he was thinking. He’d used this path quite happily as a child, but he’d had forty years of the Moderator’s influence since then. He might not be quite so aware of the importance of safety as us, but he couldn’t have been unmoved by the risk. As usual, even I found myself leaning to the left, away from the drop, and once or twice overbalanced and had to fend myself away from the cliff, bringing down a shower of stones which bounced on the path and then clattered down endlessly to the sea.

“All right back there?” Preacher called over his shoulder as I dislodged a particularly large rock.

Whitta said something I couldn’t catch, but it could have been a wordless whimper. I felt an unworthy satisfaction at his terror as he shuffled along, crouched low. Then the path cut through a narrow defile where the rocks rose on both sides of us and he straightened up.

Eventually we reached the foot of the cliff. Whitta sat down abruptly on a wet rock, shivering uncontrollably. Preacher stood over him, murmuring words of en-

couragement, while I stared around in dismay. Our expedition had suffered a setback.

“The boat’s gone!” I told them.

“The tidal wave must have broken it free,” Preacher opined. “It still could be somewhere around here.”

“Maybe it’ll be all smashed up,” Whitta said hopefully. He was staring at the dark face of Pendhu Isle. “I used to come down this path as a kid,” he said. “I’d swim across the gap and climb up to the mine to surprise my dad and his pals, for a lark. I can’t picture doing that too easily now, I can tell you. Didn’t I have any sense then? Didn’t my dad have the sense to stop me risking my neck to no purpose? Makes you wonder, eh? I’m lucky to be alive, I guess.” But there was something odd in his voice as he scanned the precipitous path opposite, a narrow scar across the cliff face. “I wish I wasn’t so scared of that climb ahead. You’ll help me, won’t you, Bill?”

I found it difficult to reply. The Whitta I knew was an overbearing, opinionated jackass whom I’d never liked, and who hadn’t liked me too much, either. Now he was pleading for help. From me. It wasn’t right.

I was saved from trying to reply by a triumphant shout from Preacher. “Look, there’s the boat!” He began to pick his way over the rocks. “Over here, men!”

“Why the hell isn’t *he* scared?” muttered Whitta.

“He’s used to it. He’s been using this route for ages, to commune with the Moderator.” I thought about it. “And maybe the Moderator... helps him a bit, somehow, like He does me, when I go to feed Him. Goes easy on the influence, something like that. It’s in His own interests, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Maybe the Moderator should give me a break, too.” Whitta said sourly.

The boat looked battered, but it was made of some tough kind of plastic and was probably seaworthy. I sincerely hoped so. We slid it over the rocks to a sandy bit of beach, rushed it into the water and scrambled aboard. Preacher seized the oars, taking charge. He spun the boat expertly onto the correct heading and began to row.

He needed all his skill. The waves, surging around either side of the island, met in jagged peaks that threatened to swamp us.

“Is it always like this?” asked Whitta, voice strident with fear.

“Not this bad.” Preacher rowed on steadily. “This is the aftermath of that tsunami.”

“So you’ve never known it like this?” I knew what Whitta was thinking.

So did Preacher. “The dinghy has built-in buoyancy chambers. There’s nothing to worry about.”

But worry Whitta did, until at last we reached the concrete block supporting one of the bridge pillars and, during a lull in the surf, jumped ashore. Preacher made the boat fast and we began to climb the path to Wheal Pendhu....

Whitta sat on a pile of rubble recovering, while Preacher and I surveyed the damage wrought by the earthquake.

The tall pump house had collapsed around the huge electric pump, which still stood, but canted at an angle, its pipes cracked and the feed cables torn and twisted. I couldn't see the power storage unit, which probably lay under the remains of the chimney. The pumping system was beyond repair. The big solar panels were shattered. Wreckage lay strewn all over the plateau. The only item apparently undamaged was the vast cylindrical mole. The main extraction shaft was somewhere underneath twisted steel and rubble.

Preacher appeared undaunted. "We're going to be able to handle this ourselves, I think," he remarked. "See, the manlift head's still standing." The low concrete structure topped by its drum stood a little apart from the rest, intact. "And the Moderator isn't injured."

Years ago, Preacher Tresize had told us he was very sensitive to the emanations from the Moderator, and we'd concluded that was probably why he'd become a Preacher in the first place. We stood before the small lift cage, sniffing at the dank air that seeped from the narrow shaft beneath.

"Tom!" Preacher called to the dejected figure sitting nearby. "Pull yourself together, man! We're going to need your knowledge of the levels!"

We'd half-carried, half-dragged Whitta up to the flat top of Pendhu Isle, and it was taking him a while to recover. He dragged himself to his feet, exhausted. I was surprised to see tears in his eyes.

"Haven't been up here since old Dad died," he said. "And now it's all smashed up. The history of the settlement, the very reason for our existence, all lost."

"An evil history best forgotten, Tom." Preacher clicked the big switch to and fro. Nothing happened. "The lift switch doesn't seem to be working."

Whitta roused himself. "Circuit breaker, I reckon," he mumbled. "I expect the whole goddamned lot shorted out when the pump house collapsed. There's a standby generator and a solar panel on the roof of this building. I'll take a look." And he shuffled off around the back.

"Glad we brought him along," Preacher observed. "I'm like a child when it comes to machinery."

Soon there was a faint hum and Preacher tried the switch again. A green light came on. We stepped into the cage. After a moment, Whitta joined us. Preacher eased a lever down and we began to descend into the very bowels of the earth, judging by the smell. It was a frightful experience in total darkness, knowing that we were suspended by a slender cable that hadn't received regular maintenance for many a decade. Preacher began singing a hymn, whether to reassure us or to hide his own fear, I didn't know; but it didn't hide the thumps as the cage struck the walls of the shaft from time to time. There were no guide rails or brakes on this manlift. I'd used it to send down the Moderator's food every week, but it was the first time I'd trusted this ancient machine with my life.

I muttered a prayer of thanksgiving when we reached the bottom with a thud. Preacher took a flashlight from a shelf and switched it on, swinging the beam over tunnel walls melted smooth by the mole. Then he swung the beam downwards....

And I got my first sight of the Moderator.

He was smaller than I expected; maybe two meters high and almost spherical except where He rested on the wet ground and there was a slight flattening. He was ivory in color and featureless, smooth and hairless. I didn't find Him terrifying nor — despite Whitta's haggis description — did I find Him funny. I found Him disappointing. I felt there should have been an emanation of power and holiness from Him; but instead, He was just a rather pathetic limbless alien who needed our help. His assistant, a small naked humanoid of no discernible sex, stood blinking up at us with huge pale eyes.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Preacher.

"It's time to get him out of here. The whole Isle is unstable now. We'll roll Him into the manlift and take Him to the top, maybe get him back to the settlement somehow. He can't come to any harm up there now we've had a couple of generations of people used to Him. It was only at first... the resentment, the resistance to change, you know...."

I stepped from the cage, regarding the Moderator warily. I gave Him a shove. His flesh was cool and clammy. I felt presumptuous. "I don't like doing this."

"He doesn't think that way. He doesn't understand dignity the way humans do. Come on now, you too, Tom. Get round the back of him and roll him into the cage."

It was easier said than done. Whitta and I pushed, but our hands sank into the Moderator's flesh and He hardly moved.

"Push lower down. Forwards and upwards," called Preacher from the cage. "Get him rolling."

"It'd be easier if you lent a hand," grumbled Whitta.

"I need to be ready to cushion him if he starts to roll too fast."

"He's not going to do that, Preacher. We're getting nowhere like this. We need some kind of a lever to get under him. There'll be all kinds of shovels around. We'll get a couple. Just lend us the flashlight a minute, for God's sake." Whitta was recovering, returning to his old hectoring manner.

I thought Preacher was a little reluctant in handing over the flashlight, but Whitta insisted and soon we were setting off in search of tools. The walls of the tunnel streamed with moisture. Soon we were paddling through puddles that seemed to get deeper the farther we went. We passed the remains of the frame Whitta had built to keep the Moderator safe from rodents, long ago.

"Tom, I can't take this. I've got to get out of here!" The tunnel walls seemed to be squeezing my very brain.

"What's the matter with you, man? There's no danger. These tunnels are safe. The mole's melted the rock solid." He swung the torch to show the shiny smooth walls. "They've lasted centuries and they'll last centuries more. That moisture, it's just condensation."

It was all very well for him; he'd known this place from childhood. All my instincts told me he was wrong and, for once, my instincts were right.

For some time I'd been wondering about the dank-smelling breeze that was blowing into our faces. Ahead of us lay a warren of old workings, stretching far out

under the sea. The main extraction shaft was blocked. There were no other shafts except the one behind us. So where was the breeze coming from?

“Tom,” I said, my mouth dry, “I think the sea’s broken into the tunnels.”

Whitta stopped dead, so suddenly that I bumped into him. The beam of the torch swept along the tunnel until it disappeared into distant blackness. Our breathing whispered back to us from the walls, quick and scared.

“Maybe you’re right,” said Whitta, his voice suddenly hoarse. “The quake must have done it.”

Fear took hold of me, robbing me of rational thought. I turned and ran into the blackness.

Almost immediately I tripped and fell full-length into a deep puddle. Then light played around me and I felt Whitta’s hand on my arm, hauling me to my feet.

“No cause for panic, Bill. There’s miles of workings at lower levels than this. They’ll fill first. We’ve got plenty of time. Let’s get back to Preacher and talk this one over, shall we? If worst comes to worst, we’ll take the manlift back up.”

He sounded calm enough, but that threatening breeze still blew and I fancied it was bringing a fishy smell with it. I could hear a distant gurgling and trickling. It was obvious the water was much closer than Whitta was willing to admit. “For God’s sake get a move on!”

Infuriatingly slow, he trudged back up the tunnel until, finally, the beam showed the pale sphere of the Moderator, and behind Him the white faces of Preacher and the Moderator’s assistant.

“What’s going on? Where are the shovels?” Preacher’s voice rose. “Is that running water I can hear?”

“Sea’s broken in. We’d best take the cage up to the next level and think about this.” The Moderator’s assistant stared at us with wide and vacant eyes, uncomprehending. Whitta stepped into the manlift, I followed and he brushed Preacher aside and twisted the lever. We began to rise jerkily up the shaft.

Preacher uttered a yell of protest. “The Moderator! We have to get Him into the lift!” He threw himself desperately at Whitta. The flashlight clattered to the ground and I snatched it up before it could roll out of the cage and disappear down the shaft. I trained the light on the struggling pair. Preacher got a hand on the lever. The cage stopped rising and swung there, bumping against the shaft walls as the pair of them tussled. Their violence appalled me. I didn’t know what to do. I’d never seen anything like this before.

“Bill, help me!” shouted Whitta. “Whack the silly beggar over the head with the flashlight!” Even for a preModerate, such fierce talk was incomprehensible.

“I can’t do that!” I said. “Leave him alone! We have to get the Moderator in here! What’s got into you?”

The cage crashed into the shaft wall as the pair fell and rolled into a corner, still struggling. No, *fighting*. They were actually aiming punches at each other now, like in a cautionary video. I could hardly believe what the flashlight showed. A man of God and stupid old Whitta raining feeble blows on each other.

“Stop it!” I shouted, my heart pounding with loathing at the dreadful sight. “For the love of God, stop it! You’ll kill each other!”

But they were elderly men and quickly tired. Panting, they rolled apart and lay blinking at the light. Preacher was the first to speak.

“We’d be better off forgetting the last couple of minutes, Tom. Some kind of madness got into us.”

Tom said nothing.

“So let’s pick ourselves up and get the Moderator into the cage before the water reaches Him, shall we?”

Whitta remained silent apart from his harsh breathing.

I became aware of a strange whimpering sound. Holding onto the edge of the cage I trained the flashlight downward. Water was swilling up the tunnel, lapping around the base of the Moderator. His assistant, uttering little cries, was jumping up and down with arms upstretched, trying to grab the bottom of the cage. He was at least a meter short, but it didn’t stop him trying, again and again.

“You see, Tom, the Moderator can’t live long underwater,” continued Preacher in tones of reason. “If the water covers him he won’t be able to transpire, and he’ll die very quickly. And you know what that means, don’t you, Tom? Our world will change for the worse. The old dangers will come back. The old tragedies, because people will act unthinkingly, without fear of consequence. Your own son died trying to cross the bridge on the parapet because you dared him to. You have a chance to make amends, Tom! None of us want those days back.”

Whitta spoke at last. “I’ve been thinking,” he said. “All the way here I’ve been thinking, Preacher. And you want to know what I thought? *Here am I climbing down a cliff, terrified of falling. Sitting in a boat, terrified of drowning. Climbing up the other side, so bloody exhausted by fear that I can hardly put one foot in front of the other.* Fear that’s been put in my mind by the Moderator. A lot different from when I was a kid and thought nothing of it all, when I used to make just the same trip to surprise my old Dad. Maybe things weren’t so bad back then. Maybe they were more fun.”

“And maybe you’d have slipped and fallen and got yourself killed.”

“But I didn’t, Preacher. I’m still here, and it’s made me think the Moderator’s taken a lot of fun out of our lives.” He squinted up at me. “See, I recall what it was like before, Bill. And I recall what it was like when the Moderator came and I felt my mind changing, slow-like, and me getting more careful day by day. More careful? More fearful, that’s the truth. I’d been a proud man and a brave one, and the Moderator stripped me of my pride and turned me into a coward. The post-Moderates don’t have that problem. They were born cowards like you, Bill, begging your pardon.”

Preacher’s tone was grave. “There’s more to it than that, as you know very well, Tom. Without the Moderator men will run amok and women will be raped, and childbirth will be uncontrolled. With too many mouths to feed settlement will take up arms against settlement, sector against sector. And then—”

“Just hold it right there, Preacher.” Whitta’s eyes gleamed up at me in the light of the torch. “Bill, tell us something. How long have you been going out with your Janie?”

“About four years, give or take. But what’s that to do with—”

“And how many times have you screwed her?”

“Tom, what the hell are you talking about!”

“Sex. Fucking, for Pete’s sake. How many times?”

“Well, none, of course, not yet,” I muttered, hugely embarrassed. “What do you think I am?”

“I think you’re goddamned near impotent. I think we all are. Not in our bodies but in our minds, because of the Moderator. Here’s a surprise for you — when I was a lad people were screwing all the time. Like goddamned rabbits, they were. And good fun it was, too!”

Preacher was climbing to his feet. “That’s enough of that talk, Tom. Bill doesn’t want to hear it and neither do I. Now, let’s go down and get the Moderator into the cage before it’s too late.”

“We’d better hurry,” I said. “There’s water all round Him, and rising fast.”

Preacher joined me. I played the beam over the water. The Moderator’s assistant peered up at us with his round, vacant eyes, uttering a soft keening. The cage swayed as Whitta got to his feet.

I never saw exactly what happened next because I was intent on the plight of the Moderator. Maybe the sudden movement of the cage caused Preacher to overbalance. At the time, the last thing I wanted to think was that Whitta pushed him.

Whatever happened, Preacher uttered a yell of alarm and toppled past me, arms outstretched, clawing at the rugged shaft wall as he tried to recover his balance. But his weight caused the cage to swing backwards. Still yelling and clawing, he fell into the widening gap and hit the water immediately beside the Moderator. I grabbed the lever to take the cage down.

Tom’s hand closed over mine, forcibly restraining me.

“Just wait a second,” he said.

I couldn’t fight him. I didn’t know how. “We can’t do this, Tom! He’ll drown!”

“Bear with me just a moment, Bill.”

Something in his voice made me release the lever. I trained the beam down the shaft again.

Preacher stood beside the Moderator some four meters below us, blinking up into the torch light, his clothing soaked. He said quietly, “If you don’t bring that cage down, you will never do a worse service to your people. Remember that, Bill. Remember that in twenty years’ time.”

“It’s Tom who won’t bring the cage down!” I cried, a coward to the end.

“Tom’s old. Tom will die. You’re the future, Bill. And you’re the one who will have to face the consequences.”

Whitta shouted in sudden anger, “Just drown, and to hell with you!”

Preacher must have realized there was no hope, because he shrugged, reached out a hand and placed it on the Moderator’s smooth skin. He stood like that for a

moment, motionless, then he nodded at us as though accepting matters as they were.

He beckoned to the Moderator's assistant, and put his arm around the creature's naked shoulders.

And his other hand disappeared into the Moderator.

It just blended, flesh into flesh. Then his arm disappeared and he stepped closer, drawing the assistant near, then putting his other arm against the Moderator as though embracing them both. For a moment his arm lay there, then it too blended into the pale skin, and within the next minute both Preacher and the assistant were gone. Absorbed.

"I thought so," said Whitta grimly. "I've always suspected the beggar, and there's the proof. The Moderator bore him and now the Moderator's taken him back. He never was a real man."

He twisted the lever and the cage began to rise.

We stood blinking in bright sunshine. Everything looked the same; the wreckage of Wheal Pendhu, the rugged coastline stretching away to the west, the uplands and the soyfields, and in the distance I could see the succorium on the hillside. Before us, Pendhu bridge spanned the gap to the mainland, decrepit but still standing. On the far side of the bridge it seemed the whole population of the settlement was gathered. How could we tell them what we'd done?

I said, "But he was a man, once."

"No, Bill. He was always a part of the Moderator. Every Moderator the world over must have someone like Preacher to look after them. An alien Preacher on top to praise Him, an alien humanoid below to tend to Him. The Moderator bore Preacher alive and all ready to go, just like an animal would."

"But why? What's it all about?"

"It's all about taking over, Bill. All about conquest and lying about it. The Moderators pretend they're doing us a hell of a favor by turning us into nice guys. But what they're really doing is slowly wiping us out in their own gentle way. And then when we're all gone a few generations from now," he regarded the cloudless sky, squinting against the sun, "their bosses will come down in their ships and settle into a world all nicely got ready for them. Or maybe they'll come sooner, and use us as slaves. That's what's going to happen. Unless we do something about it."

It was all nonsense, of course. It was just Tom Whitta talking.

We stood looking at the bridge and the people on the other side. I was trembling with reaction. What would our region be like, without the Moderator? How could I trust anyone, when we all had violence in our minds? How could I trust Whitta, right now? He might take it in his mind to push me off the cliff. I couldn't risk turning my back on him, for sure....

Whitta was regarding Pendhu bridge thoughtfully. "Hardly worth climbing all the way down the cliffs and back up again, eh? And I didn't much care for your boat, tell the truth. Much quicker across the bridge."

I stared at him. "What?"

And then he said, “You go first, Bill. *Let everyone see what kind of a man you are now.*”

There was a sick fear in me. What kind of a treacherous stunt was he about to pull?

He understood. “I want you to believe one thing, Bill — I’ve never forgiven myself for Frank’s death. Being a preModerate, I guess I just didn’t realize how scared he was. Maybe I was trying to rebel against the Moderator, through him. I was being stupid and Frank panicked, and fell. But it’s different, now. The Moderator’s just died, Bill. I felt him die. I bet you did as well. So there’s nothing to be frightened of. Nothing at all.”

And he was right. A new confidence had taken hold of me as he spoke. I was young and strong and I could handle myself, and the bridge was easy going, so long as a fellow kept his nerve. And Tom Whitta was on my side. It was a curious feeling, to have someone on your side. I’d never felt that way before. Maybe Tom wasn’t such a bad guy, after all. I grinned at him, and he slapped me on the shoulder. “Go ahead,” he said.

So I was to be Tom’s catharsis. I turned and began to walk, treading carefully but confidently, watching for the gaps and the rotten planks. There was nothing to it, really. I heard Tom murmur, “Yes, *yes...*”

And soon the settlers were all around me, cheering and pounding me on the back. And I was holding Janie close.

THE CARE AND KILLING OF YOUR DOOZLE

an unpublished short story by Michael Coney

Author's note A lightweight puzzle story. Many years ago, in the days of John Campbell, I sent a story with an unhappy ending to Analog. In my naivety, I thought stories with sad or ambiguous endings gave the reader something to ponder about. A critic might call them 'thought-provoking.' Campbell, in a very kind rejection letter, made it clear that his readers didn't want to ponder; they wanted to be entertained. "You have presented a problem without solving it," he told me. He was right. Ever since then I've made sure that my stories have proper endings — even if a tad tongue-in-cheek, like this one.

"Mom! There's a delivery waiting for us at the Transmatter Office! It's probably from Dad!"

Her son was bounding long-legged across the soyfield toward her. Liz sighed. Such youthful enthusiasm. Such hero-worship of his father, absent for a three-month tour of duty on Sol Station 3, thank God.

"It can wait, Jim. I'll pick it up later."

"But it might be *anything!*"

Knowing her son too well, Liz guessed he was hoping for some item of advanced technology, preferably lethal at one hundred meters. What had gotten into him lately? Probably spending too much time with their bloodthirsty neighbor, Pott. Was the smelly old guy becoming some kind of father-figure to the boy? Liz hoped not. Jim's real father was a bad enough role model. And as for Pott, one of these days he would go too far with his crooked deals and they'd lock him up.

"Later, Jim. You should know by now I have to watch the fields at this time of year. The geese will be coming in any time now."

She scanned the hilly terrain, resting the butt of her sonic rifle on the freshly sown ground. Given half a chance, the geese would gobble up every soybean she'd sown. Goddamned pests, they were. Great greedy brutes, winging their way from field to field, settling and gobbling and crapping, wiping out any smallholder who failed to keep a daily vigil, until finally the beans sprouted and the geese flew north.

"I'll get along to the T.O. and pick up whatever it is." Jim arrived at her side, panting. Sixteen and built like a young giraffe.

"No way. You can get a rifle from the house and give me a hand."

"Aw, goddamn it, Mom. You can handle the geese. Anyway," he brightened, "here's Pott. He's brought his gun. You won't need me now."

The gangling figure of her neighbor could be seen plodding across the fields from his distant shack, antique shotgun carried on his shoulder military fashion. Liz sighed. There was no doubt Pott was useful in driving the geese off but did he have to be so *enthusiastic* about it? The spring goose-scaring was supposed to be

a duty, not a pleasure. And the worst part of it was, the old guy actually *ate* the birds he shot.

“OK then. On your way.”

Jim’s departure coincided with Pott’s arrival. The pig-sty smell was strong as the old fellow took his place at her side. They stood silently, guns at the ready, until the first of the spring geese come winging over the treetops.

“You didn’t bring a car, then?” The transmatter clerk eyed Jim doubtfully from behind the low counter.

“I brought a handcart.” It was embarrassing, not being old enough to drive. Just another law that needed fixing. Jeez, here he was at the height of his mental powers, and the State treated him like a kid. “This delivery, it’s not *that* big, is it? The message said nothing about it being big. Who’s it from?”

The clerk consulted a printout. “Sol Station Three; that’s all it says. Three; that’s where they quarantine the aliens, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. My Dad works there.” Jim’s excitement grew. “What is it, anyway?”

“The bill of lading calls it a doozle. My guess is, it’s some kind of animal, but it’s still in stasis so you can’t rightly tell. It could be a sack of flour. We just wondered,” the man hesitated, “if maybe it got a bit... distorted in transmission. It happens. You wouldn’t believe some of the things I’ve seen coming out of the receiver. Make your hair stand on end, they would.”

This sounded promising. “Is this doozle thing scary, then?”

“It doesn’t scare *me*. I’ve seen it all, here at the T.O. I could tell you some stories, young fellow.”

Jeez, what a patronizing asshole the guy was! “The doozle. I’d like to see the doozle now, if that’s OK with you.”

Disappointed at the loss of a potential audience, the clerk indicated the counter screen. “I’ll need your fingerprint there.” He disappeared into the back, reemerging a moment later wheeling a low trolley. A pallid thing lay motionless on it. It looked to weigh some five kilograms and was, in fact, shaped like a sack of flour with rudimentary projections at each corner. It had no head as such. It had no fur. In the middle of its fat body were indentations that might well have opened and become eyes and a mouth, if the creature had not been in stasis.

“OK? You’re aware your fingerprint signifies you accept responsibility?” The clerk wheeled the trolley into a floor-to-ceiling cage with stout steel bars, stepped back outside and slammed the door. “Can’t be too careful,” he muttered and, reaching through the bars, plunged a hypodermic into the belly of the doozle. “Distortion. Genetic structure all shuffled about in transmission. You never know. What’s safe on Sol 3 may be a holy goddamned terror by the time it reaches Earth.”

But Jim found it difficult to imagine the doozle as menacing. In fact the creature was something of a disappointment as it began to stir and emerge from stasis. Its round eyes opened, regarding Jim benignly, and its mouth curved in what looked like a smile. Against his wishes, he found himself warming to the creature.

The clerk thought likewise. “Friendly little guy, isn’t he?”

Jim watched the doozle, at a loss. What was the thing *for*? Why would Dad send him such a useless little wimp, when a good selection of the horrors of the Galaxy could be had on Sol Station 3, at a price. Maybe that was the answer: the doozle came cheap. Typical of Dad. But what was he supposed to do with it?

“There was an encrypted voice greeting with it,” said the clerk, handing Jim a headpiece. Jim uttered a few words and the headpiece, recognizing his speech patterns, clicked into action. His dad’s voice blared forth. The old fool was actually trying to sing. And after a few seconds Jim’s embarrassment turned to guilt. It wasn’t a greeting to him; the song targeted his mother. Apparently it was her birthday. Jeez, a mother should surely warn her son when she had a birthday coming up!

So the doozle was not a gift for him after all.

As he wheeled the gently grunting creature down the long road to the farm, Jim wondered how his mother would react to it. She was boringly conservative, with no love of the oddball. What on Earth would she *do* with this weird lump of alien meat?

“You want to know what I’d do with that useless little alien?” said Pott, as they sat at the bench outside the back door surrounded by the results of his marksmanship, “I’d feed it to the pigs. Must be five or six kilos of good protein there.” The doozle lay cushioned on the heap of slaughtered geese, breathing gently and steadily, eyes closed.

“Is it sleeping or what?” asked Jim impatiently. “Is this all it does, for Christ’s sake?”

“It was very kind of your father to send this little fellow,” Liz reproved him, “At least he remembered my birthday, which is more than I can say for you. By the way, Mr. Pott, I’d be glad if you don’t tell Millicent who sent the doozle. You know how peculiar she can be. We’ll just pretend it arrived unannounced at the Transmitter Office.”

“All right with me,” Pott said. “The less Millicent knows, the better. Goddamned busybody.”

“And as for your pigs, Pott, I’d rather not hear about them. You know I don’t approve of eating meat. The sooner you get these dead geese out of here, the happier I’ll be.”

“Good shooting today. You should have been there, young Jim. The sky was black with the bastards. I couldn’t miss. Well...” He stood, and began to toss the birds into the trolley. “I must get going. You don’t mind if I borrow your cart? Good. I expect I’ll see you later, Jim boy.” With a final contemptuous glance at the doozle he left.

“Dreadful old reprobate,” Liz muttered. “All right, Jim, what are we going to do with this little fellow?”

“He’s opened his eyes again!” Jim exclaimed. “He’s looking at me. He’s smiling!”

“We’d better get him indoors. It’s cold out here. Can you bring him into the kitchen?” Liz led the way into the farmhouse and Jim laid the doozle on the

kitchen table. By now the creature was fully awake and immediately bent in the middle and sat up, looking around with interest. "How do you know it's a him?" Liz asked.

Jim took hold of the doozle, upended it and regarded its nether regions with interest. "Good grief, Mom, look at this!"

"I'd rather not, thanks."

"No, it's all right, there's nothing scary there. Nothing at all. Not even an asshole, for Chrissake!"

"I wish you'd watch your language, Jim. Your association with Mr. Pott seems to have coarsened you. Anyway, the little fellow must have an... an anus. All creatures do. Otherwise, how does he dispose of his waste?"

"Maybe he doesn't produce any. He could be very efficient. At least we won't have to worry about house-training him. Here." He took a handful of soya beans from a nearby sack and poured the onto the table. "Eat!"

The doozle stared at the beans, blinking, then flopped onto its front side and wriggled toward them. They heard crunching sounds. "He's eating," Liz observed in some relief. "That's one problem solved."

"He doesn't use those lumps at the corners for crawling. He just kind of humps along. They must be the vestigial remains of arms and legs." Jim warmed to his theme. "He can't have any natural enemies on his world. Earth-size world, I'd say, otherwise gravity would be a problem for him here. But if he never craps —" "Jim!"

"He'll just get bigger. He'll never stop growing." He regarded his mother in alarm. "If you want my advice, Mom, you'll give him to Pott for his pigs right now, before it's too late!"

"Don't be ridiculous. He's absolutely harmless. And anyway," she regarded the munching doozle doubtfully, "if he gets too big we'll just ship him off to the zoo."

"But think of the emotional wrench. The crippling sense of guilt. The babbling explanations to Dad. You couldn't do it, Mom. No, we're stuck with him. When he gets real big we'll use him to clean up the fields after the crop's lifted. Maybe he'll scare the geese off."

They watched as the doozle finished eating. It sat up and smiled at them.

"Cute little fellow," said Liz.

"He sucks, if you want my opinion. I wonder what his life expectancy is."

The doozle stared at Jim with an expression that could almost be interpreted as hostile. Then it uttered a series of chirpy little sounds. Jim jerked back from the table, watching the creature with sudden horror.

"What's got into you, Jim? He's not going to hurt you. He's just making his little noises. Maybe his way of thanking us for the food."

"I don't think so." Jim swallowed. "All right, so I may have gotten it wrong. But I think he said real words. I think he said, 'I am immortal.'"

"I can't think why the Station sent him to me, Millicent," Liz said innocently.

“Some kind of trial offer,” Jim suggested. “They want to see if they make good pets. He seems a friendly little guy.”

“Pets! exclaimed Millicent. “That is not a word in acceptable usage, Jim.” Then she fell silent, watching the doozle which was now asleep in a makeshift wooden cage knocked up by Jim. Her expression was one of stern disapproval. Millicent was the district sociologist, skilled in alien psychology, creature rights and all matters related to the humanitarian functioning of society.

“You’ve probably noticed he has no food in there,” Liz said defensively. “There were some instructions with him. Apparently we should keep him in a cage and feed him only when absolutely necessary. It’s not good for doozles to grow too big. You see, they are, uh, very efficient digestively.”

“He has no asshole,” Jim explained.

“He’s a goddamned freak and if I had my way he’d be put down!” opined Pott.

It was noon of the day following the doozle’s arrival. The morning goose attack had been fought off and the three neighbors had assembled for their usual coffee and chat. Jim was present too. Normally he avoided these occasions like the plague, but today was different. Today was doozle day plus one. Today the neighbors would reveal the true stupidity of adulthood and he wanted to be around to witness it. Incipient conflict was in the air, spearheaded by the foul look on alien-hugging Millicent’s face and the combative nature of good old Pott, the two of them perfect counterpoints to Mom’s natural wishy-washyness. This could be interesting.

“And why do those unfeeling scientists on Sol 3 think this creature should be kept in a cage? Millicent asked icily.

“To stop him finding food and making a pig of himself. There’s food everywhere on a farm, and apparently doozles are pretty well omnivorous. We give him a few soya beans every so often.”

“I think he sweats them off,” Jim said. “He doesn’t seem to be getting much bigger. Or maybe it all goes into energy. I read somewhere it takes you eight hundred calories a day just to stay alive.”

“He’d render down nicely.” Pott prodded the doozle through the cage.

“Stop that, please,” came a tiny, shrill voice.

“What’s that?” Millicent exclaimed. “Who said that? Was that the doozle? You didn’t tell me the doozle could speak!” she accused Liz.

“Good grief, we’d hardly gotten around to that yet. I was just giving you a run-down on his physical nature.”

“It’s a disgrace! It’s contrary to Galactic Law to keep an intelligent being in a cage, and rightly so!”

Jim listened with interest. The meeting was progressing as he’d hoped. Acrimony was everywhere. The doozle was smiling benignly through the bars of his cage. No sign of cabin fever there. Mom’s face was red.

“I merely followed instructions! I’ve done nothing wrong!”

“Tell that to the doozle! How would you like to be imprisoned in a cage, Elizabeth, answer me that! This could be a matter for the police. Then perhaps you’ll find out what cages are all about!”

Liz held up her hands. "All right," she said, "I'll let the doozle out. He can have the run of the house. He can't have the run of the farm because he'll start gorging himself on the spring sowing." She unhooked the latch, reached inside and hauled the doozle out. He lay on his back, smiling at them all.

"It doesn't alter the fact that you're demeaning an intelligent being, keeping it as a pet."

"He's not a pet. He's out of his cage. He's a member of the household."

"With full voting rights," Jim added.

"I'm pleased to hear it," Millicent said. "And from now on, I'd feel far more comfortable if you'd refer to the doozle as 'it'. It has no sex and you must not attribute a sex to it. That's anthropomorphism. And what about a name?"

"I was going to call it Monty."

"There you are, you see. Didn't it occur to you to call this alien by its own name?" Millicent leaned over the doozle, smiling. "What's your name, doozle?"

"I am doozle."

Later, they were to remember the exact significance of this reply. At the time they took it at face value, however.

"Doozle it is," Millicent said.

"I can't tell you how much that doozle pisses me off," Jim told Pott a few weeks later. The geese had flown north, the soya crop had safely germinated, summer was coming and the oddly matched couple were strolling along the river bank at the lower end of the property. "Mom is totally besotted with the little suck. It's like a mutual admiration society that I've been blackballed from."

"I still say your Dad had an ulterior motive in sending it," the old fellow said. "Probably to spy on us. You were going to ask him to take it back. Did you have any luck?"

"No dice. The old fool got all uptight and told me to encrypt any future messages. Seems he had no right to send the doozle in the first place. Said it could cost him his job but he did it out of love for Mom. And anyway, Mom would kill me if she knew I'd tried to get rid of the little creep."

Pott said thoughtfully, "I wonder how he managed to get it out of the Station without it being missed. They've got people studying them up there. You'd think they'd notice they were one short."

"I guess Dad covered up somehow. Anyway, something has to be done. Mom and the doozle have gotten far too close for my liking. It's sickening to listen to them, always agreeing on everything. It's unhealthy. And the doozle's grown a heck of a lot bigger since you last saw it. I think Mom's fattening it up deliberately." He swallowed. This was a difficult thing to say. "I think she's, uh, sleeping with it."

"Ugh."

"My thoughts exactly. That lousy alien is turning my Mom into some kind of perv. We have to do something, Pott."

"I always said we should have fed it to my pigs."

“Too late now. It never leaves Mom’s side, toddling along on those little stumps. I tried tripping it up once and it just did a kind of forward roll and started walking on its arm stumps instead. It gave me an upside-down grin as it toddled away. Weird.” He shivered.

“It’s all beginning to get you down, huh?” the old man sympathized. “I tell you what, Jim boy. Come and see my pigs. It’s feeding time, and at least they’re terrestrial stock.”

Jim brightened. He enjoyed watching the pigs eating. There was a natural slobbering greed about them, so different from the doozle’s prissy nibbling. And the way Mom watched while the doozle ate! She had this stupid smile on her face; smiling without showing her teeth, the way woman smile at babies. An atavistic link with chimps. Showing the teeth might be construed as a threat display, and spook the kiddy.

But as they passed the farmhouse on the way to Pott’s sties, Jim stopped dead, listening. “What’s that?”

“I believe it’s your mother screaming.”

“Jesus Christ! The doozle’s attacked her!”

Jim entered the farmhouse at a run, then hesitated. The screaming had stopped. Where was Mom? She wasn’t in the kitchen. He tried the living room door. No dice. He took the stairs two at a time, burst into his mother’s bedroom and stopped dead. Mom was sitting up in bed in her dressing gown. She was cradling something against her, uh, breasts. Was that a doozle’s stump poking out from under the bedclothes? Jeez, what kind of perversion was this?

“Sorry, Jim. I was frightened for a moment. It was so unexpected. But everything’s OK now. See!”

She opened up her dressing gown. Fortunately she was wearing a nightdress underneath.

And lying in her arms, smiling happily up at Jim, were two doozles.

“Hello, Jim,” they piped simultaneously.

But within a couple of days Jim had realized matters were not all bad. True, the doozles had doubled in number, but each was half the size of the original so they had become small pets again rather than a large rival for Mom’s care and attention, not to mention affection. To make matters even better, they were making a nuisance of themselves around the house, encouraging each other in mischief and hunting for food. It was clear the novelty had worn off for Mom.

“I think perhaps you should rebuild the cage, Jim.” That was definitely a shamefaced look Mom wore. “We’re going to have to restrict their movements just a bit.”

“But they’re intelligent beings, Mom. You can’t imprison them. It’s unethical.” Boy, was the boot ever on the other foot! “What will Millicent say?”

“Millicent’s coming for coffee tomorrow. I’m going to explain the whole thing to her.”

“Get her blessing, you mean?”

"I am not ruled by Millicent, Jim. I shall tell her that I'm quite happy with one doozle around the house, but two is one too many. I'll ask her to put the new doozle up for adoption."

"How do you know which is the new one, Mom? They look identical to me. A mother's instinct, maybe?"

She had the grace to blush. "Don't be ridiculous. I'll admit it's just possible I've allowed myself to get too close to these friendly little fellows. Or at least, the first one. But you must realize what good company it was, with your father away."

"Jeez, Mom, aren't I good company?"

"I wish you'd learn at least the rudiments of grammar, Jim."

The following day the coffee committee assembled in the farmhouse kitchen. The two doozles lay side by side in the new cage, smiling and watching the humans with their big round eyes, showing no sign of discontent with their confined quarters.

"There you are, Millicent, you see. I told you they were happy. If they were as intelligent as you think they are, they'd have argued with me."

"I don't think so. Clearly it's not in their nature to argue. They're non-aggressive. There's a lesson for us all in this."

"There's no lesson for me," Pott said acidly. "The human race didn't get where it is through nonaggression. If you had your way, Millicent, we'd still be living in caves at the mercy of the sabre-tooth. Kill them now, the pair of them, that's what I say. Otherwise there's nothing to stop them multiplying until they take over the Earth!"

Millicent sniffed. "I hardly think we're at that stage yet, Mr. Pott. I see this as an opportunity. A wonderful chance to learn more about these enchanting creatures."

Jim felt compelled to interject, "I think it's only one creature in two pieces."

"Don't be silly, Jim. You said you'd like to have one adopted, Liz?"

"By all means."

"Then I'll take one back with me. I can offer it the very best of homes, and no lack of intellectual stimulation. There's something about these little creatures that makes me feel good." She shot Pott a meaningful glance, "It probably depends on the kind of person you are to start with."

"I'm happy the way I am, thanks."

"So which of these little fellows shall I take, huh?" Millicent leaned over the cage, smiling at the doozles who lay side by side, smiling back at her. "Which one is yours, Liz?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, you must have seen it give birth."

"It didn't give birth in the accepted sense. It just split in half. It got kind of blurred and the features kind of swam, and it got very thin in the middle, and broke in two. Rather like a cell dividing. It's difficult to describe."

"We'll be able to study that!"

"It's not a thing I'd want to see again. And anyway, they're studying it up on Sol 3."

“Dissecting them at this very moment, probably. I think my approach is a little more humane than that.” Millicent peered into the cage. “Look, one of them is smiling more than the other. I’ll take that one. What a happy little guy. Oh, what a big smile. Oh—”

“Oh, my God!” Liz screamed.

The smile had extended until it came close to splitting the doozle in half. Then it rolled on top of its neighbor and, with a few convulsive heaves, devoured it.

“Non-aggressive, did you say, Millicent?” Pott asked.

Convuluted writhings could be seen under the pale flesh of the successful doozle, and the creature assumed a lumpy appearance. Its smile looked pained, as though it was suffering from severe indigestion.

“I’m quite sure there’s a good explanation for this,” Millicent said unhappily. “It bears out my belief that we need to research this, uh, life-form more thoroughly. It’s quite an opportunity for us.”

“Not for me, thanks,” Liz said. “This has turned me right off.”

By now the doozle’s appearance had settled down and it looked very much as it had before the previous division, if a little larger.

“Much better now,” it said.

There was a moment’s silence while they considered this.

“We should have expected nothing less,” Millicent said finally, having recovered her composure. “We confined the creatures and they turned on each other like caged rats. The more I think about it, the more I see it as perfectly rational behavior.”

“So now we’re back to one doozle,” Pott said. “So much for your chance of adoption, Millicent.”

“Oh, but she can have the horrible thing,” cried Liz. “I’m not harboring a cannibal on my farm. It’s revolting.”

“It’s it really, Mom?” asked Jim. “It’s still the same doozle as before. It was never two really separate doozles. It was two branches of the same one. Remember when we asked its name? It said ‘I am doozle’. That’s what it is. It’s not *a* doozle, it’s doozle. Two of them are still doozle. When it ate its twin, it was no different from you biting your fingernails.”

“I’ve *never* bitten my fingernails.”

Pott addressed the doozle. “You heard that. Is the boy right?”

The doozle smiled but said nothing.

“You were right, Millicent. The little bastard is intelligent. Intelligent enough to know when to keep its mouth shut.”

By the next day Jim noticed a shift in the doozle’s popularity rating as a result of the devouring episode. Mom, who had previously been enthusiastically pro-doozle, was now rabidly anti. Pott, once anti, had been so fascinated by the engulfing that he was probably veering to the right.

“Pretty significant, eh? So now we know how your husband managed to smuggle the doozle out of Sol 3. It’s not easy to keep track of a creature that can divide and combine at will. Clever little bastard.”

And the devouring had changed Jim's view, too. He'd retreated from his view that the doozle was a little suck. It had been an honest mistake brought about by Mom's overemotional attitude. The fact was, the doozle had character. It had potential.

"Let's keep it, Mom."

"I'm not having that bloodthirsty brute in this house."

"I'll keep it in the yard."

"You will not."

"So what are we going to do with it? Kill it, is that what you're saying?"

"We'll send it back to your father."

"And get him fired?"

They eyed the doozle uncertainly. Then Pott spoke up.

"I'll have him. He can take his chances with the pigs."

So it was that the doozle joined Pott's household and fitted in very well. It was stabled with a sow that had recently borne a litter of nine piglets and the doozle apparently convinced the sow that it was one of her own, feeding from her with impunity.

The next few weeks were busy. The soya crop had flowered and the little pods were forming. All day the remote-controlled flyer patrolled the fields at an altitude of some ten meters, relaying images back to Jim at the monitor. It was the aspect of farming he enjoyed most, identifying targets and taking action. If the target was a mouse or other small mammal, he would strafe it with the flyer's laser gun. If the target was smaller, such as a swarm of insects, a lethal spray would put paid to it. There were little guided missiles for badgers and the like. It was more fun than any computer game. And it was legal, too. The enemy was not intelligent, and the crop was essential to the well-being of humanity.

So it was some time before Jim found time to visit his elderly friend; and when eventually he arrived at the piggery he found a very depressed Pott.

"I wish I'd never taken in that goddamned doozle, Jim boy. Take my advice, never volunteer for anything. No matter how kindly your motives may be, keep your mouth shut and let someone else carry the can."

They leaned against the wall of one of the sties, watching a family of newly-weaned piglets feeding at the trough. The doozle was among them, happily gobbling up the swill.

"Looks OK to me."

"Nothing wrong with that goddamned doozle. It's officialdom is the problem. Bureaucrats. I've got half Social Services on my back. Daily visits. Endless questions I can't answer. Forms. They've had to invent new forms for the purpose."

"All for one doozle?"

He hesitated. "In a manner of speaking. You could say I brought it on myself. You'd better come and look."

Pott led him to the next sty. A large doozle lay there alone, sunning itself. The sty after that held two doozles of more modest size. "That one divided this morning," said Pott. Another sty held four small doozles.

“We’re hungry, Pott,” they chirped as one.

“There’s nothing I can do,” he sighed. “Nothing. I’d boil them up for swill if it wasn’t for goddamned Millicent and her Social Services. But they’re keeping an exact count and if there’s so much as one kilogram of doozle unaccounted for, they’ll have me behind bars. They keep telling me the doozle is an intelligent species. Huh! They’re just intelligent enough to take advantage of our rules, but no more.”

Jim thought about it. “But they’re basically all one doozle with a single intelligence. If you killed them all except one, you wouldn’t have reduced the overall intelligence.”

“Believe me, I tried that one. It didn’t wash. They said we couldn’t be sure. Only the doozle could tell us, and it sure as hell isn’t going to do that.”

Jim regarded his friend helplessly. “How did it all happen, anyway? You only had one doozle to start with.”

“True enough, and it shouldn’t have presented any problem. If you keep a doozle in a confined space and feed it just above a starvation level, it hardly grows at all. Everything’s fine.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Well, if you give the same doozle lots of space, it divides in two. It must have been a method of self-regulating population on its home world, because if you confine those two again, they merge into one. They multiply according to the space available, and they grow according to the food available.”

“So why did you let them multiply?” Jim asked.

He sighed. “They’re ingratiating little devils. They give the impression of liking a person. They boost your ego. That’s what happened to your mom.” Pott glanced at him. “Let’s face it, I’m not a popular fellow, Jim boy. Somehow I seem to rub people up the wrong way, and the pigs don’t exactly help my aura. And here was this little guy thinking I’m the greatest. What could be better than that? Well, *two* little guys thinking I’m the greatest. And so on. Before I knew it, I had an alien fan club.”

“How many, for Chrissake?”

“Nine as of today. For a while I was happier than I ever remember. Then I came to my senses. The fact was, I’d trusted them, and they’d hoodwinked me into allowing them to multiply.”

“But if you re-confined them, they’d merge, wouldn’t they?”

“Yes, but they’ve been eating like horses. A combined doozle would be a pretty big beast, now. Bigger than me. I don’t relish the idea of having it around.” He regarded the four small doozles in the sty. “At least these four are a manageable size. But we’re not allowed to kill any of them.”

“I should think not! If I had my way, it would a crime even to think like that.” Millicent had arrived, with four other members of Social Services. They went about their business efficiently, weighing each doozle on portable scales, checking the elasticity of their flesh with a graduated prodder, peering into their eyes with a tiny flashlight, taking notes. “Eighty-three kilograms total,” Millicent reported. That’s very satisfactory. A gain of six kilos since last weigh-in.”

“Don’t you ever wonder where it will end?”

“That’s not my department, Pott. But in the short term, we’ve decided to remove the doozles to a...” She hesitated, “a more suitable place. There’s no way we can justify keeping intelligent creatures in pigsties. I’m sure you agree. So we’ve had purpose-built quarters built for them, and we have assembled a team of experts who will be responsible for communication, indoctrination and integration.”

“What do you mean, integration?” Pott asked suspiciously.

“In the long term, to fit them to become members of society.”

“*Our* society?”

“What else?”

“You can’t do that!” Jim shouted. “They’ll take over the world!”

Harvest time, and the big machine ate its way across the fields in straight lines, sucking up the soya plants, stripping the pods and mulching the stalks, extracting the beans, bagging them and chopping the pods for pig food. Jim sat at the controls atop the harvester, pondering a communication he’d received from his father. He caught sight of a figure in the mirror: Pott picking his way across the stubble. He applied the brake and after a moment the old man climbed stiffly into the seat beside him.

“Good harvest, Jim boy?” he asked. He sounded very tired.

Jim jerked a thumb at the hopper behind the cab. It was three-quarters full of beans. “OK, I guess.”

Pott gazed across the lush green of the crop to the trees beyond, and the distant hills. “Make the most of it, Jim boy. Enjoy it all while you can. We won’t have many more years of this. Mark my words, in a few years humans will be obsolete. The doozle will take over.”

“I can’t see that, Pott. They have too many natural enemies here on Earth, and they can’t defend themselves. Even a rat could eat a doozle alive.”

“One did, the other day. They lost three doozles at the new Integration Center. So now Social Services have begun a campaign to eliminate all predators from this region. They’re putting poison down and setting traps and God knows what else. It’s a goddamned disgrace!”

“I wipe out things that try to eat our crops,” Jim pointed out.

“That’s all right, you have a pecuniary interest. But Millicent and her gang are doing it for altruistic reasons, for God’s sake.” The old man snorted loudly.

“How shortsighted can you get? With all the predators gone there’ll be nothing to stop the doozles spreading everywhere, aided and abetted by Millicent’s dupes. And they’re already much better adapted than us as a society, because it’s impossible for the little bastards to disagree with one another. They’re all one doozle.”

“We have to do something,” said Jim.

“What can we do? There are only two of us, and people around here are totally in love with those little swine. There was a public outcry when the rats got three of them. Demonstrations in the street. Did you know Millicent asked Sol 3 for some more? They said they didn’t know how we got hold of them in the first place, and they asked her to send them back.”

“Why didn’t she?”

Pott snorted, not a pleasant sound. “She’s besotted with them, like everyone else. They get hundreds of visitors every day at the Center, just gawking at the doozles in their habitat and thinking they feel better for doing it. And the habitat’s far too big. The doozles are dividing and growing, so soon they’ll have to extend the place further, because they can’t stand having them eat one another. And all the time they’re trying to educate them, working toward releasing them into our society.”

“Scary thought.” Jim maneuvered the harvester in a semicircle and started on a new row. “But it needn’t happen that way. The doozles don’t multiply up on Sol 3, you know, because they don’t allow them the space.”

“This isn’t Sol 3, Jim boy.”

He hesitated. “The fact is, Pott, I’ve got an idea. Well, to be honest, Dad put it into my head when I called him the other day. Now listen; this is something nobody must know about, otherwise it won’t work. And it can’t be done for a few days. And if anything goes wrong, I’ll be in a hell of a lot of trouble.”

“You’re still under the legal age.”

“They’d raise me to an adult court, I bet.”

Pott glanced over his shoulder and leaned close. “Maybe you should tell me about it.”

Ten days later Jim judged the time to be right.

It was a warm and moonless night that found him carefully unscrewing the bolts on the padlocked back gate of the Integration Center.

“I like your style, Jim boy,” Pott murmured. “You’ve planned this operation like a master criminal.”

“I’ve cased the joint pretty carefully this past few days. Millicent is impressed with my interest in the doozles. She thinks I’m aiming for a career in Social Services. Now, the doozle enclosure is over to our right.”

Shielding the flashlight with his fingers, Jim led the way along the spectators’ walkway, Pott puffing behind, wheeling the cart. The doozle enclosure was about twenty meters by five, consisting of a meter-high glass wall on three sides and timber-built sleeping quarters on the fourth, long side. Jim had already established that there were no security guards; why should there be? Everyone liked the doozles. Jim played the beam over the enclosure.

“Empty. They’re all in the back there.”

“How many are there?”

“Sixteen as of yesterday afternoon.” He shone the flashlight around the enclosure again, just to make sure. The light showed a few leafless shrubs and a lot of close-cropped grass.

“Looks like the little bastards have cleaned the place out,” Pott observed.

“Yeah, Mom’s supplying the Center with soybeans. Too many, for my liking. They’re feeding the doozles like fighting cocks.”

Jim swung himself over the low glass wall and ran across the enclosure. The four entrances to the doozles' sleeping quarters were each about one meter square. He dropped onto his knees and crawled into the first one.

A single fat doozle lay on a bed of sawdust. It blinked at the light.

"Time to eat?" it piped hopefully.

"Time to leave here for ever," said Jim "Time for the wide open spaces. No more cages for you, fellow. No more humans gawking at you. We're taking you away from all this. Me and old Pott. You remember Pott?"

"Pott did not like me," the doozle said suspiciously.

"All that's changed now. Pott and me, we're your best friends." The doozle wouldn't understand the concept of lying, would it? Surely not. All doozles were one, so lying would not have evolved in their society. A dull existence, when you came to think of it.

"Thank you," said the doozle.

It followed Jim as he crawled outside. Fifteen doozles stood there waiting for them.

"Thank you!" they cried as one.

They toddled after him as he led the way to the far side of the enclosure and lifted them one by one over the glass.

"There's a hell of a lot of them," Pott complained.

"We're wasting our time if we leave any behind." He addressed the doozles.

"This cart is all we have to carry you to a better place. Can you all squeeze in as tight as possible?"

The doozles did better than that. They flowed and combined until the cart was full of a gray jello-like substance with eyes here and there, glinting in the flashlight's glow.

"What about the holes in the side of the cart?" Pott said. "They won't ooze out, will they?"

"Hardly. I've told them they're going to the wide open spaces. They don't want to miss that."

"I still say there's a lot of useful protein in this cart."

"The pigs wouldn't touch them before and they won't touch them now. It's alien meat, Pott. We don't know what the genetic structure is. It could kill your pigs stone dead."

The old man sighed. "Maybe you're right. It seems a helluva waste, though. Hey, don't walk so fast!"

Together they wheeled the cart through the gate and down the road to the farm. By the time they reached the upper end of the soyfields a great twittering of birds was announcing the dawn. Jim tilted the cart and the mass of doozle slid to the ground. Almost immediately it began to separate itself into individuals, each about thirty centimeters across. They paved the area like big cobblestones, smiling up at him.

"Is this our new home?"

“These are our soyfields. The crop has all been lifted, leaving lots of stubble and all the pods and beans that the machine missed. It’s all yours. All this space. All this food.” Jim turned away abruptly, unable to face the trust in the doozles’ eyes. They were already beginning to divide joyously and spread out. “This land is yours forever,” Pott told them. “You have space without limit. No more cages, no more enclosures, no more starvation diet. Doozles are free to multiply and spread. Our only wish is for your success and happiness. God bless you.” Sixty-four tiny voices piped, “Thank you.”

Two hours later, self-doubt was inflicting the conspirators.

“Nothing can go wrong now,” Jim said nervously. “Can it?”

“So long as they divide faster than they eat. We stressed the concept of unlimited space enough, did we? Should we go back and shout some reinforcement to them?”

“I can’t look. I’ve had it with the doozles.” Jim sank down onto a large rock.

“It’s too late now, anyway. Jeez, what have we done, Pott?”

“Jim boy, I’m too goddamned tired to think about it. Uh, is that Millicent coming this way? Your eyes are better than mine. Tell me I’m mistaken, please.”

“It’s Millicent.” Jim stood, preparing to face the music.

He didn’t have to wait long. “*What have you done with the doozles?*”

Millicent halted before them, hands on hips, thin face pink with anger. “Don’t bother to deny anything. The tracks of your cart led straight from the Integration Center to this farm. Aha!” A skinny arm shot out, a skeletal finger pointing. “There’s the cart!”

“What’s going on? What’s all the shouting about?” Liz appeared at the farmhouse door in her dressing gown, rubbing her eyes. “I was trying to have a lie-in, for Chrissake!”

“Your son has kidnapped the doozles, Liz!”

Exasperation showed on Liz’s face. “To hell with the doozles. I don’t want to talk about those vile creatures. I’m going back to bed.” The door slammed.

“What kind of a mother is that?”

“She’s a damn good mother, Millicent, and you’re trespassing on her land!” Pott snapped.

“I’m going to take a look in that cart.” Millicent strode off downhill.

They trailed after, scanning the soya fields anxiously. “There’s nothing here to interest you,” Pott snapped.

“I’ll be the judge of that!” Millicent halted beside the cart. “Huh. Empty. All right, where are they?”

“How in hell should we know?”

Millicent bent over the cart. “You don’t fool me. I can *smell* them.” She scanned the farm buildings. “The barn, of course. You’ve hidden them in the barn. You never wanted to hand them over in the first place, did you, Pott? Well, we’ll see about this!”

She was about to climb back up the field when a curious rhythmic whine filled the air.

Jim uttered an involuntary groan of relief. Millicent looked at him sharply. “What’s going on? What’s that noise? Oh, it’s only the geese.”

They came in from the north, over the roof of the farmhouse, necks outstretched and wings beating strongly. They passed over the soyfields and for a moment Jim held his breath; then they wheeled as one, hundreds of them gliding in to land, disturbing the quiet morning air with their honking, alighting all around the three humans and beginning to feed.

“I’m going to take a look in that barn,” Millicent snapped, ignoring the beetle-sized creature that toddled past the toe of her wellington boot.

But a goose saw it and snapped it up hungrily before moving on to deal with other tasty morsels nearby.

“We’ll come with you, Millicent,” said Pott, putting an arm around her shoulders and leading her away. “We have nothing to hide.”

One hour later this was literally true and the geese took off and headed south.

LADY FLAMINGO AND THE SHAPECAST JENNIES

an unpublished story by Michael Coney

Author's note *It's possible the reader will recognize that the basic premise of this story is borrowed from O Henry's beautiful tale The Gift of the Magi, which brings tears to my eyes. That's how I recognize perfection, the tears. Very few science fiction stories have this effect on me; offhand I can think of two: Bob Shaw's Light of Other Days and Cordwainer Smith's Ballad of Lost C'Mell. Maybe I'm just a sentimentalist. That said, here's a sentimental story.*

Lady Flamingo was not pretty.

She regarded herself in the everyway mirror and sighed. She rotated the device, taking in her side view, her back view. No doubt about it, she was too thick in the waist, too long in the nose, too tall, too Earth-type.

“But does it matter?” she asked herself. She was Director of Metamorf, hence her title. Her sole superior in the *City of the Stars* was King Connaught VI, the Captain. She had a hundred-plus technicians working under her. Among them was one Tony Meta-two....

She stopped reasoning for an instant and allowed a guilty warmth to suffuse her mind and body. Then she shrugged it off. “I could kick any one of them down to the lower levels if I felt like it,” she gloated.

And it was fortunate that the gloat was inward and private, because Tony Meta-two chose that moment to drop by.

“Just thought I’d let you know, my Lady. They’ll have the analysis of Leonides Six finished in forty-eight hours, so they tell me.”

A quick flash of temper. “Why don’t they tell *me*?”

“It’s just a rumor, my Lady. I was passing it on, that’s all.”

“I’d rather get my instructions from official sources, Meta-two. Particularly when it concerns the Befitter.”

Tony sighed. All he’d been doing, was trying to help by alerting her unofficially to upcoming commitments. He shrugged and moved away, aware of her gaze on his back, and made his way to the Befitter and its sharp end, the Tunnel.

The Befitter, vital to the purpose of the *City of the Stars*, looked like nothing more than long gray wall covered with dials, screens and keyboards, at which sat some seventy technicians. The Tunnel, at the far left end, was a fat white tube a meter in diameter, about ten meters long with a padded conveyor belt running through it. It lay on a long raised platform against the far wall of the lab. It took skill and experience to operate the Befitter, because human beings would lie on that conveyor belt, and pass through the Tunnel, and emerge into the afterchamber as different human beings.

The Befitter prepared humans for life on worlds not quite like Earth. Genetically modified, they were known colloquially as Jennies.

Next, Tony Meta-two did something mildly illegal, but something that most Befitter technicians did from time to time. He walked over to a screen, keyed in his password and smiled at the image that appeared.

A beautiful woman smiled back at him, life-size, naked and inviting.

She was only a picture on a screen; an image of a shell of a body. She had no heart, no lungs, nothing that made an image into a person. She was just a template.

But this template had the potential for development. It could be imposed on a woman passing through the Befitter, so that she would emerge at the other end looking like a goddess instead of some freak designed for some oddball planet. It could be done, but it wouldn't. The Befitter consumed far too much of the ship's energy to be used for frivolous purposes. He regarded the image sadly and sat down to make a few artistic improvements.

What a pity Lady Flamingo couldn't spruce herself up a bit! A better-looking boss might be more sure of herself, less prone to bouts of temper. Basically she was a nice woman, badly presented yet with a definite underlying sex appeal that she seemed determined to hide.

At the very moment Lady Flamingo was gazing at the same picture in high fury. She'd hacked into Tony Meta-two's plaything. So that was the kind of woman the bastard went for! An empty, simpering shell! Good grief, she'd have thought an intelligent man would find something better to do with the ship's expensive equipment!

She switched off and the image faded, and with it her wrath. Face it, girl, men were men. One day she'd like to show them all. One day she'd like to run herself through the Befitter and impose that goddamned image on her body.

... And afterwards, maybe invite Tony to her quarters for a drink...

It would never happen.

Another of Lady Flamingo's subordinates was Frank Meta-eight. Frank didn't figure large in her reckoning because he was competent at his job and a pretty ordinary guy. She never had to yell at Frank because he'd shot too much growth texturizer into a Jenny's thigh, or liposucked an arm down to a skeleton. She never had to suspend him for illegal use of *City* property.... The Befitter was a temptation to all who worked in Metamorf. It could smooth a pitted complexion; it could augment a breast. Lady Flamingo trusted her subordinates to use the Befitter for none of these purposes, and her trust had never been betrayed.

But what they did away from the lab was their own business.

Frank Meta-eight was currently lying on an untidy heap of cushions in a remote observation bubble a few kilometers away at the other end of the ship. With him was a girl who had given her name as Sophie. Just Sophie, nothing else. They'd been making love. They were warm and replete and smiling at each other.

"And to think that just seven days ago we'd never met," Frank murmured, stroking her cheek. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, round brown eyes and a snub nose, auburn hair framing a heart-shaped face. Frank was totally crazy about her, wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

Their first meeting had been quite coincidental, given that *City of the Stars* was home to over a million souls. Frank had been wandering around Capcha sector, trying to make sense of the incoming data on planet Leonides Six, chatting to the technicians. He'd caught sight of a girl with auburn hair on the far side of the lab, and when she'd turned his way he'd caught his breath. She'd smiled at him, and they'd gravitated together. He'd assumed she was a member of the Capcha staff. She hadn't disabused him, but now time was running out for her.

"Seven days ago..." she repeated, kissing his hand. "So short a time? It feels like I've known you for ages."

"It feels like I wasted my life until I met you." He hesitated. "Shall we... Would you like to move in with me? I have quarters on the seventh level."

She hesitated too. Her pretty face was suddenly sad. "Don't let's move too fast."

But he persisted. He was frightened of losing her. He wanted to lock her into a commitment. She was like a lovely dream that slips away on waking. He didn't want to awaken, ever. So he put all manner of arguments to her; he even pointed out advantages of finance and convenience, making her laugh at his desperation.

"Let's get dressed," she said eventually.

He dressed her with reverence, taking his time. Hand in hand they left the bubble, pausing at the entrance and looking back. The tidy-gnomes were already at work, plumping up the cushions and arranging them neatly against the transparent wall. Leonides Six could be seen outside, big and blue.

"Why are you crying, Sophie?"

"It's... as though we were never in that bubble. As though the robots are cleaning away the memories."

But her gaze was focussed far away, on a bright pinpoint, Leonides Six....

Twenty minutes later they were strolling through the Jennies' Bazaar. It was not a route Frank would have chosen. Odd-looking people strolled the corridors, and the stores lining the corridors displayed odd-looking clothing. The *City of the Stars'* last call had been at a high-gravity planet, and many of the Jennies were heavysset stumpy people, waddling around on unnaturally powerful legs. A few others bore evidence of an earlier visit to the Befitter, having long arms out of proportion to the rest of their bodies. There were more, stranger ones.

Sophie said quietly, "They should re-engineer them back to normal."

"But they're always on call. They might have to be adapted for another world at any time. It would be a terrible waste of resources, forever changing Jennies back to —" He almost said 'humans'. "Earth-types."

"But they shouldn't have to go around like this. They're so... ugly."

Frank found her comment shocking. "The Befitter must *never* be used for cosmetic purposes. Anyway, nobody's forced into Jennydom. They're all volunteers who want to see new worlds, something outside the *City*. Tell the truth, when I was a kid I wanted to volunteer myself, but my fosters wouldn't let me. They had me checked out and found I was psychologically unsuitable." He sighed. "They thought I might crack in a crisis on some strange world." It was no disgrace. Everyone was accepted for what they were, in the *City*. The Jennies, too.

"They seem happy enough. It's just...."

“I know.” He glanced at a woman with legs thick as tree trunks, bounding powerfully after a ball as a group of Jennies played in a large open area. “We don’t find them physically attractive, do we? But they’re happy enough with one another. After a while they get used to one another’s appearance. We say they’re ‘captured by the form’. *Shapecast*. Jennies have children, after all.”

She shuddered involuntarily. She was very young and her education was still progressing. “Normal children?”

“What’s normal?” Frank was alarmed. Sophie seemed to be thinking strange thoughts, drifting away from him somehow. He tightened his grip on her hand as a group of giant Jennies came strolling toward them, filling the corridor. They parted politely to let the couple through.

“Well, doesn’t it bother you to be in the business of producing freaks?”

He stared at her, shocked. She was crying. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?” he said quickly. She was young, she was inexperienced, she came from a distant region of the ship. He must make allowances. He hurried her to an elevator and they ascended ten levels, emerging into a vast kitchen filled with appetizing smells.

“Sorry,” she said, biting into a soybun.

“I want to withdraw from the Leonides Six project.”

Lord Strongarm of Go regarded Sophie in surprise. “Why? You were happy enough when we briefed you, when? Less than twenty days ago.”

“You didn’t tell me enough about it.”

“You had access to the data bank. It’s all there; all the history of our other projects and the results of initial Leonides Six research. It’s going to be a good project. Low gravity, fascinating plant life, no serious predators and beautiful scenery. You might even decide to stay on with the colonists after your tour’s over.”

“I was naive. I didn’t go into it deeply enough. So I’ve changed my mind and I want out.”

Lord Strongarm frowned. “Well, I’m afraid that’s not possible. You enlisted and that’s the end of it. We’ve invested too much to have you drop out now. Everything’s planned and there’s no time to train a replacement. What in hell’s got into you, anyway? There’s nothing to be scared of on Leonides Six.”

“It’s not just Leonides Six.” Sophie admitted. “I want out of Go altogether.”

“This doesn’t make sense. You’ve been training for five years. And now, the first time you’re accepted for the Jennies, you want out?”

She blinked and a tear rolled slowly down her cheek. “I don’t want to be a Jenny. I like the way I look *now*.”

“The way you *look*? What’s that got to do with anything?” Lord Strongarm stared at her angrily, seeing an Earth-type female a little under average height, mousy hair, eyes too large, face shape not quite standard.... He retracted his claws hastily; no point in getting too aggressive; gently does it. He took her hand; it felt soft and tiny in his big hairy paw, relic of his first project. “I felt like you once. I was nervous of what the Befitter would do to me. But then, once I was through it, I felt better than I’ve ever felt. Like a lion.” He chuckled at his own joke. “Let me show you something.”

Still holding her hand, he placed his other hand against the blank, white wall. An opening widened and he led her into a small, comfortably-furnished chamber. “Sit down, Sophie.” He brought her a drink from the dispenser. “This place is my secret.”

He tapped the arm of his chair and one wall of the chamber was transformed into a giant screen. Images of strange animals, plants and people came and went. The picture steadied. A column of figures were climbing a steep mountain trail on all fours. They were human — or were they? Others were inflating accommodation blisters in the foreground. Their faces were slightly leonine, their bodies more so. Their stance was slightly stooped.

“My first project. Pythos Two. In the end something of a failure. The top life-form proved to be too high on the intelligence scale, so we pulled out.”

Other projects followed, other worlds, other types of human. A child was born. It was covered in dense fur like its mother.

“Oh, no!”

“The parents love their child just the same. They’re shapecast.”

“They didn’t tell me about shapecasting,” Sophie said angrily.

“Well, obviously you get used to the way people around you look. Your teaching hasn’t been censored in any way. You haven’t seen these images before because they’re... frowned upon. They’re nostalgia. We don’t want anything to do with nostalgia in the *City*, we’re forward-looking people, right? We never go back, we never can. The future is everything. But me — I’m a Lord and I can do what the hell I like, and if I like to dream of old times occasionally, that’s nobody’s business but my own so long as it doesn’t interfere with the running of the projects.”

“I’m sorry. I find the whole thing disgusting and I think I always will.” She gulped. “That baby... Ugh. It makes me feel sick!”

He said quietly. “It makes me feel love. Ask yourself, which is the best way to feel?”

She stared at him, hearing something in his tone of voice. “No!”

“Yes. He’s my child. I left him behind with his mother and the permanent colonists. It was a wonderful world and the best place for them. He’s over sixty now, Underchief of the main settlement. He’s done well.”

He shook himself mentally, seeking to erase the memories — and the regrets he would never admit. He tapped the chair again. Now the screen was full of data. “You’re twenty-two years old, I see, so you’ve been training for the Jennies since you were seventeen. As a Jenny, you’ll never feel old, even when you’re a hundred and thirty, due for Termination.

“The Befitter will keep you young right up to the end. Every time you go through that Tunnel, your organs are revitalized. It’s one of the side-effects — you’ll notice it yourself soon, young though you are. It’s the first time for a few Earth-types and they’ll be nervous just like you. The others, the Jennies, will be looking forward to it because they know they’ll come out the other end feeling great. And remember, Jennies’ minds become shapecast very quickly. They all look good to one another in a matter of days.”

Sophie said quietly, “But they don’t look good to Earth-types. They look weird.”

Lord Strongarm finally lost patience. “If *I* look weird to you that’s *your* god-damned problem, girl. I’ll have no truck with the stupid prejudices of Earth-types. You’ll feel differently when you’ve been through the Befitter, believe me! Come and see me in two years time when you get back from Leonides Six, and I’ll be pleased to accept your apology. Now get out of my sight!”

Frank couldn’t understand it. Sophie hadn’t shown up at their agreed meeting place, and he didn’t know how to get in touch with her. He didn’t know where she lived. He didn’t even know which sector she worked in. He’d tried Capcha, where he’d first met her, but they’d never heard of her. She’d told him her name was Sophie; nothing more. Why? Had she always intended to remain anonymous? She was somewhere in this space city of a million-plus inhabitants, but where? He’d lost her. For a few days he wandered the streets and parks, frequently dropping by the observation bubble where they’d made love. He asked around. No Sophie.

One morning Lady Flamingo said angrily, “I don’t know what the hell’s the matter with you, Meta-eight, but you’d better snap out of it. I can’t have you absent for days on end; and where in hell have you been, anyway? We have a busy schedule coming up: a thousand Jennies for Leonides Six going through the Befitter. I need every hand I’ve got, and I need everyone at their best.”

He could have told her about Sophie but he didn’t. There was something about Lady Flamingo that discouraged such confidences. He was quite sure she’d never been in love in her life.

Which showed just how wrong he could be.

“You heard that, Frank,” Tony Meta-two said as they left Lady Flamingo’s office. “So pull yourself together or you’ll be in deep mire.” He added more sympathetically, “I’m telling you this as a friend. Cross Lady Flamingo and you’ll find yourself in the lower levels.”

Frank had no option but to comply. Next day he took his place at the vast Befitter console along with close to a hundred other technicians and commenced the job of adapting the data from Capcha to suit a viable human form. Leonides Six was a small, warm planet with a thin atmosphere of oxygen and nitrogen, one part to six. Plant life simple but luxuriant; abundant marine life but no large land-based life forms. In other words, it was a young world, ideal for colonization. All it needed was a suitable human form.

Metamorf’s task was to design and produce this form.

The Befitter’s data base already contained details of the molecular structure of all Earth life and the life of all worlds already visited, some thirty worlds in all. So a huge variety of building blocks was available from which almost any conceivable carbon-based life-form could be constructed — if necessary. But nine times out of ten the work of Metamorf consisted solely in the adaptation of existing, well-trained humans.

Frank watched his screen, and for the space of a few hours he was able to push Sophie to the back of his mind. The template for the future explorers of Leonides Six began to take shape. Most of the process was automatic based on the data from Capcha Command’s drones, but the finer points were brushed in by the

technicians to give the optimum human appearance to the constructs, male and female. The Jennies' existing genetic structure would do the rest. There was no intent to create a team of identical Jennies.

Days later a tall humanoid had firmed up on the screen, slender and lightly built, gracile but with a deep chest to handle the thin atmosphere.

A green light appeared above Frank's screen.

He looked along the console. Red lights were turning green, off into the distance.

People sat back, relaxing, exhausted.

"Looks good," came the voice of Lady Flamingo. She was standing directly behind Frank. "Glad to see you've got your act together, Meta-eight."

And thoughts of Sophie came flooding back.

He mumbled some acknowledgment, and Lady Flamingo passed on down the bright laboratory, pausing now and then for a word or two. Soon her voice came through the PA system. "Well done, everyone. I've notified Go that we're ready for action and they're passing on the message to their people right now. We'll be processing our first batch of Jennies the day after tomorrow. I think we've all earned a day's break, don't you?"

A day to find Sophie.

So Frank trod the corridors, the levels, the busy bazaars and the silent soyfields once more. Night came and the *City's* lights were dimmed, and finally he dragged himself back to his quarters, exhausted. He slept fitfully, haunted by dreams of brown eyes and a soft, warm body; and when he awakened it was with a sense of loss and despair. Processing a thousand Jennies would take many days; further searching must be postponed. He took a sound-shower, dressed and made his way to the Befitter, trying to look brisk and alert as he passed by the sharp eyes of Lady Flamingo and joined the milling, chattering throng of technicians.

"Take your places."

He sat beside his equipment while an unruly crowd of Jennies poured into the chamber, talking excitedly, exchanging jokes and roaring with laughter. They were all shapes, all sizes, relics of many a past exploration. They were also well trained and able to handle almost any situation that might arise in an unfamiliar environment. If a Jenny failed in his or her duty it was invariably due to an unexpected local factor not picked up by Capcha's drones.

Frank watched the disparate crowd with something approaching admiration. These were superhumans, and when one of them answered to her number and approached he felt diffident, almost inferior. She was a big, well-muscled woman, handsome rather than pretty. Her appearance told him nothing about her previous adaptation but he recognized the general type; she'd been given immunity to certain poisons and diseases that could have threatened a previous exploration. She handed him her card without speaking, and he inserted it in the slot. He felt, or possibly imagined, her contempt for him as he attached electrodes to her body.

He read the screen. "So you're one hundred and twenty three years old," he said, trying to make conversation. "This'll be your last trip?" He could have bitten his tongue off. What had prompted him to make such a crass reference to Termination?

But she smiled. “You never know. I might squeeze in another. FTL travel is a wonderful thing.”

He watched the screen as the Befitter confirmed her suitability. All was well: no serious diseases, no obvious mental aberrations. A suitable Jenny ready for re-shaping. He returned her card which now contained the coding for her adaptation. She would insert the card into the slot as she entered the tunnel. It was a double check; her data was already recorded in the Befitter but it had been known for Jennies to enter the tunnel in the wrong order.

Day followed day with much the same pattern. He was able to pass all his Jennies as fit for Leonides Six — much to his relief on seeing some of the heated arguments that developed further along the line. One gigantic Jennie actually picked up his examiner bodily and threw him across the room. Later it emerged that the Jennie had falsified his age, and would have been due for Termination halfway through his tour of duty. This would have left an exploration unit one person short, which could not be allowed.

Every so often Frank would take a break and stroll down the room to join the group of off-duty technicians watching the naked Jennies being put through the tunnel. It was interesting to see people climb onto the belt with bodies adapted to one world, to emerge into the afterchamber with different bodies; lighter, taller, almost ethereal. And then stagger away, unused to the feel of themselves.

“Fatties in, ghoulies out,” somebody muttered to him.

And so the Jennies destined for Leonides Six became known as ghoulies. They didn’t mind. With every reincarnation they gained a different nickname.

“Here’s a first-timer,” said someone else. “Looks scared. They always do.”

At first his mind refused to recognize her...

She climbed onto the belt and lay down on her back, feet first into the tunnel, naked and very beautiful. She was trembling, her eyes shining with tears. An attendant laid a hand on her arm, murmured a few words of reassurance and inserted the card for her because her hand was shaking too much to find the slot. The belt began to move.

He tried to speak but the words stuck in his throat.

She caught sight of him. “Frank, I’m so sorry,” was all she said as she disappeared into the tunnel. It didn’t tell him a thing; no reasons, nothing.

He walked away, bereft of all rational thought, and booked off sick.

The Leonides manned survey was a success. The prototype Jennies were found to be totally suited to the planet. No serious dangers had been encountered and, more importantly, no creatures with the short-term potential for evolving intelligence. Two years after the first human landing it was announced that five thousand Jennies would be reprocessed to form a permanent colonization party.

And during those two years Frank had been unable to get Sophie out of his mind. He’d heard through the grapevine that she’d tried to change her posting at the last minute, and had been refused. So what would she do now? Would she sign on with the colonists, or would she return to the ship as a member of the Jenny pool, awaiting her next project? She would have forgotten him by then, of course.

She would have become shapecast.

She would have found a lover among the tall and willowy ghoulies. A lover of her own build, who looked fine and handsome to her shapecast mind. They would have decided their future together by now. So he should forget her. He *must* forget her. She was just another page in his history; she existed no more. She wasn't the Sophie he'd known. And with two years of ghoulie outlook behind her, she probably wouldn't even recognize him.

Unless...

No, it was impossible. It was illegal. It was unethical.

But it *could* be done.

Once the stupendous idea had taken hold he couldn't get it out of his mind. He went through his duties in a dream, sometimes wishing he had the courage to put his idea into practice, sometimes glad that he didn't. But while he sat at the console fine-tuning the design of the new colonists according to new data from the advance party, he was also —

Fine-tuning a design for himself.

No handsome fellow for female technician to drool over, this. The image on the screen used the basic structure of the ghoulies onto which Frank superimposed his own characteristics. Every time Lady Flamingo or Tony Meta-two walked by, they saw a ghoulie on his screen and suspected nothing.

He kept telling himself all this was a waste of time because he'd never have the nerve to use the construct.

Nevertheless he took the next step, reprogramming the details on his card.

He hadn't committed a crime, yet.

Perhaps he wasn't going to.

Perhaps cowardice was stronger than love.

“What!”

Lady Flamingo of Metamorf stared at Tony Meta-two in disbelief.

“There's no doubt about it, my Lady. There's been illegal use of the Befitter. We're not just talking about someone creating images for fun. Somebody's actually put themselves through the Tunnel.”

“Why, for heaven's sake?”

“Search me. The head count doesn't lie; and besides,” he reached into his pocket, “there was a card lying in the tray at the far end of the Tunnel. The identity field's been erased.”

She began to get angry. “It has to be one of our own people! Nobody else has the expertise!”

“I know.”

“Who the hell is it?”

He glanced at the clock. “We'll know in a few minutes when they arrive for work. Somebody's bound to be missing. He won't have the nerve to show up looking different.”

“Or she. Some bimbo trying to gussy her looks up a bit, I'll bet! What kind of form did this idiot take on?”

“Funny thing is, the card’s set up for the Leonides format. I can’t think why any of our people would want to go around looking like that. Unless they had their own reasons for infiltrating the Jennies. It’s weird. It makes no sense.”

“Well, whoever it is, it’ll be the lower levels for them! The disloyalty of it! Think of the disgrace to Metamorf when this gets out!”

“I’ll find a way of hushing it up. Even if it means reconstructing the bastard by force. Don’t worry about that, my Lady.”

“Tony, I want you to get to the bottom of this right away. I want to know *who*, and I want to know *why*, and I want the situation... corrected. I don’t care how. And for God’s sake be discreet about it. You know how rumors fly around the *City*.” She managed a smile. “I know I can rely on you, Tony.”

“Completely, my Lady.”

She watched him go, distracted by the sight of his powerful buttocks, then anger took over again. She’d be the laughingstock of the ship if this got out! A Leonides form, yet. At least nobody could say the Befitter had been used for cosmetic purposes.

Her mood was not improved by an unexpected visit from Lord Strongarm of Go.

“Flamingo, I have a favor to ask.”

“Go ahead,” she said cautiously.

Lord Strongarm hesitated. “I have a problem Jenny on my staff.”

And you’re not the only one, Flamingo thought. “Yes?”

“Her name is Sophie Go-983. Just back from Leonides and presently being debriefed. You may have come across her; I believe she was very, uh, friendly with your Frank Meta-eight.”

“So that’s why the guy couldn’t keep his mind on his work!”

“Most likely. Anyway, Go-983 hasn’t been pulling her weight on Leonides and has asked to be released from the Jennies.” There was incredulity in Lord Strongarm’s voice. “I ask you, why would anyone want out of the Jennies? We’re an elite corps and pretty goddamned proud of our history. We’re a brotherhood and a sisterhood all in one. We’re the cream of the *City*.”

“Yes, well, I’m sure we’re all take pride in our jobs.”

“Not to belittle Metamorf,” Lord Strongarm said hastily. “But you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure. So this Sophie is doomed to the lower levels, is she? Too bad. But she can be retrained as a janitor or whatever.”

“Maybe I should tell you a bit more about Go-983, Flamingo. She’s smart. She’s quick. She’s got a lot going for her. And she’s kind of cute, for a Jenny. She’d be an asset to the *City*.”

“And where would we be without janitors?”

Lord Strongarm sighed. The old bitch was making things difficult. “To get to the point, I feel we should consider reconstructing this woman.”

“When the next project comes up?”

“No, right now. I recommend she leaves the Jennies, is reconstructed as a standard human, and takes her place in the society of the *City*.”

Lady Flamingo flushed. “You can’t be suggesting we use the Befitter for cosmetic purposes? That is illegal, Strongarm. You’re asking me to commit a felony. You’re asking me to betray all we stand for!”

Lord Strongarm shrugged, spread his hands and stood. “What the hell, it was worth a try. No hard feelings, huh? I came under pressure from a whole bunch of the guys, and I thought I’d run it up the flagstaff. And maybe some of the guys were hoping to set a precedent, you know, in case one of them wants out some time. It’d be a lonely life in the *City*, being a Jenny and yet not a Jenny, if you get my meaning. Still, I guess you’re right, Flamingo. Sophie Go-983 must take her chances in the real world.”

“I’m pleased to hear you say that, Strongarm.”

After he’d gone Flamingo got herself a stiff drink from the dispenser. God, the day had just begun and she was drinking already. But Strongarm had rattled her. Could he have overheard Tony and her discussing the illegal reconstruction of their illegal ghoulie? No, he’d have pushed harder if he had. But supposing word did come to his ears! What a mess! It was about time Tony reported back.

He entered a few minutes later. “It’s Frank Meta-eight,” he said without preamble. “He’s not at his post, and we found his personal data on his drive, password-protected. So the silly bastard’s turned himself into a ghoulie. Why would he want to do that?”

Matters were becoming all too clear to Lady Flamingo.

“I wonder what the password for his illegal image was,” she said angrily. “Not Sophie, by any chance?”

“As a matter of fact it was. Just six letters. It only took us a few seconds to crack it. How did you know, my Lady?”

“Never mind how I know,” she snarled. “Just go find Meta-eight and bring him here!”

She needed another drink. Her hand was shaking with anger and she’d spilled most of the last one. This time she slopped it all over the dispenser. So that was what all the trouble was about! Star-crossed lovers. Well, there was no room for that kind of thing on this ship. Love! It was all a goddamned myth dreamed up by Populance people. Get a plague on board and love is everything, everybody must screw to maintain numbers. But if all is going well in the *City* they preach celibacy. Love is a myth!

And she could prove it.

The idea, born out of rage and — could it be? — jealousy, slid into her mind like a venomous snake.

Shapecasting. It had its uses.

She called Lord Strongarm of Go.

“Strongarm? I’ve changed my mind. I think we can accommodate your Jenny after all. Bring her to the Befitter as soon as you like.”

Two days later Lady Flamingo of Metamorf was ready. Frank Meta-eight had been located skulking around the Jennie’s Bazaar, posing as a legitimate Jenny and doubtless waiting until Sophie’s debriefing was over and he could quietly

make contact with her. Now he was seated in the afterchamber of the Befitter, no doubt wondering what the hell was going on. Two large Jenny guards stood at the door.

Flamingo watched through the one-way screen, the hairy Lord Strongarm of Go at her side.

“I don’t understand why you’ve brought that guy in,” he said. “Who in hell is he? He’s one of my Jennies, isn’t he? One of the Leonides prototypes. But I don’t recognize him.”

Flamingo said nothing. Pity Strongarm had to be here, but he’d insisted on witnessing the transformation of Sophie. Anyway, it meant the responsibility for an illegal process was shared. She felt like hugging herself as she heard the hum of the Tunnel. Just a few minutes now. Just a few minutes and that stupid bastard Meta-eight would get his comeuppance. She couldn’t wait to see his face when Sophie appeared, changed back.

Sophie, now the small Earth-type human.

And Frank Meta-eight, now the attenuated ghoulie, impossibly lightweight in comparison.

The perfect double switch.

How repulsive they’d find each other! So much for Love.

“Here she comes,” said Strongarm. “Looks good. No problems there. Well...” He stood. “Thanks a lot. I’ve seen all I need to see.”

Flamingo watched alone. She saw the puzzlement on Frank’s long lantern face as the figure slid out of the Tunnel. The belt stopped. Sophie raised her head, looked around and stepped uncertainly to the floor. Flamingo felt a moment of sick envy; this was an exceptionally pretty girl. And she hadn’t been enhanced in any way; the Befitter had been programmed to restore her exactly to her previous appearance. That had salved Flamingo’s conscience somewhat: no cosmetic enhancement.

Her mind wandered....

She, Flamingo, had the means to look as pretty as that girl. She was in charge of the Befitter. She could rewrite the rules just once, for herself. Maybe she would. She might not find love, because there was no such thing, but at least she’d find sex. She could use Sophie’s image. Or she could use any one of the images illegally produced by those sex-mad technicians of hers. She could use that bimbo template Tony produced! Then he’d take notice of her!

But meanwhile she would enjoy this meeting of the ex-lovers.

Frank was staring at Sophie as she stood beside the belt.

“Sophie!” he shouted in amazement. He made to run toward her, and stumbled, and fell full-length on the hard floor. Flamingo chuckled. The poor sap had forgotten he was a ghoulie. He was weak as a kitten in this gravity.

Sophie’s eyes widened as she saw him. He’d picked himself up and was staggering toward her. She stood transfixed.

Now the revulsion, now Flamingo’s triumph.

Sophie tottered forward. The walk became a faltering run. The couple met, embraced, then held each other at arm's length, staring greedily into each other's faces. Their words came faintly to Flamingo through the one-way glass.

"Oh God, Frank, it's been so long."

"But... How can you still love me? Look at me! Why did I do this to myself?"

And Sophie said, "Don't be silly. I don't care how you look. You're still you, my love. Still my Frank."

They kissed. They clung together. Flamingo turned away and left the room.

The lovers were too engrossed to hear her anguished howl.

You can make of it what you like. The *City's* archives make no comment, they just reports the facts. Later, people embroider these facts into legends. Most people — the romantics — say the story proves that Love conquers all, and it's the human being within that matters, not the outward appearance. A few people — the cynics — say that Sophie was shapecast after two years with the ghoulies on Leonides Six and saw Frank's ghoulie physique as perfectly normal. Conversely, Frank hadn't been a ghoulie long enough to become shapecast, and simply saw Sophie as he remembered her.

Whichever.

But this is not the end of the story. There is one small addendum.

The archives record that Lady Flamingo stood alone for a long time in her quarters that evening, thinking, trying to make sense of things. Perhaps considering the evidence of her own eyes and ears. Perhaps pondering on romanticism versus cynicism. Most probably revising her views on life.

Maybe she didn't need to worry about that perfect image Tony had created on his screen, after all. Maybe the real thing was worth a try, suitably packaged.... So she shrugged off her work clothes, kicked them aside as though they were things of no account, and took a long sonic shower.

When she emerged she stood for a moment before the clothing dispenser, before turning slightly pink and pressing unfamiliar keys. The underclothing that emerged from the slot was so scanty and filmy, so unfamiliar that she felt clumsy trying to put it on. Next came an evening gown with a deep neckline exposing some ninety percent of her breasts; after donning it she tugged and adjusted until it looked sophisticated rather than provocative. Then came the cosmetics.

She took some care over these, standing in front of the everyway mirror for a long time after she'd done, assessing the finished product. Surely it wasn't bad? Not bad at all?

Finally she shrugged, and rearranged the neckline so that it was no longer sophisticated.

She nodded in satisfaction.

Then she picked up the visiphone.

"Hi, Tony. How would you like to come up to my quarters for a drink?"

THE PORCUPINE

An unpublished horror story by Michael Coney

I don't write fantasy stories and I don't write horror. Well, not often. This is because I don't have the fantasy mind; my feet have to be rooted firmly to the ground. And as for horror, I don't have a nasty enough imagination and I can't handle the ponderous style that horror often demands. Nevertheless here is a horror story written in the only style I could think of that would handle the serious theme without driving me to suicide. I never tried to market it, in fact I lost it for a year or two. Then one day I thought "didn't I once write a story about a porcupine?" And I searched through an abandoned laptop, and there it was.

This morning a strange beast came lumbering out from under the bushes at the bottom of our yard. It was spaniel-size but very low-slung, and quite friendly of eye. It made a rustling noise.

Mom started screaming.

"What the hell is that?" shouted Dad, staring at the beast, dropping his can of Budweiser and gripping the barbecue fork as a weapon.

"It's a porcupine," I explained.

"I know it's a porcupine, for God's sake. What's a porcupine doing here?"

"It's a wild animal, Dad. They roam free."

Mom stopped screaming long enough to yell, "Get it out of here!" Her face was deathly white. Martini slopped from the glass in her hand.

"For Chrissake!" Dad muttered quietly to me, "This'll be the finish of your mother. Do something about it, Jack, right now, while I deal with this god-damned barbecue. Kill it, if you must. Just get it out of your mother's sight."

In fairness to Dad, who might have appeared unnecessarily bloodthirsty, I should explain that we have to be very protective of Mom. She's only recently come back home after a few months in a place called Dingle Dell. They tell me she suddenly got ill, but they won't specify the disease. They keep things from me, you see, because they think I'm only a child.

But I'm thirteen, for God's sake, and if Mom's been suffering from some kind of woman disease, I'm old enough to be acquainted with the details.

So the family barbecue on a sunny afternoon turned bizarre at the drop of a hat. A minute ago all three of us were happy and laughing; the next the barbecue flared up, demanding Dad's attention at the very moment when a wild animal sauntered out of the shrubbery. But that's the way it is with our family. Happiness is transitory, but memories last forever.

Dad glanced at Mom, then at the blazing burgers, then the porcupine, then me. He wearing a funny apron and had been in the act of pouring beer onto the flames. "What the hell are you waiting for, Jack?" he shouted. "You know how nervous your mother is!"

I took up the long yard rake and advanced on the animal. It's not wise to grapple closely with porcupines. I know what I'm talking about because I read a lot. There's not much else to do in the holidays, with Angie and Podge gone.

"And afterwards," shouted Dad, "You can phone the goddamned SPCA!"

Whatever happened to Angie and Podge, I wonder? They've been away six months now.

In the beginning there was me. Actually, if we must delve into antiquity like this, in the beginning there was Mom and Dad. Thirteen years ago I sprang from their loins and thereafter nothing much happened until I was eleven. Then Angie arrived. Unlike myself, she sprang full-grown and full-dressed.

"Jack, I'd like you to meet your new sister," Mom had said.

"I thought new sisters came smaller," I said suspiciously. "This one's almost my size."

"That's a very good point, Jack," said Dad, "and one day we'll discuss the ramifications. But for the time being just accept what your mother says, there's a good boy, and don't try to be clever."

They were forever putting me down like that. I don't have to try to be clever because I am clever, and I'm able to read them like a book. This sister was an impostor. She was a total stranger they were trying to foist on me, and I found the whole business very sinister. Had my parents been taken over by aliens, possibly? Had this rather plump girl come from a pod?

"Say hello to Angie, Jack," said Mom.

I felt trapped. "Well hello Angie," I boomed in Dad's voice.

Her eyes flashed. They were slightly protruding, like those of Aunt Joan who has a thyroid problem, and just a mite vacant, so flashing couldn't have come easily. "Yeah, Jack," she said.

"Angie's ten," said Dad. "She'll be company for you. It must be lonely for you here."

The insensitivity of my parents never ceases to amaze me. Were they never young themselves? This fattie was a mere infant. Chelsea Wainwright, whom I'd loved for weeks, was all of fourteen. I happen to like older women and I wanted no company but Chelsea's. Not that I ever got it.

That evening Angie enlightened me a little. "I'm out of control," she said proudly, slouched on my bed in her night-attire. "Maybe that's why it took me so long to get adopted. Any smokes around here?"

"My parents don't smoke."

She chuckled indulgently. "What do they do, then?"

"My mother runs the household. My father is the manager of the bank in town."

"I meant for fun."

This took some thinking about. "My mother buys those sandy-looking wax candles they sell at craft fairs." I said at last. "And she collects antique hat pins. I believe her collection is highly-regarded in the field. And my father lights fires in

the yard. He's something of a pyromaniac. And he watches TV. He likes old black-and-white movies."

"Jeez." She cast heavy-browed glances around my room like a caged baboon, taking in the posters, the sporting memorabilia, the piles of magazines, the bookcase full of the classics, the whole of my eclectic personal culture. "Has it come to this?"

It was a bad beginning, but in the weeks that followed Angie worked hard on her image. Rephrasing that, she sucked up to my parents so successfully that she replaced me in the family pecking order, leaving me bottom man on the totem pole, to mix a couple of metaphors.

"Angie needs a special kind of love," said Mom when I complained.

"So do I, Mom."

"You never did before."

This was not answerable so I withdrew from the fray, leaving the field to Angie. She was quick to take advantage. She helped with the dishes, she programmed the VCR to record Dad's late-night movies, she organized Mom's candle and hat pin collections with little labels, she raked leaves and piled them up for Dad to burn, she thanked people for things, she kept her room tidy, she was a disgusting little creep. It would have been pathetic if it hadn't been frightening. Such a personality change indicated a deep-seated and possibly incurable mental disorder. I feared for her sanity.

"Your parents are so nice," she said one day, smiling. That was another thing. She'd taken to smiling.

I shrugged. It was not for me to criticize their tightly-knit little threesome. Angie mentioned to Dad how she'd love a tree-house in the big oak at the bottom of the yard, so she could play housie.

And Dad leaped to obey.

All of which fills in some of the gaps, but has little to do with the current problem presented by the porcupine. Faced with the business end of the rake, it reversed thrust and began to back toward me, slashing its tail to and fro vigorously. The brute was enormous, over three foot long, and when the tail struck the rake's tines the quills flew like javelins.

I snatched the rake away. Some of those quills had come uncomfortably close. As everyone knows, they're barbed and work their way into the flesh, making for the heart. Besides, I rather liked porcupines, and I didn't want to damage this specimen. By now Mom had retreated indoors, still screaming, and Dad had followed her in, so the animal and I were alone and unobserved, free to indulge our fantasies.

It was not beyond the bounds of possibility for a guy of my age to have a pet porcupine.

If I could somehow trap this specimen and tame it, I would have it for company on the long and lonely winter evenings. When I'd gained its confidence I could teach it to walk to heel, maybe perform some simple tricks. This would

stand me in good stead at school. *“There goes Jack Barton with his porcupine. Have you seen the things that animal can do?”*

Instant popularity, for the price of a little patience and understanding.

Under the old oak tree — the one that had held Angie’s tree-house until Dad had destroyed it in a fit of temper six months ago during what I like to think of as our family’s Black Period — there lay a big heap of junk. Most of it was the remains of the tree-house, but its very existence made it a useful place to throw other unwanted stuff. Among this stuff was an antique solid wooden crib that Angie had used when she began to develop fatty breasts and the mothering instinct took its toll. She used to rock her doll in it, and croon to it tunelessly.

I grabbed the crib and upturned it over the porcupine.

You’re probably wondering about the family’s Black Period. In its somber mood it was similar to Picasso’s Blue Period, only worse. Last week, thinking we’d moved into happier times, I asked Mom what had happened to Angie and Podge. Not that I particularly wanted them back, but a bright young fellow like me can’t help but get curious sometimes. I had my own theory about their fate, and it’s nice to have one’s theories confirmed.

“I’ve told you time and time again, I never want to hear Angie’s name spoken in this house,” said Dad, who was unfortunately present.

“Podge, then. Exactly what happened to Podge?”

This innocent question set Mom off, and it was as though the Black Period was at its zenith again. The weeping, the wailing (from Mom), the gnashing of teeth (from Dad). And a quick flash of juvenile temper from myself.

“Why won’t you two ever *tell* me anything?”

The Black Period began maybe nine months after Angie’s arrival. It began deceptively, with Mom and Dad all jolly and laughing and whispering. Nobody told me anything, as usual. By that time Angie was well established and I was a nobody. The time came when I confronted Mom.

“Why are you and Dad always laughing and stuff?”

She stared at me consideringly. “Yes, I think we can give you the good news now. They tell me everything’s going to be fine.”

“Isn’t everything fine already?”

“I can hardly believe it, after all these years of trying. Jack, you’re going to have a little sister. What do you think about that?”

“A real little sister, you mean? Not a fake one like Angie?”

She laughed merrily. “A real little sister of your very own.”

I saw myself dropping another position in the family league table. “Well, she can’t be worse than Angie,” I said despondently.

“Angie’s had a very difficult life, Jack. We must make allowances.”

This was a laugh. From what Angie had told me, she’d had it pretty good at her last home. Drinking and smoking, the very latest sound equipment and CD’s, clandestine nighttime orgies in abandoned buildings, bouts of pleasurable vandalism; I’d have said she’d been living the life of Riley, for a ten-year-old.

So they continued to make allowances for Angie, day after day, until the baby arrived.

Then everything changed.

But more of that in a minute. I could hear Mom still screaming, even through the double thermopane windows Dad installed as a misguided economy measure. I've checked our fuel bills. It'll take us 134 years to recover the cost of those windows in fuel savings, and that's not counting interest. Dad, meanwhile, had run outside again, and was dividing his attention equally between the burgers and Mom.

"It's all right now, Mary!" he yelled. "Jack's got rid of it!" His head whipped around and he leveled his gaze in my direction as one might aim a rifle. "Have you got rid of it?"

"In a way, Dad."

"What? Don't mumble. This is important to your mother!"

"I've neutralized it."

"Neutralized it? What the hell do you mean, neutralized it?" Casting aside his barbecue tools, he came striding across the lawn toward me. His whole demeanor bespoke accusation. "Where exactly is the goddamned thing, huh?"

If I've learned nothing else in my thirteen years — and sometimes I don't think I've learned much else — it's that there's a time for simple honesty, and a time for barefaced lying. This was one of the latter times.

"It's gone, Dad. It shuffled off through the hedge. It's next door, now." Circumstantial detail was called for. "It seemed a bit lame. It had kind of a deformed foot. The SPCA can deal with it. They have people trained in rehabilitating injured animals."

But Dad's attention had wandered. His face had gone pale. "Oh, Jesus," he whispered. "What's that?"

"You mean this?" I had my foot on it, and I could feel movement within. "It's just that old crib Ang. . . the girl that used to be here played with."

"Get rid of it!" He was shaking, in the grip of a powerful emotion. "Get rid of it, for Chrissake! The crib, all this wood and stuff, the whole goddamned lot. Put a match to it — you've always enjoyed a good blaze. And do it now! There's a can of petrol in the shed." He stalked back toward the house, pausing for a moment to call back with quiet menace, "And I mean right now. If your mother caught sight of that crib, it would be Dingle Dell again!"

I had no desire to trigger another Black Period, when Mom's screams had eventually abated to weak groans while the ambulance crunched to a stop on the gravel driveway. Mom hadn't come home for ages, that time.

And it wouldn't be any good asking Dad how the sight of an old crib could cause all that grief. I took my foot off it, and it began to move jerkily toward the wreckage of the tree-house like a lame turtle.

At first Angie had used the crib — donated by an elderly aunt — as a receptacle for the big doll she called Angie, after herself. She'd be forever undress-

ing it, then dressing it up again in the same clothes because she had only one set that fitted. I asked her what the point was.

"She has to be bathed, stupid."

"Why?"

"Ask yourself, Jack. Why does Mom bathe Podge?" This was our private name for the recent squalling arrival.

"But this thing doesn't have natural functions. It's just a doll, don't you see?"

Suddenly it became important to straighten Angie out. She'd been quite depressed since Podge entered our reckoning. "You're letting yourself in for a whole load of trouble if you don't get a grip on these fantasies" I went on. "There are places where they lock people like you away. Get real, Angie. You don't want to go one of those places, do you?"

She muttered something, head down.

"What's that?"

"I said maybe it would be better than this place." Her head was still down but her cheeks were so fat they were still visible from above. I saw a tear trickle down the right-hand one.

"What's wrong with this place? Dad went to a lot of trouble to build you this tree-house."

"I'm not talking about the dumb old tree-house. I'm talking about everything!" She raised her head and began to shout. There was a crazed look in her eyes. It seemed I was too late with my counseling. She'd tipped over the edge. "I'm talking about the big house, and your dad and mom, and you, the whole goddamned lot of you, the cat as well, and most of all I'm talking about that little swine Podge!"

"Podge never did you any harm."

She hesitated, probably wondering if she could trust me with a further revelation, or whether I might use it against her. More quietly she said, "Your dad and mom are too wrapped up in that kid, forever creeping around her. It's unhealthy."

"You mean they don't spend any time with you any more. Well, welcome to the real world, Angie. You'll get used to it. I have."

"I don't wanna get used to it!" She was crying full-blown now, stomping to and fro, the tree-house floor trembling under the repeated hammer-blows of her substantial legs. "I want things to be like they were before! I want to matter to them! But now they've got Podge they don't need me any more. They can ship me out just as easy as they shipped me in!"

Against my better judgment I began to feel quite sorry for her. "The novelty of Podge will wear off," I pointed out. "Give them time."

"They've had enough time," she said, suddenly recovering and shooting me a crafty look. "Now it's my time. Time to take things into my own hands."

"Uh, what do you mean?"

"I mean Podge must go!"

"Go where?"

She stamped her foot. "Does it matter? I don't mean any special place. I mean go from here. Get herself shipped out. Or. . . or die, or something. Babies die all the time."

A creeping horror took hold of me. The look in her eyes spooked me. "Let's not get carried away, Angie, eh?"

"You think I'm gonna do something stupid?"

"It wouldn't be the first time, let's face it. Remember when you murdered your guinea pig?"

Now she looked merely sulky, which was reassuringly normal. "I bathed the dumb old guinea pig. How many times do I have to tell you? It stank, and I bathed it, and it died."

"You held it underwater until it drowned. That's what I call murder. You'd better not try that with Podge." And I'd better warn Mom and Dad, I realized.

"Oh, no." The crafty look was back. "That's too easy for Podge. Too obvious. I was thinking of something much more. . . what's the word?"

"Subtle?"

"That's it. And something so I wouldn't get blamed. Something. . . what's the word?"

"Indetectable?"

"Yeah, that's it."

The porcupine was presenting something of a problem. Until I'd tamed it, it was little better than a wild beast; and right now it was getting angry and making a funny chattering noise. The crib surged forward and was brought up short by the pile of junk. It backed off and tried again. And again. It reminded me of a fair-ground bumper car. And underneath was a furious and well-armed animal.

A lifetime of memories came to my rescue. I remembered Dad catching a wasp by slamming an upturned tumbler over it as it crawled across the table. At the time I'd thought: So you've captured it, but what next? It's going to take a long time to starve. Then my resourceful parent slid a piece of card under the glass and lifted the whole lot up, triumphant. The wasp was now his to dispose of as he saw fit. How he did dispose of it is irrelevant. The point is, I'd benefited by his experience. Probably the only time I ever did.

The corner of a sheet of plywood was protruding from under the planks and junk. I hauled it out. It was bigger than I'd have liked, probably four foot by two, but it would serve the purpose. I placed it on the ground, lifted the corner of the crib a fraction, and slid it under. A spiny paw showed and there was some resistance, but I persevered and soon had the plywood sheet under the crib.

The rest was child's play. Holding the crib in position I rolled the whole lot over so the plywood was on top, then piled a few planks over it all to hold the new lid in position.

The next step would be to build the animal a clandestine hutch in some overgrown corner of the yard. Then training could commence.

"I want to show you something," said Angie one day.

I followed her up the rope ladder into the tree-house. In retrospect it was a few small steps for me, but a giant leap for the family's gathering Black Period. At the time, however, I had no premonitions.

I don't think I've described the tree-house before. It sat maybe ten foot up the old oak, built between two thick boughs emerging from the trunk about forty-five degrees to each other. The floor area was quite small, maybe six by six, and the roof was too low for me to stand although Angie had headroom enough. Construction was of mediocre quality, Dad's initial enthusiasm having become tempered by boredom at a very early stage. A small plastic table stood in the middle of the floor, with a toy tea-set laid out on it. Two bright pink chairs were positioned on opposite sides of the table. In one of them sat Angie (the doll), and in the other sat a large gray donkey called Moke. A few filthy cushions were scattered around, and against one wall lay the crib. Such was the extent of Angie's housie.

Crouching, I followed her ample rump into the interior.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Look in the crib, stupid."

At first I didn't understand what I saw. It seemed to be a small amorphous multicolored humanoid lying naked on top of the blanket. It had rudimentary arms, one yellow, one blue. Its tiny head was a melange of colors with some kind of rough sandy texture mixed in. The body was more substantial, translucent white. The legs, like the arms, were thin and inadequately muscled. There were no external sex organs. I doubt that there were any internal ones either.

"You've melted down Mom's candle collection," I accused her. "You're in big trouble, Angie."

"Look at it!" she yelled angrily. "Don't you see? It's Podge!"

She was hallucinating again. "It's not, you know, Angie. Not really."

"I know it's not really! But it's a . . . a . . ."

"An image, graven from melted candles?"

"Well, yeah."

"What's it for?"

"It's for getting Podge." Her plump face wore an evil smile. "Watch this."

A cardboard box lay beside the crib. Angie opened it. Treasure glittered within. "You've raided Mom's hat pin collection!" I cried, appalled. The pins were all jumbled up, bereft of their labels. First the candles, now the pins. This rated at least a month's grounding.

"I had to, see? Ordinary pins aren't long enough to reach the heart."

The whole thing was becoming too deep for me. Angie squatted on the floor like some pale and vengeful Buddha, pins in hand. Selecting a mercifully short one with a tortoiseshell knob on the end, she pushed it into the humanoid's arm.

Simultaneously there came a babyish scream from outside.

I jerked up, bashing my head on the roof.

“You see?” said Angie.

Recovering my sanity, I peered out of the roughly-cut window. The day was sunny and Mom had put Podge outside in her baby carriage to harden her off. As I watched, Mom came bounding out of the house and snatched Podge up, comforting her. The wails died down.

Angie was removing the pin from the image.

“Coincidence,” I said.

“Shows how little you know, Jack,” said Angie, suddenly looking much older.

Shivering, I crawled out of the tree-house.

In my defense, I must point out that you can't build a porcupine hutch without wood. So obviously I needed to remove and hide a few planks before the big bonfire took place. By the time the ashes were cold, I reasoned, people would have forgotten the tree-house ever existed and I would be able to cut the planks to size and fashion the hutch without interference.

But I had underestimated the persistence of my parents' memory of the Black Period.

Dad was shuffling across the lawn from the house, his left arm around Mom and his right hand grasping the butane lighter normally used for igniting the barbecue. He looked purposeful. Mom was weeping.

“We'll get rid of the memories once and for all,” he was saying, “with one big goddamned bonfire.”

“Are you sure that porcupine's gone?”

“Jack's taken care of it. You don't have to worry about a thing, Mary.” His gaze darted hither and thither, probably making sure the crib was well hidden in the pile. “This is going to be a catharsis, Mary,” he said. “A cauterization.” He was quite excited by the whole idea.

“What, right now?” I asked anxiously.

“No time like the present.” His gaze steadied on the pile. “Wait a minute. Just wait one goddamned minute. What's happened to all the wood? Have you taken some of the wood away, Jack?”

“It's nearly all here, Dad.”

The speed and violence of Dad's eruption spoke of the strain under which he labored. Or so I like to think, but it could just have been a typical tantrum. “Jesus Christ!” he shouted. “Can't you ever do what you're told?” His eyes had suddenly assumed an expression that took me back to Angie's crazed look — and for one fleeting moment I wondered if she had been his real daughter by some doxy, later smuggled into the family under false pretenses. “I distinctly said we'd burn the lot! All of it! That's the whole point, don't you see?”

“Remember what the doctor said about your blood pressure, Paul,” squeaked Mom.

“To hell with the doctor! The doctor doesn't understand the frustrations of living in a house where everyone is conspiring against me! I had this all planned

and now the little swine is trying to sabotage it! It happens every time! Can't anything ever get done right around here?"

He paused to draw breath, and I said quickly, "I was in the process of moving the bonfire over into the corner there, so we don't risk the oak tree catching."

"To hell with the oak tree! So far as the goddamned oak is concerned, it can burn with the rest. It's all part of the same scenario, anyway. Now just bring that wood back, and bring the can of gas from the shed while you're about it!"

"You're going to use gas?" I'd visualized a slow burn, with me removing the crib and porcupine under cover of billowing smoke. "Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

"Nothing like gas for a good blaze. Now do what you're told and stop arguing!"

So began what I now call the Second Black Period. It came only a few months after the First.

Bear with me while I revert to the First.

Following Angie's initial spectacular success with the waxen image, she suffered a series of setbacks. The more hat pins she thrust into the thing, the more Podge seemed to thrive, growing fatter and pinker by the day.

One day during a brief period of household normality I visited the tree-house on my own, to find the pseudo-Podge beginning to crumble under the effects of repeated stabbing. Meanwhile Angie was sulking in her room; Mom was in bed grieving the loss of her candles and hat pins, the whereabouts of which Angie refused to reveal; and Dad was raking leaves with an expression of gloating anticipation of the blaze to come. That's about as normal as we get, in our family.

I visited Angie. "Just give her the hat pins back and explain," I advised. "Play on her sympathy. Stress your loneliness."

"Don't wanna!"

"Mention your difficult early life. Say this was all a childish phase you've grown out of."

"Not gonna!"

"Well, you have grown out of it, haven't you? I mean the wax doll didn't work, did it?"

"I'll get back at them some way."

"Don't even think like that. You can't beat them. I know. I've tried. Stop crying and make your peace with Mom."

"No way! Old bitch."

"Well, what are you going to do, then? You can't lie on your bed for ever."

"I'll think of something."

I gave up and left her muttering and snarling. I never had been able to talk any sense into Angie.

“Go on, Jack. Splash it all over. No need for false economy. We want a good blaze here.” Dad’s thumb was whitening over the button of the butane lighter. He could hardly wait.

“Dad. . . .”

“You’ve missed this lot here.”

“But Dad. . . .”

“Are you defying me again, son? Here, give me that can!” And he snatched it out of my hand, and slopped it all over the planks covering the porcupine and his crib.

Matters were moving to a dreadful conclusion, totally out of my control. Dad laid a trail of gas to where we stood and put down the can. He nodded at Mom, smiling. He brandished the butane lighter. “Stand back,” he said. He squatted down, holding the lighter to his gas trail. “All those terrible old memories are going up in smoke. We’re making a new start.”

I made a grab for the lighter. We overbalanced and I found myself rolling on the ground with him. We seemed to be fighting. “Listen,” I jerked out.

“What the hell?” he was yelling. “That’s enough, Jack! What in God’s name has got into you?” He pinned me to the ground. “You’re crazier than—” His mouth snapped shut. I believe he’d come perilously close to mentioning Angie’s name.

“Just listen a minute. I can explain everything.”

“Make it good, son.”

“Let me up.” We scrambled to our feet. It occurred to me that a picture spoke more than a thousand words, or something like that. I began to pull the planks away from the crib until only the sheet of ply was left.

Mom and Dad drew close, intrigued despite themselves.

“What’s that under there?” said Dad suspiciously. “It isn’t. . . .?”

I flung aside the plywood sheet with a flourish.

I’d thought the sight of the porcupine, jammed in the crib like a spiny little baby, would awaken some kind of parenting instinct in Mom and Dad, particularly since the events of the First Black Period and the disappearance of Podge and Angie. I had a vision of us kneeling before the crib like three wise men, worshipping the wonder of Mother Nature and the gift she had brought us. Dad would help me build the hutch, of course; and Mom would prepare tasty meals for the little fellow. House training would follow as inevitably as night follows day, and in the long winter evenings the porcupine would doze quietly before the living room fire, a friend and companion for us all.

Alas.

Dad uttered a few loud and carelessly-chosen words, but they were drowned in the cacophony of screaming from Mom. She turned away and began to run around the lawn in a curiously random fashion, still screaming. Dad ran after her and tried to get hold of her, but she fought him off. Eventually he succeeded in throwing and pinning her, and shouted to me to call Dingle Dell.

One final journey into the past.

The zenith of the First Black Period came a couple of days after Angie's vague threats of revenge, one sunny afternoon when Dad and I were trying to talk Mom out of bed. She was still grieving over Angie's disobedience.

There came a screaming such as I'd never heard before. As you know I'm no stranger to screaming, but this was something special. It rose to a high whistling pitch that must have alerted every dog for miles around, and quite a few bats. It was more of a squeal than a scream. It was continuous; the squealer having, apparently, inexhaustible lungs. It was only later, on sober reflection, that I realized breath must have been drawn from time to time, and that I didn't notice because my ears were still ringing from the previous squeal.

Mom set up a subsidiary scream, which didn't help. "My baby! My baby!"

She was right. There was a definite Podge-like quality to the sounds. She jumped out of bed, fully recovered, and ran to the open window. The baby carriage sat in the middle of the lawn, in the sunlight. "What's she doing there?" yelled Dad. "I left her in the shade!"

We clattered down the stairs in a clumsy threesome, Mom bringing up the rear, still in her night attire. We rounded the pillar at the foot of the stairs and charged through the kitchen, tightly knit. Dad hauled at the door without success.

"Locked, damn it!" he shouted.

The squealing from outside had taken on a bubbling quality.

We wheeled around as one, and ran for the front door, Mom now in the lead. She jerked at the doorknob, whimpering. "Woe, woe, woe," she seemed to be crying.

Dad shoved her aside and rattled the doorknob himself without success. We were locked in. For the first time it occurred to me that Angie was at the bottom of this. "Open a window, Dad!" I said.

He chose the big kitchen window. As he flung it open the squealing stopped. We scrambled out and ran across the grass.

I reached the baby carriage first and looked inside. Podge wasn't there. Angie had stolen her. I didn't want to think any more. I couldn't help observing what was in the baby carriage — but I wasn't going to think.

I also observed Mom and Dad peering into the baby carriage. I heard Mom cry, "What's happened to her? What the hell's this thing in here? My God, where is she?" I saw Dad's head snap around as he looked up at the tree-house. I saw Angie's face appear at the window up there. She was smiling.

"Jesus Christ," muttered Dad, running for the oak tree, followed by Mom. Things up in the tree-house had gone terribly quiet. They climbed the rope ladder clumsily and crawled inside. Then I heard screaming again but this time it was Mom. I began to climb the ladder myself but the tree-house was too full of people for me to get inside.

Dad's face swung toward me, all contorted.

"Out!" he snapped.

I climbed down to the grass and walked slowly towards the house, trying to think, but my mind seemed frozen. I made myself look into the baby carriage again. No Podge. Instead the wax image lay there, flaking from all the stabbing.

But there were no hat pins in it now.

Like I said, they keep things from me because they think I'm only a child. But I can put two and two together with the best of them, and as the Dingle Dell van trundles away over the lumpy lawn I'm thinking: Dad's not going to accept the porcupine. The poor little guy must have his freedom. But the crib's all wedged in the lumber and I can't tip it up and I'm jerking and jerking at it and the porcupine's looking up at me and Dad's sprinting toward me across the lawn snatching up the butane lighter as he comes and something funny is happening in my head and I can't seem to think straight any more....