Selections from FRAGILE THINGS

VOLUME 5

Neil Gaiman

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ANANSI BOYS*

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For Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison,
and the late Robert Sheckley,
masters of the craft

Contents

IN THE END

In the end, the Lord gave Mankind the world. All the world was Man's, save for one garden. *This is my garden,* said the Lord, *and here you shall not enter.*

There was a man and a woman who came to the garden, and their names were Earth and Breath.

They had with them a small fruit which the Man carried, and when they arrived at the gate to the garden, the Man gave the fruit to the Woman, and the Woman gave the fruit to the Serpent with the flaming sword who guarded the Eastern Gate.

And the Serpent took the fruit and

placed it upon a tree in the center of the garden.

Then Earth and Breath knew their clothedness, and removed their garments, one by one, until they were naked; and when the Lord walked through the garden he saw the man and the woman, who no longer knew good from evil, but were satisfied, and He saw it was good.

Then the Lord opened the gates and gave Mankind the garden, and the Serpent raised up, and it walked away proudly on four strong legs; and where it went none but the Lord can say.

And after that there was nothing but silence in the Garden, save for the occasional sound of the man taking away its name from another animal.

GOLIATH

I suppose I could claim that I had always suspected that the world was a cheap and shoddy sham, a bad cover for something deeper and weirder and infinitely more strange, and that, in some way, I already knew the truth. But I think that's just how the world has always been. And even now that I know the truth—as you will, my love, if you're reading this—the world still seems cheap and shoddy. Different world, different shoddy, but that's how it feels.

They say, *Here's the truth,* and I say, *Is that all there is?* And they say, *Kind of.*

Pretty much. As far as we know.

So. It was 1977, and the nearest I had come to computers was I'd recently bought a big, expensive calculator, and then I'd lost the manual that came with it, so I didn't know what it did anymore. I'd add, subtract, multiply, and divide, and was grateful I had no need to cos, sine, or find tangents or graph functions or whatever else the gizmo did, because, having recently been turned down by the RAF, I was working as a bookkeeper for a small discount carpet warehouse in Edgware, in north London, near the top of the Northern Line. I pretended that it didn't hurt whenever I'd see a plane overhead, that I didn't care that there was a world my size denied me. I just wrote down the numbers in a big double-entry

book. I was sitting at the table at the back of the warehouse that served me as a desk when the world began to melt and drip away.

Honest. It was like the walls and the ceiling and the rolls of carpet and the *News of the World* topless calendar were all made of wax, and they started to ooze and run, to flow together and to drip. I could see the houses and the sky and the clouds and the road behind them, and then *that* dripped and flowed away, and behind it all was blackness.

I was standing in the puddle of the world, a weird, brightly colored thing that oozed and brimmed and didn't cover the tops of my brown leather shoes. (I have feet like shoeboxes. Boots have to be specially made for me. Costs me a

fortune.) The puddle cast a weird light upward.

In fiction, I think I would have refused to believe it was happening, would've wondered if I'd been drugged or if I was dreaming. In reality, hell, I was there and it was real, so I stared up into the darkness, and then, when nothing more happened, I began to walk, splashing through the liquid world, calling out, seeing if anyone was about.

Something flickered in front of me.

"Hey fella," said a voice. The accent was American, although the intonation was odd.

"Hello," I said.

The flickering continued for a few moments, and then resolved itself into a smartly dressed man in thick horn-rimmed

spectacles.

"You're a pretty big guy," he said. "You know that?"

Of course I knew that. I was nineteen years old and even then I was close to seven feet tall. I have fingers like bananas. I scare children. I'm unlikely to see my fortieth birthday: people like me die young.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"Enemy missile took out a central processing unit," he said. "Two hundred thousand people, hooked up in parallel, blown to dead meat. We've got a mirror going of course, and we'll have it all up and running again in next to no time. You're just free-floating here for a couple of nanoseconds, while we get London

processing once more."

"Are you God?" I asked. Nothing he had said had made any sense to me.

"Yes. No. Not really," he said. "Not as you mean it, anyway."

And then the world lurched and I found myself coming to work again that morning, poured myself a cup of tea, had the longest, strangest bout of *déjà vu* I've ever had. Twenty minutes, where I knew everything that anyone was going to do or say. And then it went, and time passed properly once more, every second following every other second just like they're meant to.

And the hours passed, and the days, and the years.

I lost my job in the carpet company and got a new job bookkeeping for a company

that sold business machines. I got married to a girl called Sandra I met at the swimming baths and we had a couple of kids, both normal sized, and I thought I had the sort of marriage that could survive anything, but I hadn't, so she went away and she took the kiddies with her. I was in my late twenties, and it was 1986, and I got a job in a little shop on Tottenham Court Road selling computers, and I turned out to be good at it.

I liked computers.

I liked the way they worked. It was an exciting time. I remember our first shipment of ATs, some of them with 40-megabyte hard drives…. Well, I was impressed easily back then.

I still lived in Edgware, commuted to work on the Northern Line. I was on the

tube one evening, going home—we'd just gone through Euston and half the passengers had got off—and I was looking at the other people in the carriage over the top of the *Evening Standard* and wondering who they were, who they really were, inside: the thin, black girl writing earnestly in her notebook, the little old lady with the green velvet hat on, the girl with the dog, the bearded man with the turban….

The tube stopped in the tunnel.

That was what I thought happened, anyway: I thought the tube had stopped. Everything went very quiet.

And then we went through Euston, and half the passengers got off.

And then we went through Euston, and half the passengers got off. And I was

looking at the other passengers and wondering who they really were inside when the train stopped in the tunnel, and everything went very quiet.

And then everything lurched so hard I thought we'd been hit by another train.

And then we went through Euston, and half the passengers got off, and then the train stopped in the tunnel, and then everything went—

(*Normal service will be resumed as possible,* whispered a voice in the back of my head.)

And this time as the train slowed and began to approach Euston I wondered if I was going crazy: I felt like I was jerking back and forth on a video loop. I knew it was happening, but there was nothing I could do to change anything, nothing I

could do to break out of it.

The black girl sitting next to me passed me a note. ARE WE DEAD? it said.

I shrugged. I didn't know. It seemed as good an explanation as any.

Slowly, everything faded to white.

There was no ground beneath my feet, nothing above me, no sense of distance, no sense of time. I was in a white place. And I was not alone.

The man wore thick horn-rimmed spectacles, and a suit that looked like it might have been an Armani. "You again?" he said. "The big guy. I just spoke to you."

"I don't think so," I said.

"Half an hour ago. When the missiles hit."

"In the carpet factory? That was years ago. Half a lifetime."

“About thirty-seven minutes back. We’ve been running in an accelerated mode since then, trying to patch and cover, while we’ve been processing potential solutions.”

“Who sent the missiles?” I asked. “The U.S.S.R.? The Iranians?”

“Aliens,” he said.

“You’re kidding?”

“Not as far as we can tell. We’ve been sending out seed probes for a couple of hundred years now. Looks like something has followed one back. We learned about it when the first missiles landed. It’s taken us a good twenty minutes to get a retaliatory plan up and running. That’s why we’ve been processing in overdrive. Did it seem like the last decade went pretty fast?”

“Yeah. I suppose.”

“That’s why. We ran it through pretty fast, trying to maintain a common reality while coprocessing.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“We’re going to counterattack. We’re going to take them out. I’m afraid it will take a while: we don’t have the machinery yet. We have to build it.”

The white was fading now, fading into dark pinks and dull reds. I opened my eyes. For the first time. I choked on it. It was too much to take in.

So. Sharp the world and tangled-tubed and strange and dark and somewhere beyond belief. It made no sense. Nothing made sense. It was real, and it was a nightmare. It lasted for thirty seconds, and each cold second felt like a tiny forever.

And then we went through Euston, and half the passengers got off….

I started talking to the black girl with the notebook. Her name was Susan. Several weeks later she moved in with me.

Time rumbled and rolled. I suppose I was becoming sensitive to it. Maybe I knew what I was looking for—knew there *was* something to look for, even if I didn't know what it was.

I made the mistake of telling Susan some of what I believed one night—about how none of this was real. About how we were really just hanging there, plugged and wired, central processing units or just cheap memory chips for some computer the size of the world, being fed a consensual hallucination to keep us happy, to allow us to communicate and dream

using the tiny fraction of our brains that weren't being used by them—whoever *they* were—to crunch numbers and store information.

"We're memory," I told her. "That's what we are. Memory."

"You don't really believe this stuff," she told me, and her voice was trembling. "It's a story."

When we made love, she always wanted me to be rough with her, but I never dared. I didn't know my own strength, and I'm so clumsy. I didn't want to hurt her.

I never wanted to hurt her, so I stopped telling her my ideas, tried to kiss it better, to pretend it had all been a joke, just not the funny kind….

It didn't matter. She moved out the following weekend.

I missed her, deeply, painfully. But life goes on.

The moments of déjà vu were coming more frequently now. Moments would stutter and hiccup and falter and repeat. Sometimes whole mornings would repeat. Once I lost a day. Time seemed to be breaking down entirely.

And then I woke up one morning and it was 1975 again, and I was sixteen, and after a day of hell at school I was walking out of school, into the RAF recruiting office next to the kebab house in Chapel Road.

"You're a big lad," said the recruiting officer. I thought he was American at first, but he said he was Canadian. He wore big horn-rimmed glasses.

"Yes," I said.

“And you want to fly?”

“More than anything.” It seemed like I half-remembered a world in which I’d forgotten that I wanted to fly planes, which seemed as strange to me as forgetting my own name.

“Well,” said the horn-rimmed man, “we’re going to have to bend a few rules. But we’ll have you up in the air in no time.” And he meant it, too.

The next few years passed really fast. It seemed like I spent all of them in planes of different kinds, cramped into tiny cockpits, in seats I barely fitted, flicking switches too small for my fingers.

I got Secret clearance, then I got Noble clearance, which leaves Secret clearance in the shade, and then I got Graceful clearance, which the Prime Minister

himself doesn't have, by which time I was piloting flying saucers and other craft that moved with no visible means of support.

I started dating a girl called Sandra, and then we got married, because if we married we got to move into married quarters, which was a nice little semi-detached house near Dartmoor. We never had any children: I had been warned that it was possible I might have been exposed to enough radiation to fry my gonads, and it seemed sensible not to try for kids, under the circumstances: didn't want to breed monsters.

It was 1985 when the man with horn-rimmed spectacles walked into my house.

My wife was at her mother's that week. Things had got a bit tense, and she'd moved out to buy herself some "breathing

room." She said I was getting on her nerves. But if I was getting on anyone's nerves, I think they must have been my own. It seemed like I knew what was going to happen all the time. Not just me: it seemed like everyone knew what was going to happen. Like we were sleepwalking through our lives for the tenth or the twentieth or the hundredth time.

I wanted to tell Sandra, but somehow I knew better, knew I'd lose her if I opened my mouth. Still, I seemed to be losing her anyway. So I was sitting in the lounge watching *The Tube* on Channel Four and drinking a mug of tea, and feeling sorry for myself.

The man with the horn-rimmed specs walked into my house like he owned the

place. He checked his watch.

"Right," he said. "Time to go. You'll be piloting something pretty close to a PL-47."

Even people with Graceful clearance weren't meant to know about PL-47s. I'd flown a prototype a dozen times. Looked like a teacup, flew like something from *Star Wars*.

"Shouldn't I leave a note for Sandra?" I asked.

"No," he said, flatly. "Now, sit down on the floor and breathe deeply and regularly. In, out, in, out."

It never occurred to me to argue with him, or to disobey. I sat down on the floor, and I began to breathe, slowly, in and out and out and in and…

In.

Out.

In.

A wrenching. The worst pain I've ever felt. I was choking.

In.

Out.

I was screaming, but I could hear my voice and I wasn't screaming. All I could hear was a low bubbling moan.

In.

Out.

It was like being born. It wasn't comfortable, or pleasant. It was the breathing carried me through it, through all the pain and the darkness and the bubbling in my lungs. I opened my eyes. I was lying on a metal disk about eight feet across. I was naked, wet, and surrounded by a sprawl of cables. They were retracting,

moving away from me, like scared worms or nervous brightly colored snakes.

I looked down at my body. No body hair, no scars, no wrinkles. I wondered how old I was, in real terms. Eighteen? Twenty? I couldn't tell.

There was a glass screen set into the floor of the metal disk. It flickered and came to life. I was staring at the man in the horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Do you remember?" he asked. "You should be able to access most of your memory for the moment."

"I think so," I told him.

"You'll be in a PL-47," he said. "We've just finished building it. Pretty much had to go back to first principles, come forward. Modify some factories to construct it. We'll have another batch of

them finished by tomorrow. Right now we've only got one."

"So if this doesn't work, you've got replacements for me."

"If we survive that long," he said. "Another missile bombardment started about fifteen minutes ago. Took out most of Australia. We project that it's still a prelude to the real bombing."

"What are they dropping? Nuclear weapons?"

"Rocks."

"Rocks?"

"Uh-huh. Rocks. Asteroids. Big ones. We think that tomorrow, unless we surrender, they may drop the moon on us."

"You're joking."

"Wish I was." The screen went dull.

The metal disk I was riding had been

navigating its way through a tangle of cables and a world of sleeping naked people. It had slipped over sharp microchip towers and softly glowing silicone spires.

The PL-47 was waiting for me at the top of a metal mountain. Tiny metal crabs scuttled across it, polishing and checking every last rivet and stud.

I walked inside on tree trunk legs that still trembled and shook from lack of use. I sat down in the pilot's chair and was thrilled to realize that it had been built for me. It fitted. I strapped myself down. My hands began to go through warm-up sequence. Cables crept over my arms. I felt something plugging into the base of my spine, something else moving in and connecting at the top of my neck.

My perception of the ship expanded radically. I had it in 360 degrees, above, below. I was the ship, while at the same time, I was sitting in the cabin, activating the launch codes.

"Good luck," said the horn-rimmed man on a tiny screen to my left.

"Thank you. Can I ask one last question?"

"I don't see why not."

"Why me?"

"Well," he said, "the short answer is that you were designed to do this. We've improved a little on the basic human design in your case. You're bigger. You're much faster. You have improved processing speeds and reaction times."

"I'm not faster. I'm big, but I'm clumsy."

“Not in real life,” he said. “That’s just in the world.”

And I took off.

I never saw the aliens, if there were any aliens, but I saw their ship. It looked like fungus or seaweed: the whole thing was organic, an enormous glimmering thing, orbiting the moon. It looked like something you’d see growing on a rotting log, half-submerged under the sea. It was the size of Tasmania.

Two-hundred mile-long sticky tendrils were dragging asteroids of various sizes behind them. It reminded me a little of the trailing tendrils of a Portuguese Man O’ War, that strange compound sea creature: four inseparable organisms that dream they are one.

They started throwing rocks at me as I

got a couple of hundred thousand miles away.

My fingers were activating the missile bay, aiming at a floating nucleus, while I wondered what I was doing. I wasn't saving the world I knew. That world was imaginary: a sequence of ones and zeroes. If I was saving anything, I was saving a nightmare….

But if the nightmare died, the dream was dead, too.

There was a girl named Susan. I remembered her from a ghost life long gone. I wondered if she was still alive. (Had it been a couple of hours ago? Or a couple of lifetimes?) I supposed she was dangling hairless from cables somewhere, with no memory of a miserable, paranoid giant.

I was so close I could see the ripples of the creature's skin. The rocks were getting smaller and more accurate. I dodged and wove and skimmed to avoid them. Part of me was just admiring the economy of the thing: no expensive explosives to build and buy, no lasers, no nukes. Just good old kinetic energy: big rocks.

If one of those things had hit the ship I would have been dead. Simple as that.

The only way to avoid them was to outrun them. So I kept running.

The nucleus was staring at me. It was an eye of some kind. I was certain of it.

I was less than a hundred yards away from the nucleus when I let the payload go. Then I ran.

I wasn't quite out of range when the thing imploded. It was like fireworks—

beautiful in a ghastly sort of way. And then there was nothing but a faint trace of glitter and dust….

"I did it!" I screamed. "I did it! I fucking well did it!"

The screen flickered. Horn-rimmed spectacles were staring at me. There was no real face behind them anymore. Just a l o o s e approximation of concern and interest, like a blurred cartoon. "You did it," he agreed.

"Now, where do I bring this thing down?" I asked.

There was a hesitation, then, "You don't. We didn't design it to return. It was a redundancy we had no need for. Too costly, in terms of resources."

"So what do I do? I just saved the Earth. And now I suffocate out here?"

He nodded. “That’s pretty much it. Yes.”

The lights began to dim. One by one, the controls were going out. I lost my 360-degree perception of the ship. It was just me, strapped to a chair in the middle of nowhere, inside a flying teacup.

“How long do I have?”

“We’re closing down all your systems, but you’ve got a couple of hours, at least. We’re not going to evacuate the remaining air. That would be inhuman.”

“You know, in the world I came from, they would have given me a medal.”

“Obviously, we’re grateful.”

“So you can’t come up with any more tangible way to express your gratitude?”

“Not really. You’re a disposable part. A unit. We can’t mourn you any more than a

wasps' nest mourns the death of a single wasp. It's not sensible and it's not viable to bring you back."

"And you don't want this kind of firepower coming back toward the Earth, where it could potentially be used against you?"

"As you say."

And then the screen went dark, with not so much as a good-bye. *Do not adjust your set,* I thought. *Reality is at fault.*

You become very aware of your breathing, when you only have a couple of hours of air remaining. In. Hold. Out. Hold. In. Hold. Out. Hold….

I sat there strapped to my seat in the half-dark, and I waited, and I thought. Then I said, "Hello? Is anybody there?"

A beat. The screen flickered with

patterns. “Yes?”

“I have a request. Listen. You—you people, machines, whatever you are—you owe me one. Right? I mean I saved all your lives.”

“Continue.”

“I’ve got a couple of hours left. Yes?”

“About fifty-seven minutes.”

“Can you plug me back into the…the real world. The other world. The one I came from?”

“Mm? I don’t know. I’ll see.” Dark screen once more.

I sat and breathed, in and out, in and out, while I waited. I felt very peaceful. If it wasn’t for having less than an hour to live, I’d have felt just great.

The screen glowed. There was no picture, no pattern, no nothing. Just a

gentle glow. And a voice, half in my head, half out of it, said, "You got a deal."

There was a sharp pain at the base of my skull. Then blackness, for several minutes.

Then this.

That was fifteen years ago: 1984. I went back into computers. I own my computer store on the Tottenham Court Road. And now, as we head toward the new millennium, I'm writing this down. This time around, I married Susan. It took me a couple of months to find her. We have a son.

I'm nearly forty. People of my kind don't live much longer than that, on the whole. Our hearts stop. When you read this, I'll be dead. You'll know that I'm dead. You'll have seen a coffin big

enough for two men dropped into a hole.

But know this, Susan, my sweet: my true coffin is orbiting the moon. It looks like a flying teacup. They gave me back the world, and you, for a little while. Last time I told you, or someone like you, the truth, or what I knew of it, you walked out on me. And maybe that wasn't you, and I wasn't me, but I don't dare risk it again. So I'm going to write this down, and you'll be given it with the rest of my papers when I'm gone. Good-bye.

They may be heartless, unfeeling, computerized bastards, leeching off the minds of what's left of humanity. But I can't help feeling grateful to them.

I'll die soon. But the last twenty minutes have been the best years of my life.

PAGES FROM A JOURNAL FOUND IN A SHOEBOX LEFT IN A GREYHOUND BUS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN TULSA, OKLAHOMA, AND LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Monday the 28th

I guess I've been following Scarlet for a long time now. Yesterday I was in Las Vegas. Walking across the parking lot of a casino, I found a postcard. There was a

word written on it in crimson lipstick. One word: *Remember*. On the other side of the postcard was a highway in Montana.

I don't remember what it is I'm meant to remember. I'm on the road now, driving north.

Tuesday the 29th

I'm in Montana, or maybe Nebraska. I'm writing this in a motel. There's a wind gusting outside my room, and I drink black motel coffee, just like I'll drink it tomorrow night and the night after that. In a small-town diner today I heard someone say her name. "Scarlet's on the road," said the man. He was a traffic cop, and he changed the subject when I got close and listened.

He was talking about a head-on collision. The broken glass glittered on the road like diamonds. He called me "Ma'am," politely.

Wednesday the 30th

"It's not the work that gets to you so bad," said the woman. "It's the way that people stare." She was shivering. It was a cold night and she wasn't dressed for it.

"I'm looking for Scarlet," I told her.

She squeezed my hand with hers, then she touched my cheek, so gently. "Keep looking, hon," she said. "You'll find her when you're ready." Then she sashayed on down the street.

I wasn't in a small town any longer. Maybe I was in Saint Louis. How can you tell if you're in Saint Louis? I looked for

some kind of arch, something linking East and West, but if it was there I missed it.

Later, I crossed a river.

Thursday the 31st

There were blueberries growing wild by the side of the road. A red thread was caught in the bushes. I'm scared that I'm looking for something that does not exist anymore. Maybe it never did.

I spoke to a woman I used to love today, in a café in the desert. She's a waitress there, a long time ago.

"I thought I was your destination," she told me. "Looks like I was just another stop on the line."

I couldn't say anything to make it better. She couldn't hear me. I should have asked if she knew where Scarlet was.

Friday the 32nd

I dreamed of Scarlet last night. She was huge and wild, and she was hunting for me. In my dream, I knew what she looked like. When I woke I was in a pickup truck parked by the side of the road. There was a man shining a flashlight in the window at me. He called me “Sir” and asked me for ID.

I told him who I thought I was and who I was looking for. He just laughed and walked away, shaking his head. He was humming a song I didn’t know. I drove the pickup south, into the morning. Sometimes I fear this is becoming an obsession. She’s walking. I’m driving. Why is she always so far ahead of me?

Saturday the 1st

I found a shoebox that I keep things in. In a Jacksonville McDonald's I ate a quarter pounder with cheese and a chocolate milkshake, and I spread everything I keep in the shoebox out on the table in front of me: the red thread from the blueberry bush; the postcard; a Polaroid photograph I found in some fennel-blown wasteland beside Sunset Boulevard—it shows two girls whispering secrets, their faces blurred; an audio cassette; some golden glitter in a tiny bottle I was given in Washington, D.C.; pages I've torn from books and magazines. A casino chip. This journal.

"When you die," says a dark-haired woman at the next table, "they can make you into diamonds now. It's scientific. That's how I want to be remembered. I

want to shine."

Sunday the 2nd

The paths that ghosts follow are written on the land in old words. Ghosts don't take the interstate. They walk. Is that what I'm following here? Sometimes it seems like I'm looking out through her eyes. Sometimes it feels like she's looking out through mine.

I'm in Wilmington, North Carolina. I write this on an empty beach, while the sunlight glitters on the sea, and I feel so alone.

We make it up as we go along. Don't we?

Monday the 3rd

I was in Baltimore, standing on a

sidewalk in the light fall rain, wondering where I was going. I think I saw Scarlet in a car, coming toward me. She was a passenger. I could not see her face, but her hair was red. The woman who drove the car, an elderly pickup truck, was fat and happy, and her hair was long and black. Her skin was dark.

I slept that night in the house of a man I did not know. When I woke, he said, "She's in Boston."

"Who?"

"The one you're looking for."

I asked how he knew, but he wouldn't talk to me. After a while he asked me to leave, and, soon enough, I did. I want to go home. If I knew where it was, I would. Instead I hit the road.

Tuesday the 4th

Passing Newark at midday, I could see the tip of New York, already smudged dark by dust in the air, now scumbled into night by a thunderstorm. It could have been the end of the world.

I think the world will end in black-and-white, like an old movie. (Hair as black as coal, sugar, skin as white as snow.) Maybe as long as we have colors we can keep going. (Lips as red as blood, I keep reminding myself.)

I made Boston in the early evening. I find myself looking for her in mirrors and reflections. Some days I remember when the white people came to this land, and when the black people stumbled ashore in chains. I remember when the red people walked to this land, when the land was

younger.

I remember when the land was alone.

"How can you sell your mother?" That was what the first people said, when asked to sell the land they walked upon.

Wednesday the 5th

She spoke to me last night. I'm certain it was her. I passed a pay phone on the street in Metairie, LA. It rang, I picked up the handset.

"Are you okay?" said a voice.

"Who is this?" I asked. "Maybe you have a wrong number."

"Maybe I do," she said. "But are you okay?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Know that you are loved," she said. And I knew that it had to be her. I wanted

to tell her that I loved her too, but by then she'd already put down the phone. If it was her. She was only there for a moment. Maybe it was a wrong number, but I don't think so.

I'm so close now. I buy a postcard from a homeless guy on the sidewalk with a blanket of stuff, and I write *Remember* on it, in lipstick, so now I won't ever forget, but the wind comes up and carries it away, and just for now I guess I'm going to keep on walking.

HOW TO TALK TO GIRLS AT PARTIES

“Come on,” said Vic. “It’ll be great.”

“No, it won’t,” I said, although I’d lost this fight hours ago, and I knew it.

“It’ll be brilliant,” said Vic, for the hundredth time. “Girls! Girls! Girls!” He grinned with white teeth.

We both attended an all-boys’ school in south London. While it would be a lie to say that we had no experience with girls—Vic seemed to have had many girlfriends, while I had kissed three of my sister’s friends—it would, I think, be perfectly true to say that we both chiefly

spoke to, interacted with, and only truly understood, other boys. Well, I did, anyway. It's hard to speak for someone else, and I've not seen Vic for thirty years. I'm not sure that I would know what to say to him now if I did.

We were walking the backstreets that used to twine in a grimy maze behind East Croydon station—a friend had told Vic about a party, and Vic was determined to go whether I liked it or not, and I didn't. But my parents were away that week at a conference, and I was Vic's guest at his house, so I was trailing along beside him.

"It'll be the same as it always is," I said. "After an hour you'll be off somewhere snogging the prettiest girl at the party, and I'll be in the kitchen listening to somebody's mum going on

about politics or poetry or something."

"You just have to *talk* to them," he said. "I think it's probably that road at the end here." He gestured cheerfully, swinging the bag with the bottle in it.

"Don't you know?"

"Alison gave me directions and I wrote them on a bit of paper, but I left it on the hall table. S'okay. I can find it."

"How?" Hope welled slowly up inside me.

"We walk down the road," he said, as if speaking to an idiot child. "And we look for the party. Easy."

I looked, but saw no party: just narrow houses with rusting cars or bikes in their concreted front gardens; and the dusty glass fronts of newsagents, which smelled of alien spices and sold everything from

birthday cards and secondhand comics to the kind of magazines that were so pornographic that they were sold already sealed in plastic bags. I had been there when Vic had slipped one of those magazines beneath his sweater, but the owner caught him on the pavement outside and made him give it back.

We reached the end of the road and turned into a narrow street of terraced houses. Everything looked very still and empty in the Summer's evening. "It's all right for you," I said. "They fancy you. You don't actually *have* to talk to them." It was true: one urchin grin from Vic and he could have his pick of the room.

"Nah. S'not like that. You've just got to talk."

The times I had kissed my sister's

friends I had not spoken to them. They had been around while my sister was off doing something elsewhere, and they had drifted into my orbit, and so I had kissed them. I do not remember any talking. I did not know what to say to girls, and I told him so.

"They're just girls," said Vic. "They don't come from another planet."

As we followed the curve of the road around, my hopes that the party would prove unfindable began to fade: a low pulsing noise, music muffled by walls and doors, could be heard from a house up ahead. It was eight in the evening, not that early if you aren't yet sixteen, and we weren't. Not quite.

I had parents who liked to know where I was, but I don't think Vic's parents cared

that much. He was the youngest of five boys. That in itself seemed magical to me: I merely had two sisters, both younger than I was, and I felt both unique and lonely. I had wanted a brother as far back as I could remember. When I turned thirteen, I stopped wishing on falling stars or first stars, but back when I did, a brother was what I had wished for.

We went up the garden path, crazy paving leading us past a hedge and a solitary rosebush to a pebble-dashed facade. We rang the doorbell, and the door was opened by a girl. I could not have told you how old she was, which was one of the things about girls I had begun to hate: when you start out as kids you're just boys and girls, going through time at the same speed, and you're all

five, or seven, or eleven, together. And then one day there's a lurch and the girls just sort of sprint off into the future ahead of you, and they know all about everything, and they have periods and breasts and makeup and God-only-knew-what-else—for I certainly didn't. The diagrams in biology textbooks were no substitute for being, in a very real sense, young adults. And the girls of our age were.

Vic and I weren't young adults, and I was beginning to suspect that even when I started needing to shave every day, instead of once every couple of weeks, I would still be way behind.

The girl said, "Hello?"

Vic said, "We're friends of Alison's." We had met Alison, all freckles and

orange hair and a wicked smile, in Hamburg, on a German exchange. The exchange organizers had sent some girls with us, from a local girls' school, to balance the sexes. The girls, our age, more or less, were raucous and funny, and had more or less adult boyfriends with cars and jobs and motorbikes and—in the case of one girl with crooked teeth and a raccoon coat, who spoke to me about it sadly at the end of a party in Hamburg, in, of course, the kitchen—a wife and kids.

"She isn't here," said the girl at the door. "No Alison."

"Not to worry," said Vic, with an easy grin. "I'm Vic. This is Enn." A beat, and then the girl smiled back at him. Vic had a bottle of white wine in a plastic bag, removed from his parents' kitchen cabinet.

“Where should I put this, then?”

She stood out of the way, letting us enter. “There’s a kitchen in the back,” she said. “Put it on the table there, with the other bottles.” She had golden, wavy hair, and she was very beautiful. The hall was dim in the twilight, but I could see that she was beautiful.

“What’s your name, then?” said Vic.

She told him it was Stella, and he grinned his crooked white grin and told her that that had to be the prettiest name he had ever heard. Smooth bastard. And what was worse was that he said it like he meant it.

Vic headed back to drop off the wine in the kitchen, and I looked into the front room, where the music was coming from. There were people dancing in there. Stella

walked in, and she started to dance, swaying to the music all alone, and I watched her.

This was during the early days of punk. On our own record players we would play the Adverts and the Jam, the Stranglers and the Clash and the Sex Pistols. At other people's parties you'd hear ELO or 10cc or even Roxy Music. Maybe some Bowie, if you were lucky. During the German exchange, the only LP that we had all been able to agree on was Neil Young's *Harvest,* and his song "Heart of Gold" had threaded through the trip like a refrain: *I crossed the ocean for a heart of gold*....

The music playing in that front room wasn't anything I recognized. It sounded a bit like a German electronic pop group

called Kraftwerk, and a bit like an LP I'd been given for my last birthday, of strange sounds made by the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The music had a beat, though, and the half-dozen girls in that room were moving gently to it, although I only looked at Stella. She shone.

Vic pushed past me, into the room. He was holding a can of lager. "There's booze back in the kitchen," he told me. He wandered over to Stella and he began to talk to her. I couldn't hear what they were saying over the music, but I knew that there was no room for me in that conversation.

I didn't like beer, not back then. I went off to see if there was something I wanted to drink. On the kitchen table stood a large bottle of Coca-Cola, and I poured myself

a plastic tumblerful, and I didn't dare say anything to the pair of girls who were talking in the underlit kitchen. They were animated and utterly lovely. Each of them had very black skin and glossy hair and movie star clothes, and their accents were foreign, and each of them was out of my league.

I wandered, Coke in hand.

The house was deeper than it looked, larger and more complex than the two-up two-down model I had imagined. The rooms were underlit—I doubt there was a bulb of more than 40 watts in the building—and each room I went into was inhabited: in my memory, inhabited only by girls. I did not go upstairs.

A girl was the only occupant of the conservatory. Her hair was so fair it was

white, and long, and straight, and she sat at the glass-topped table, her hands clasped together, staring at the garden outside, and the gathering dusk. She seemed wistful.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" I asked, gesturing with my cup. She shook her head, and then followed it up with a shrug, to indicate that it was all the same to her. I sat down.

Vic walked past the conservatory door. He was talking to Stella, but he looked in at me, sitting at the table, wrapped in shyness and awkwardness, and he opened and closed his hand in a parody of a speaking mouth. *Talk.* Right.

"Are you from around here?" I asked the girl.

She shook her head. She wore a low-cut

silvery top, and I tried not to stare at the swell of her breasts.

I said, "What's your name? I'm Enn."

"Wain's Wain," she said, or something that sounded like it. "I'm a second."

"That's uh. That's a different name."

She fixed me with huge, liquid eyes. "It indicates that my progenitor was also Wain, and that I am obliged to report back to her. I may not breed."

"Ah. Well. Bit early for that anyway, isn't it?"

She unclasped her hands, raised them above the table, spread her fingers. "You see?" The little finger on her left hand was crooked, and it bifurcated at the top, splitting into two smaller fingertips. A minor deformity. "When I was finished a decision was needed. Would I be

retained, or eliminated? I was fortunate that the decision was with me. Now, I travel, while my more perfect sisters remain at home in stasis. They were firsts. I am a second.

"Soon I must return to Wain, and tell her all I have seen. All my impressions of this place of yours."

"I don't actually live in Croydon," I said. "I don't come from here." I wondered if she was American. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"As you say," she agreed, "neither of us comes from here." She folded her six-fingered left hand beneath her right, as if tucking it out of sight. "I had expected it to be bigger, and cleaner, and more colorful. But still, it is a jewel."

She yawned, covered her mouth with

her right hand, only for a moment, before it was back on the table again. “I grow weary of the journeying, and I wish sometimes that it would end. On a street in Río, at Carnival, I saw them on a bridge, golden and tall and insect-eyed and winged, and elated I almost ran to greet them, before I saw that they were only people in costumes. I said to Hola Colt, ‘Why do they try so hard to look like us?’ and Hola Colt replied, ‘Because they hate themselves, all shades of pink and brown, and so small.’ It is what I experience, even me, and I am not grown. It is like a world of children, or of elves.” Then she smiled, and said, “It was a good thing they could not any of them see Hola Colt.”

“Um,” I said, “do you want to dance?”

She shook her head immediately. “It is

not permitted," she said. "I can do nothing that might cause damage to property. I am Wain's."

"Would you like something to drink, then?"

"Water," she said.

I went back to the kitchen and poured myself another Coke, and filled a cup with water from the tap. From the kitchen back to the hall, and from there into the conservatory, but now it was quite empty.

I wondered if the girl had gone to the toilet, and if she might change her mind about dancing later. I walked back to the front room and stared in. The place was filling up. There were more girls dancing, and several lads I didn't know, who looked a few years older than me and Vic. The lads and the girls all kept their

distance, but Vic was holding Stella's hand as they danced, and when the song ended he put an arm around her, casually, almost proprietorially, to make sure that nobody else cut in.

I wondered if the girl I had been talking to in the conservatory was now upstairs, as she did not appear to be on the ground floor.

I walked into the living room, which was across the hall from the room where the people were dancing, and I sat down on the sofa. There was a girl sitting there already. She had dark hair, cut short and spiky, and a nervous manner.

Talk, I thought. "Um, this mug of water's going spare," I told her, "if you want it?"

She nodded, and reached out her hand and took the mug, extremely carefully, as

if she were unused to taking things, as if she could trust neither her vision nor her hands.

"I love being a tourist," she said, and smiled hesitantly. She had a gap between her two front teeth, and she sipped the tap water as if she were an adult sipping a fine wine. "The last tour, we went to sun, and we swam in sunfire pools with the whales. We heard their histories and we shivered in the chill of the outer places, then we swam deepward where the heat churned and comforted us.

"I wanted to go back. This time, I wanted it. There was so much I had not seen. Instead we came to world. Do you like it?"

"Like what?"

She gestured vaguely to the room—the

sofa, the armchairs, the curtains, the unused gas fire.

"It's all right, I suppose."

"I told them I did not wish to visit world," she said. "My parent-teacher was unimpressed. 'You will have much to learn,' it told me. I said, 'I could learn more in sun, again. Or in the deeps. Jessa spun webs between galaxies. I want to do that.'

"But there was no reasoning with it, and I came to world. Parent-teacher engulfed me, and I was here, embodied in a decaying lump of meat hanging on a frame of calcium. As I incarnated I felt things deep inside me, fluttering and pumping and squishing. It was my first experience with pushing air through the mouth, vibrating the vocal cords on the way, and I

used it to tell parent-teacher that I wished that I would die, which it acknowledged was the inevitable exit strategy from world."

There were black worry beads wrapped around her wrist, and she fiddled with them as she spoke. "But knowledge is there, in the meat," she said, "and I am resolved to learn from it."

We were sitting close at the center of the sofa now. I decided I should put an arm around her, but casually. I would extend my arm along the back of the sofa and eventually sort of creep it down, almost imperceptibly, until it was touching her. She said, "The thing with the liquid in the eyes, when the world blurs. Nobody told me, and I still do not understand. I have touched the folds of the Whisper and

pulsed and flown with the tachyon swans, and I still do not understand."

She wasn't the prettiest girl there, but she seemed nice enough, and she was a girl, anyway. I let my arm slide down a little, tentatively, so that it made contact with her back, and she did not tell me to take it away.

Vic called to me then, from the doorway. He was standing with his arm around Stella, protectively, waving at me. I tried to let him know, by shaking my head, that I was onto something, but he called my name and, reluctantly, I got up from the sofa and walked over to the door. "What?"

"Er. Look. The party," said Vic, apologetically. "It's not the one I thought it was. I've been talking to Stella and I

figured it out. Well, she sort of explained it to me. We're at a different party."

"Christ. Are we in trouble? Do we have to go?"

Stella shook her head. He leaned down and kissed her, gently, on the lips. "You're just happy to have me here, aren't you darlin'?"

"You know I am," she told him.

He looked from her back to me, and he smiled his white smile: roguish, lovable, a little bit Artful Dodger, a little bit wide-boy Prince Charming. "Don't worry. They're all tourists here anyway. It's a foreign exchange thing, innit? Like when we all went to Germany."

"It is?"

"Enn. You got to *talk* to them. And that means you got to listen to them, too. You

understand?"

"I *did*. I already talked to a couple of them."

"You getting anywhere?"

"I was till you called me over."

"Sorry about that. Look, I just wanted to fill you in. Right?"

And he patted my arm and he walked away with Stella. Then, together, the two of them went up the stairs.

Understand me, all the girls at that party, in the twilight, were lovely; they all had perfect faces but, more important than that, they had whatever strangeness of proportion, of oddness or humanity it is that makes a beauty something more than a shop window dummy. Stella was the most lovely of any of them, but she, of course, was Vic's, and they were going upstairs

together, and that was just how things would always be.

There were several people now sitting on the sofa, talking to the gap-toothed girl. Someone told a joke, and they all laughed. I would have had to push my way in there to sit next to her again, and it didn't look like she was expecting me back, or cared that I had gone, so I wandered out into the hall. I glanced in at the dancers, and found myself wondering where the music was coming from. I couldn't see a record player or speakers.

From the hall I walked back to the kitchen.

Kitchens are good at parties. You never need an excuse to be there, and, on the good side, at this party I couldn't see any signs of someone's mum. I inspected the

various bottles and cans on the kitchen table, then I poured a half an inch of Pernod into the bottom of my plastic cup, which I filled to the top with Coke. I dropped in a couple of ice cubes and took a sip, relishing the sweet-shop tang of the drink.

"What's that you're drinking?" A girl's voice.

"It's Pernod," I told her. "It tastes like aniseed balls, only it's alcoholic." I didn't say that I only tried it because I'd heard someone in the crowd ask for a Pernod on a live Velvet Underground LP.

"Can I have one?" I poured another Pernod, topped it off with Coke, passed it to her. Her hair was a coppery auburn, and it tumbled around her head in ringlets. It's not a hair style you see much now, but

you saw it a lot back then.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Triolet," she said.

"Pretty name," I told her, although I wasn't sure that it was. She was pretty, though.

"It's a verse form," she said, proudly. "Like me."

"You're a poem?"

She smiled, and looked down and away, perhaps bashfully. Her profile was almost flat—a perfect Grecian nose that came down from her forehead in a straight line. We did *Antigone* in the school theater the previous year. I was the messenger who brings Creon the news of Antigone's death. We wore half-masks that made us look like that. I thought of that play, looking at her face, in the kitchen, and I

thought of Barry Smith's drawings of women in the *Conan* comics: five years later I would have thought of the Pre-Raphaelites, of Jane Morris and Lizzie Siddall. But I was only fifteen then.

"You're a poem?" I repeated.

She chewed her lower lip. "If you want. I am a poem, or I am a pattern, or a race of people whose world was swallowed by the sea."

"Isn't it hard to be three things at the same time?"

"What's your name?"

"Enn."

"So you are Enn," she said. "And you are a male. And you are a biped. Is it hard to be three things at the same time?"

"But they aren't different things. I mean, they aren't contradictory." It was a word I

had read many times but never said aloud before that night, and I put the stresses in the wrong places. *Con*tradict*ory*.

She wore a thin dress made of a white, silky fabric. Her eyes were a pale green, a color that would now make me think of tinted contact lenses; but this was thirty years ago; things were different then. I remember wondering about Vic and Stella, upstairs. By now, I was sure that they were in one of the bedrooms, and I envied Vic so much it almost hurt.

Still, I was talking to this girl, even if we were talking nonsense, even if her name wasn't really Triolet (my generation had not been given hippie names: all the Rainbows and the Sunshines and the Moons, they were only six, seven, eight years old back then). She said, "We knew

that it would soon be over, and so we put it all into a poem, to tell the universe who we were, and why we were here, and what we said and did and thought and dreamed and yearned for. We wrapped our dreams in words and patterned the words so that they would live forever, unforgettable. Then we sent the poem as a pattern of flux, to wait in the heart of a star, beaming out its message in pulses and bursts and fuzzes across the electromagnetic spectrum, until the time when, on worlds a thousand sun systems distant, the pattern would be decoded and read, and it would become a poem once again."

"And then what happened?"

She looked at me with her green eyes, and it was as if she stared out at me from

her own Antigone half-mask; but as if her pale green eyes were just a different, deeper, part of the mask. "You cannot hear a poem without it changing you," she told me. "They heard it, and it colonized them. It inherited them and it inhabited them, its rhythms becoming part of the way that they thought; its images permanently transmuting their metaphors; its verses, its outlook, its aspirations becoming their lives. Within a generation their children would be born already knowing the poem, and, sooner rather than later, as these things go, there were no more children born. There was no need for them, not any longer. There was only a poem, which took flesh and walked and spread itself across the vastness of the known."

I edged closer to her, so I could feel my

leg pressing against hers. She seemed to welcome it: she put her hand on my arm, affectionately, and I felt a smile spreading across my face.

"There are places that we are welcomed," said Triolet, "and places where we are regarded as a noxious weed, or as a disease, something immediately to be quarantined and eliminated. But where does contagion end and art begin?"

"I don't know," I said, still smiling. I could hear the unfamiliar music as it pulsed and scattered and boomed in the front room.

She leaned into me then and—I suppose it was a kiss…. I suppose. She pressed her lips to my lips, anyway, and then, satisfied, she pulled back, as if she had

now marked me as her own.

"Would you like to hear it?" she asked, and I nodded, unsure what she was offering me, but certain that I needed anything she was willing to give me.

She began to whisper something in my ear. It's the strangest thing about poetry—you can tell it's poetry, even if you don't speak the language. You can hear Homer's Greek without understanding a word, and you still know it's poetry. I've heard Polish poetry, and Inuit poetry, and I knew what it was without knowing. Her whisper was like that. I didn't know the language, but her words washed through me, perfect, and in my mind's eye I saw towers of glass and diamond; and people with eyes of the palest green; and, unstoppable, beneath every syllable, I could feel the

relentless advance of the ocean.

Perhaps I kissed her properly. I don't remember. I know I wanted to.

And then Vic was shaking me violently. "Come on!" he was shouting. "Quickly. Come on!"

In my head I began to come back from a thousand miles away.

"Idiot. Come on. Just get a move on," he said, and he swore at me. There was fury in his voice.

For the first time that evening I recognized one of the songs being played in the front room. A sad saxophone wail followed by a cascade of liquid chords, a man's voice singing cut-up lyrics about the sons of the silent age. I wanted to stay and hear the song.

She said, "I am not finished. There is yet

more of me."

"Sorry love," said Vic, but he wasn't smiling any longer. "There'll be another time," and he grabbed me by the elbow and he twisted and pulled, forcing me from the room. I did not resist. I knew from experience that Vic could beat the stuffing out me if he got it into his head to do so. He wouldn't do it unless he was upset or angry, but he was angry now.

Out into the front hall. As Vic pulled open the door, I looked back one last time, over my shoulder, hoping to see Triolet in the doorway to the kitchen, but she was not there. I saw Stella, though, at the top of the stairs. She was staring down at Vic, and I saw her face.

This all happened thirty years ago. I have forgotten much, and I will forget

more, and in the end I will forget everything; yet, if I have any certainty of life beyond death, it is all wrapped up not in psalms or hymns, but in this one thing alone: I cannot believe that I will ever forget that moment, or forget the expression on Stella's face as she watched Vic hurrying away from her. Even in death I shall remember that.

Her clothes were in disarray, and there was makeup smudged across her face, and her eyes—

You wouldn't want to make a universe angry. I bet an angry universe would look at you with eyes like that.

We ran then, me and Vic, away from the party and the tourists and the twilight, ran as if a lightning storm was on our heels, a mad helter-skelter dash down the

confusion of streets, threading through the maze, and we did not look back, and we did not stop until we could not breathe; and then we stopped and panted, unable to run any longer. We were in pain. I held on to a wall, and Vic threw up, hard and long, into the gutter.

He wiped his mouth.

"She wasn't a—" He stopped.

He shook his head.

Then he said, "You know…I think there's a thing. When you've gone as far as you dare. And if you go any further, you wouldn't be *you* anymore? You'd be the person who'd done *that*? The places you just can't go…. I think that happened to me tonight."

I thought I knew what he was saying. "Screw her, you mean?" I said.

He rammed a knuckle hard against my temple, and twisted it violently. I wondered if I was going to have to fight him—and lose—but after a moment he lowered his hand and moved away from me, making a low, gulping noise.

I looked at him curiously, and I realized that he was crying: his face was scarlet; snot and tears ran down his cheeks. Vic was sobbing in the street, as unselfconsciously and heartbreakingly as a little boy. He walked away from me then, shoulders heaving, and he hurried down the road so he was in front of me and I could no longer see his face. I wondered what had occurred in that upstairs room to make him behave like that, to scare him so, and I could not even begin to guess.

The streetlights came on, one by one;

Vic stumbled on ahead, while I trudged down the street behind him in the dusk, my feet treading out the measure of a poem that, try as I might, I could not properly remember and would never be able to repeat.

THE DAY THE SAUCERS CAME

That day, the saucers
landed. Hundreds of
them, golden,
Silent, coming down
from the sky like
great snowflakes,
And the people of
Earth stood and
stared as they
descended,
Waiting, dry-mouthed,
to find what waited
inside for us

And none of us knowing if we would be here tomorrow
But you didn't notice it because

That day, the day the saucers came, by some coincidence,
Was the day that the graves gave up their dead
And the zombies pushed up through soft earth
or erupted, shambling and dull-eyed, unstoppable,
Came towards us, the

living, and we
screamed and ran,
But you did not notice
this because

On the saucer day,
which was the
zombie day, it was
Ragnarok also, and
the television
screens showed us
A ship built of dead-
men's nails, a
serpent, a wolf,
All bigger than the
mind could hold, and
the cameraman could
Not get far enough
away, and then the

Gods came out
But you did not see them coming because
On the saucer-zombie-battling-gods day the floodgates broke
And each of us was engulfed by genies and sprites
Offering us wishes and wonders and eternities
And charm and cleverness and true brave hearts and pots of gold
While giants feefofummed across

the land, and killer bees,
But you had no idea of any of this because

That day, the saucer day the zombie day
The Ragnarok and fairies day, the day the great winds came
And snows, and the cities turned to crystal, the day
All plants died, plastics dissolved, the day the
Computers turned, the screens telling us we

would obey, the day
Angels, drunk and muddled, stumbled from the bars,
And all the bells of London were sounded, the day
Animals spoke to us in Assyrian, the Yeti day,
The fluttering capes and arrival of the Time Machine day,
You didn’t notice any of this because
you were sitting in your room, not doing anything
not even reading, not

really, just looking at your telephone, wondering if I was going to call.

SUNBIRD

They were a rich and a rowdy bunch at the Epicurean Club in those days. They certainly knew how to party. There were five of them:

There was Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy, big enough for three men, who ate enough for four men and who drank enough for five. His great-grandfather had founded the Epicurean Club with the proceeds of a tontine, which he had taken great pains, in the traditional manner, to ensure that he had collected in full.

There was Professor Mandalay, small and twitchy and gray as a ghost (and

perhaps he was a ghost; stranger things have happened) who drank nothing but water, and who ate doll-portions from plates the size of saucers. Still, you do not need the gusto for the gastronomy, and Mandalay always got to the heart of every dish placed in front of him.

There was Virginia Boote, the food and restaurant critic, who had once been a great beauty but was now a grand and magnificent ruin, and who delighted in her ruination.

There was Jackie Newhouse, the descendant (on the left-handed route) of the great lover, gourmand, violinist, and duelist Giacomo Casanova. Jackie Newhouse had, like his notorious ancestor, both broken his share of hearts and eaten his share of great dishes.

And there was Zebediah T. Crawcrustle, who was the only one of the Epicureans who was flat-out broke: he shambled in unshaven from the street when they had their meetings, with half a bottle of rotgut in a brown paper bag, hatless and coatless and, too often, partly shirtless, but he ate with more of an appetite than any of them.

Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy was talking—

"We have eaten everything that can be eaten," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy, and there was regret and glancing sorrow in his voice. "We have eaten vulture, mole, and fruitbat."

Mandalay consulted his notebook. "Vulture tasted like rotten pheasant. Mole tasted like carrion slug. Fruitbat tasted

remarkably like sweet guinea pig."

"We have eaten kakopo, aye-aye, and giant panda—"

"Oh, that broiled panda steak," sighed Virginia Boote, her mouth watering at the memory.

"We have eaten several long-extinct species," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy. "We have eaten flash-frozen mammoth and Patagonian giant sloth."

"If we had but gotten the mammoth a little faster," sighed Jackie Newhouse. "I could tell why the hairy elephants went so fast, though, once people got a taste of them. I am a man of elegant pleasures, but after only one bite, I found myself thinking only of Kansas City barbecue sauce, and what the ribs on those things would be like, if they were fresh."

“Nothing wrong with being on ice for a millennium or two,” said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. He grinned. His teeth may have been crooked, but they were sharp and strong. “Even so, for real taste you had to go for honest-to-goodness mastodon every time. Mammoth was always what people settled for, when they couldn’t get mastodon.”

“We’ve eaten squid, and giant squid, and humongous squid,” said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy. “We’ve eaten lemmings and Tasmanian tigers. We’ve eaten bower bird and ortolan and peacock. We’ve eaten the dolphin fish (which is not the mammal dolphin) and the giant sea turtle and the Sumatran rhino. We’ve eaten everything there is to eat.”

“Nonsense. There are many hundreds of

things we have not yet tasted," said Professor Mandalay. "Thousands, perhaps. Think of all the species of beetle there are, still untasted."

"Oh Mandy," sighed Virginia Boote. "When you've tasted one beetle, you've tasted them all. And we all tasted several hundred species. At least the dung-beetles had a real kick to them."

"No," said Jackie Newhouse, "that was the dung-beetle balls. The beetles themselves were singularly unexceptional. Still, I take your point. We have scaled the heights of gastronomy, we have plunged down into the depths of gustation. We have become cosmonauts exploring undreamed-of worlds of delectation and gourmanderie."

"True, true, true," said Augustus

TwoFeathers McCoy. “There has been a meeting of the Epicureans every month for over a hundred and fifty years, in my father’s time, and my grandfather’s time, and my great-grandfather’s time, and now I fear that I must hang it up for there is nothing left that we, or our predecessors in the club, have not eaten.”

“I wish I had been here in the twenties,” said Virginia Boote, “when they legally had Man on the menu.”

“Only after it had been electrocuted,” said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. “Half-fried already it was, all char and crackling. It left none of us with a taste for long pig, save one who was already that way inclined, and he went out pretty soon after that anyway.”

“Oh, Crusty, *why* must you pretend that

you were there?" asked Virginia Boote, with a yawn. "Anyone can see you aren't that old. You can't be more than sixty, even allowing for the ravages of time and the gutter."

"Oh, they ravage pretty good," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "But not as good as you'd imagine. Anyway there's a host of things we've not eaten yet."

"Name one," said Mandalay, his pencil poised precisely above his notebook.

"Well, there's Suntown Sunbird," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. And he grinned his crookedy grin at them, with his teeth ragged but sharp.

"I've never heard of it," said Jackie Newhouse. "You're making it up."

"I've heard of it," said Professor Mandalay, "but in another context. And

besides, it is imaginary."

"Unicorns are imaginary," said Virginia Boote, "but gosh, that unicorn flank tartare was tasty. A little bit horsy, a little big goatish, and all the better for the capers and raw quail eggs."

"There's something about the Sunbird in one of the minutes of the Epicurean Club from bygone years," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy. "But what it was, I can no longer remember."

"Did they say how it tasted?" asked Virginia.

"I do not believe that they did," said Augustus, with a frown. "I would need to inspect the bound proceedings, of course."

"Nah," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "That's only in the charred volumes. You'll never find out about it from there."

Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy scratched his head. He really did have two feathers, which went through the knot of black-hair-shot-with-silver at the back of his head, and the feathers had once been golden although by now they were looking kind of ordinary and yellow and ragged. He had been given them when he was a boy.

"Beetles," said Professor Mandalay. "I once calculated that, if a man such as myself were to eat six different species of beetle each day, it would take him more than twenty years to eat every beetle that has been identified. And over that twenty years enough new species of beetle might have been discovered to keep him eating for another five years. And in those five years enough beetles might have been

discovered to keep him eating for another two and a half years, and so on, and so on. It is a paradox of inexhaustibility. I call it Mandalay's Beetle. You would have to enjoy eating beetles, though," he added, "or it would be a very bad thing indeed."

"Nothing wrong with eating beetles if they're the right kind of beetle," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "Right now, I've got a hankering on me for lightning bugs. There's a kick from the glow of a lightning bug that might be just what I need."

"While the lightning bug or firefly (*Photinus pyralis*) is more of a beetle than it is a glowworm," said Mandalay, "it is by no stretch of the imagination edible."

"They may not be edible," said

Crawcrustle. “But they’ll get you into shape for the stuff that is. I think I’ll roast me some. Fireflies and habañero peppers. Yum.”

Virginia Boote was an eminently practical woman. She said, “Suppose we did want to eat Suntown Sunbird. Where should we start looking for it?”

Zebediah T. Crawcrustle scratched the bristling seventh-day beard that was sprouting on his chin (it never grew any longer than that; seventh-day beards never do). “If it was me,” he told them, “I’d head down to Suntown of a noon in midsummer, and I’d find somewhere comfortable to sit—Mustapha Stroheim’s coffeehouse, for example—and I’d wait for the Sunbird to come by. Then I’d catch him in the traditional manner, and cook

him in the traditional manner as well."

"And what would the traditional manner of catching him be?" asked Jackie Newhouse.

"Why, the same way your famous ancestor poached quails and wood grouse," said Crawcrustle.

"There's nothing in Casanova's memoirs about poaching quail," said Jackie Newhouse.

"Your ancestor was a busy man," said Crawcrustle. "He couldn't be expected to write everything down. But he poached a good quail nonetheless."

"Dried corn and dried blueberries, soaked in whiskey," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy. "That's how my folk always did it."

"And that was how Casanova did it,"

said Crawcrustle, “although he used barley grains mixed with raisins, and he soaked the raisins in brandy. He taught me himself.”

Jackie Newhouse ignored this statement. It was easy to ignore much that Zebediah T. Crawcrustle said. Instead, Jackie Newhouse asked, “And where is Mustapha Stroheim’s coffeehouse in Suntown?”

“Why, where it always is, third lane after the old market in the Suntown district, just before you reach the old drainage ditch that was once an irrigation canal, and if you find yourself outside One eye Khayam’s carpet shop you have gone too far,” began Crawcrustle. “But I see by the expressions of irritation upon your faces that you were expecting a less

succinct, less accurate description. Very well. It is in Suntown, and Suntown is in Cairo, in Egypt, where it always is, or almost always."

"And who will pay for an expedition to Suntown?" asked Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy. "And who will be on this expedition? I ask the question although I already know the answer, and I do not like it."

"Why, you will pay for it, Augustus, and we will all come," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "You can deduct it from our Epicurean membership dues. And I shall bring my chef's apron and my cooking utensils."

Augustus knew that Crawcrustle had not paid his Epicurean Club membership in much too long a time, but the Epicurean

Club would cover him; Crawcrustle had been a member of the Epicureans in Augustus's father's day. He simply said, "And when shall we leave?"

Crawcrustle fixed him with a mad old eye and shook his head in disappointment. "Why, Augustus," he said. "We're going to Suntown, to catch the Sunbird. When else should we leave?"

"Sunday!" sang Virginia Boote. "Darlings, we'll leave on a Sunday!"

"There's hope for you yet, young lady," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "We shall leave Sunday indeed. Three Sundays from now. And we shall travel to Egypt. We shall spend several days hunting and trapping the elusive Sunbird of Suntown, and, finally, we shall deal with it in the traditional way."

Professor Mandalay blinked a small gray blink. “But,” he said. “I am teaching a class on Monday. On Mondays I teach mythology, on Tuesdays I teach tap dancing, and on Wednesdays, woodwork.”

“Get a teaching assistant to take your course, Mandalay O Mandalay. On Monday you’ll be hunting the Sunbird,” said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. “And how many other professors can say that?”

They went, one by one, to see Crawcrustle, in order to discuss the journey ahead of them, and to announce their misgivings.

Zebediah T. Crawcrustle was a man of no fixed abode. Still, there were places he

could be found, if you were of a mind to find him. In the early mornings he slept in the bus terminal, where the benches were comfortable and the transport police were inclined to let him lie; in the heat of the afternoons he hung in the park by the statues of long-forgotten generals, with the dipsos and the winos and the hopheads, sharing their company and the contents of their bottles, and offering his opinion, which was, as that of an Epicurean, always considered and always respected, if not always welcomed.

Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy sought out Crawcrustle in the park; he had with him his daughter, Hollyberry NoFeathers McCoy. She was small, but she was sharp as a shark's tooth.

"You know," said Augustus, "there is

something very familiar about this."

"About what?" asked Zebediah.

"All of this. The expedition to Egypt. The Sunbird. It seemed to me like I heard about it before."

Crawcrustle merely nodded. He was crunching something from a brown paper bag.

Augustus said, "I went to the bound annals of the Epicurean Club, and I looked it up. And there was what I took to be a reference to the Sunbird in the index for forty years ago, but I was unable to learn anything more."

"And why was that?" asked Zebediah T. Crawcrustle, swallowing noisily.

Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy sighed. "I found the relevant page in the annals," he said, "but it was burned away, and

afterward there was some great confusion in the administration of the Epicurean Club."

"You're eating lightning bugs from a paper bag," said Hollyberry NoFeathers McCoy. "I seen you doing it."

"I am indeed, little lady," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle.

"Do you remember the days of great confusion, Crawcrustle?" asked Augustus.

"I do indeed," said Crawcrustle. "And I remember you. You were only the age that young Hollyberry is now. But there is always confusion, Augustus, and then there is no confusion. It is like the rising and the setting of the sun."

Jackie Newhouse and Professor Mandalay found Crawcrustle that evening, behind the railroad tracks. He was

roasting something in a tin can over a small charcoal fire.

"What are you roasting, Crawcrustle?" asked Jackie Newhouse.

"More charcoal," said Crawcrustle. "Cleans the blood, purifies the spirit."

There was basswood and hickory, cut up into little chunks at the bottom of the can, all black and smoking.

"And will you actually eat this charcoal, Crawcrustle?" asked Professor Mandalay.

In response, Crawcrustle licked his fingers and picked out a lump of charcoal from the can. It hissed and fizzed in his grip.

"A fine trick," said Professor Mandalay. "That's how fire-eaters do it, I believe."

Crawcrustle popped the charcoal into his mouth and crunched it between his

ragged old teeth. “It is indeed,” he said. “It is indeed.”

Jackie Newhouse cleared his throat. “The truth of the matter is,” he said, “Professor Mandalay and I have deep misgivings about the journey that lies ahead.”

Zebediah merely crunched his charcoal. “Not hot enough,” he said. He took a stick from the fire and nibbled off the orange-hot tip of it. “That’s good,” he said.

“It’s all an illusion,” said Jackie Newhouse.

“Nothing of the sort,” said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle, primly. “It’s prickly elm.”

“I have extreme misgivings about all this,” said Jackie Newhouse. “My ancestors and I have a finely tuned sense of personal preservation, one that has

often left us shivering on roofs and hiding in rivers—one step away from the law, or from gentlemen with guns and legitimate grievances—and that sense of self-preservation is telling me not to go to Suntown with you."

"I am an academic," said Professor Mandalay, "and thus have no finely developed senses that would be comprehensible to anyone who has not ever needed to grade papers without actually reading the blessed things. Still, I find the whole thing remarkably suspicious. If this Sunbird is so tasty, why have I not heard of it?"

"You have, Mandy old fruit. You have," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle.

"And I am, in addition, an expert on geographical features from Tulsa,

Oklahoma, to Timbuktu," continued Professor Mandalay. "Yet I have never seen a mention in any book of a place called Suntown in Cairo."

"Seen it mentioned? Why, you've taught it," said Crawcrustle, and he doused a lump of smoking charcoal with hot pepper sauce before popping it in his mouth and chomping it down.

"I don't believe you're really eating that," said Jackie Newhouse. "But even being around the trick of it is making me uncomfortable. I think it is time that I was elsewhere."

And he left. Perhaps Professor Mandalay left with him: that man was so gray and so ghostie it was always a toss-up whether he was there or not.

Virginia Boote tripped over Zebediah T.

Crawcrustle while he rested in her doorway, in the small hours of the morning. She was returning from a restaurant she had needed to review. She got out of a taxi, tripped over Crawcrustle, and went sprawling. She landed nearby. "Whee!" she said. "That was some trip, wasn't it?"

"Indeed it was, Virginia," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "You would not happen to have such a thing as a box of matches on you, would you?"

"I have a book of matches on me somewhere," she said, and she began to rummage in her purse, which was very large and very brown. "Here you are."

Zebediah T. Crawcrustle was carrying a bottle of purple methylated spirits, which he proceeded to pour into a plastic cup.

“Meths?” said Virginia Boote. “Somehow you never struck me as a meths drinker, Zebby.”

“Nor am I,” said Crawcrustle. “Foul stuff. It rots the guts and spoils the taste buds. But I could not find any lighter fluid at this time of night.”

He lit a match, then dipped it near the surface of the cup of spirits, which began to burn with a flickery light. He ate the match. Then he gargled with the flaming liquid, and blew a sheet of flame into the street, incinerating a sheet of newspaper as it blew by.

“Crusty,” said Virginia Boote, “that’s a good way to get yourself killed.”

Zebediah T. Crawcrustle grinned through black teeth. “I don’t actually drink it,” he told her. “I just gargle and breathe

it out."

"You're playing with fire," she warned him.

"That's how I know I'm alive," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle.

Virginia said, "Oh, Zeb. I *am* excited. I am so excited. What do you think the Sunbird tastes like?"

"Richer than quail and moister than turkey, fatter than ostrich and lusher than duck," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "Once eaten it's never forgotten."

"We're going to Egypt," she said. "I've never been to Egypt." Then she said, "Do you have anywhere to stay the night?"

He coughed, a small cough that rattled around in his old chest. "I'm getting too old to sleep in doorways and gutters," he said. "Still, I have my pride."

"Well," she said, looking at the man, "you could sleep on my sofa."

"It is not that I am not grateful for the offer," he said, "but there is a bench in the bus station that has my name on it."

And he pushed himself away from the wall and tottered majestically down the street.

There really *was* a bench in the bus station that had his name on it. He had donated the bench to the bus station back when he was flush, and his name was attached to the back of it, engraved upon a small brass plaque. Zebediah T. Crawcrustle was not always poor. Sometimes he was rich, but he had difficulty in holding on to his wealth, and whenever he had become wealthy he discovered that the world frowned on rich

men eating in hobo jungles at the back of the railroad, or consorting with the winos in the park, so he would fritter his wealth away as best he could. There were always little bits of it here and there that he had forgotten about, and sometimes he would forget that he did not like being rich, and then he would set out again and seek his fortune, and find it.

He had needed a shave for a week, and the hairs of his seven-day beard were starting to come through snow white.

They left for Egypt on a Sunday, the Epicureans. There were five of them there, and Hollyberry NoFeathers McCoy waved good-bye to them at the airport. It was a very small airport, which still

permitted waves good-bye.

"Good-bye, Father!" called Hollyberry NoFeathers McCoy.

Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy waved back at her as they walked along the asphalt to the little prop plane, which would begin the first leg of their journey.

"It seems to me," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy, "that I remember, albeit dimly, a day like this long, long ago. I was a small boy, in that memory, waving good-bye. I believe it was the last time I saw my father, and I am struck once more with a sudden presentiment of doom." He waved one last time at the small child at the other end of the field, and she waved back at him.

"You waved just as enthusiastically back then," agreed Zebediah T.

Crawcrustle, "but I think she waves with slightly more aplomb."

It was true. She did.

They took a small plane and then a larger plane, then a smaller plane, a blimp, a gondola, a train, a hot-air balloon, and a rented Jeep.

They rattled through Cairo in the Jeep. They passed the old market, and they turned off on the third lane they came to (if they had continued on they would have come to a drainage ditch that was once an irrigation canal). Mustapha Stroheim himself was sitting outside in the street, perched on an elderly wicker chair. All of the tables and chairs were on the side of the street, and it was not a particularly wide street.

"Welcome, my friends, to my *Kahwa,*"

said Mustapha Stroheim. "*Kahwa* is Egyptian for café, or for coffeehouse. Would you like tea? Or a game of dominoes?"

"We would like to be shown to our rooms," said Jackie Newhouse.

"Not me," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "I'll sleep in the street. It's warm enough, and that doorstep over there looks mighty comfortable."

"I'll have coffee, please," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy.

"Of course."

"Do you have water?" asked Professor Mandalay.

"Who said that?" said Mustapha Stroheim. "Oh, it was you, little gray man. My mistake. When I first saw you I thought you were someone's shadow."

"I will have *ShaySokkar Bosta,*" said Virginia Boote, which is a glass of hot tea with the sugar on the side. "And I will play backgammon with anyone who wishes to take me on. There's not a soul in Cairo I cannot beat at backgammon, if I can remember the rules."

Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy was shown to his room. Professor Mandalay was shown to his room. Jackie Newhouse was shown to his room. This was not a lengthy procedure; they were all in the same room, after all. There was another room in the back where Virginia would sleep, and a third room for Mustapha Stroheim and his family.

"What's that you're writing?" asked

Jackie Newhouse.

"It's the procedures, annals, and minutes of the Epicurean Club," said Professor Mandalay. He was writing in a large leather-bound book with a small black pen. "I have chronicled our journey here, and all the things that we have eaten on the way. I shall keep writing as we eat the Sunbird, to record for posterity all the tastes and textures, all the smells and the juices."

"Did Crawcrustle say how he was going to cook the Sunbird?" asked Jackie Newhouse.

"He did," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy. "He says that he will drain a beer can, so it is only a third full. And then he will add herbs and spices to the beer can. He will stand the bird up on the can, with

the can in its inner cavity, and place it up on the barbecue to roast. He says it is the traditional way."

Jackie Newhouse sniffed. "It sounds suspiciously modern to me."

"Crawcrustle says it is the traditional method of cooking the Sunbird," repeated Augustus.

"Indeed I did," said Crawcrustle, coming up the stairs. It was a small building. The stairs weren't that far away, and the walls were not thick ones. "The oldest beer in the world is Egyptian beer, and they've been cooking the Sunbird with it for over five thousand years now."

"But the beer can is a relatively modern invention," said Professor Mandalay, as Zebediah T. Crawcrustle came through the door. Crawcrustle was holding a cup of

Turkish coffee, black as tar, which steamed like a kettle and bubbled like a tarpit.

"That coffee looks pretty hot," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy.

Crawcrustle knocked back the cup, draining half the contents. "Nah," he said. "Not really. And the beer can isn't really that new an invention. We used to make them out of an amalgam of copper and tin in the old days, sometimes with a little silver in there, sometimes not. It depended on the smith, and what he had to hand. You needed something that would stand up to the heat. I see that you are all looking at me doubtfully. Gentlemen, consider: of course the Ancient Egyptians made beer cans; where else would they have kept their beer?"

From outside the window, at the tables in the street, came a wailing, in many voices. Virginia Boote had persuaded the locals to start playing backgammon for money, and she was cleaning them out. That woman was a backgammon shark.

Out back of Mustapha Stroheim's coffeehouse there was a courtyard containing a broken-down old barbecue, made of clay bricks and a half-melted metal grating, and an old wooden table. Crawcrustle spent the next day rebuilding the barbecue and cleaning it, oiling down the metal grille.

"That doesn't look like it's been used in forty years," said Virginia Boote. Nobody would play backgammon with her any

longer, and her purse bulged with grubby piasters.

"Something like that," said Crawcrustle. "Maybe a little more. Here, Ginnie, make yourself useful. I've written a list of things I need from the market. It's mostly herbs and spices and wood chips. You can take one of the children of Mustapha Stroheim to translate for you."

"My pleasure, Crusty."

The other three members of the Epicurean Club were occupying themselves in their own way. Jackie Newhouse was making friends with many of the people of the area, who were attracted by his elegant suits and his skill at playing the violin. Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy went for long walks. Professor Mandalay spent time translating

the hieroglyphics he had noticed were incised upon the clay bricks in the barbecue. He said that a foolish man might believe that they proved the barbecue in Mustapha Stroheim's backyard was once sacred to the Sun. "But I, who am an intelligent man," he said, "I see immediately that what has happened is that bricks that were once, long ago, part of a temple, have, over the millennia, been reused. I doubt that these people know the value of what they have here."

"Oh, they know all right," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "And these bricks weren't part of any temple. They've been right here for five thousand years, since we built the barbecue. Before that we made do with stones."

Virginia Boote returned with a filled

shopping basket. “Here,” she said. “Red sandalwood and patchouli, vanilla beans, lavender twigs and sage and cinnamon leaves, whole nutmegs, garlic bulbs, cloves, and rosemary: everything you wanted and more.”

Zebediah T. Crawcrustle grinned with delight. “The Sunbird will be so happy,” he told her.

He spent the afternoon preparing a barbecue sauce. He said it was only respectful, and besides, the Sunbird’s flesh was often slightly on the dry side.

The Epicureans spent that evening sitting at the wicker tables in the street out front, while Mustapha Stroheim and his family brought them tea and coffee and hot mint drinks. Zebediah T. Crawcrustle had told the Epicureans that they would be

having the Sunbird of Suntown for Sunday lunch, and that they might wish to avoid food the night before, to ensure that they had an appetite.

"I have a presentiment of doom upon me," said Augustus Two Feathers McCoy that night, in a bed that was far too small for him, before he slept. "And I fear it shall come to us with barbecue sauce."

They were all so hungry the following morning. Zebediah T. Crawcrustle had a comedic apron on, with the words KISS THE COOK written upon it in violently green letters. He had already sprinkled the brandy-soaked raisins and grain beneath the stunted avocado tree behind the house, and he was arranging the scented woods,

the herbs, and the spices on the bed of charcoal. Mustapha Stroheim and his family had gone to visit relatives on the other side of Cairo.

"Does anybody have a match?" Crawcrustle asked.

Jackie Newhouse pulled out a Zippo lighter, and passed it to Crawcrustle, who lit the dried cinnamon leaves and dried laurel leaves beneath the charcoal. The smoke drifted up into the noon air.

"The cinnamon and sandalwood smoke will bring the Sunbird," said Crawcrustle.

"Bring it from where?" asked Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy.

"From the Sun," said Crawcrustle. "That's where he sleeps."

Professor Mandalay coughed discreetly. He said, "The Earth is, at its closest, 91

million miles from the Sun. The fastest dive by a bird ever recorded is that of the peregrine falcon, at 273 miles per hour. Flying at that speed, from the Sun, it would take a bird a little over thirty-eight years to reach us—if it could fly through the dark and cold and vacuum of space, of course."

"Of course," agreed Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. He shaded his eyes and squinted and looked upward. "Here it comes," he said.

It looked almost as if the bird was flying out of the sun; but that could not have been the case. You could not look directly at the noonday sun, after all.

First it was a silhouette, black against the sun and against the blue sky, then the sunlight caught its feathers, and the

watchers on the ground caught their breath. You have never seen anything like sunlight on the Sunbird's feathers; seeing something like that would take your breath away.

The Sunbird flapped its wide wings once, then it began to glide in ever-decreasing circles in the air above Mustapha Stroheim's coffeehouse.

The bird landed in the avocado tree. Its feathers were golden, and purple, and silver. It was smaller than a turkey, larger than a rooster, and had the long legs and high head of a heron, though its head was more like the head of an eagle.

"It is very beautiful," said Virginia Boote. "Look at the two tall feathers on its head. Aren't they lovely?"

"It is indeed quite lovely," said

Professor Mandalay.

"There is something familiar about that bird's headfeathers," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy.

"We pluck the headfeathers before we roast the bird," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "It's the way it's always done."

The Sunbird perched on a branch of the avocado tree, in a patch of sun. It seemed almost as if it were glowing, gently, in the sunlight, as if its feathers were made of sunlight, iridescent with purples and greens and golds. It preened itself, extending one wing in the sunlight. It nibbled and stroked at the wing with its beak until all the feathers were in their correct position, and oiled. Then it extended the other wing, and repeated the

process. Finally, the bird emitted a contented chirrup, and flew the short distance from the branch to the ground.

It strutted across the dried mud, peering from side to side short-sightedly.

"Look!" said Jackie Newhouse. "It's found the grain."

"It seemed almost that it was looking for it," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy. "That it was expecting the grain to be there."

"That's where I always leave it," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle.

"It's so lovely," said Virginia Boote. "But now I see it closer, I can see that it's much older than I thought. Its eyes are cloudy and its legs are shaking. But it's still lovely."

"The Bennu bird is the loveliest of

birds," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle.

Virginia Boote spoke good restaurant Egyptian, but beyond that she was all at sea. "What's a Bennu bird?" she asked. "Is that Egyptian for Sunbird?"

"The Bennu bird," said Professor Mandalay, "roosts in the Persea tree. It has two feathers on its head. It is sometimes represented as being like a heron, and sometimes like an eagle. There is more, but it is too unlikely to bear repeating."

"It's eaten the grain and the raisins!" exclaimed Jackie Newhouse. "Now it's stumbling drunkenly from side to side—such majesty, even in its drunkenness!"

Zebediah T. Crawcrustle walked over to the Sunbird, which, with a great effort of will, was staggering back and forth on

the mud beneath the avocado tree, not tripping over its long legs. He stood directly in front of the bird, and then, very slowly, he bowed to it. He bent like a very old man, slowly and creakily, but still he bowed. And the Sunbird bowed back to him, then it toppled to the mud. Zebediah T. Crawcrustle picked it up reverently, and placed it in his arms, carrying it as one would carry a child, and he took it back to the plot of land behind Mustapha Stroheim's coffeehouse, and the others followed him.

First he plucked the two majestic headfeathers, and set them aside.

And then, without plucking the bird, he gutted it, and placed the guts on the smoking twigs. He put the half-filled beer can inside the body cavity, and placed the

bird upon the barbecue.

"Sunbird cooks fast," warned Crawcrustle. "Get your plates ready."

The beers of the ancient Egyptians were flavored with cardamom and coriander, for the Egyptians had no hops; their beers were rich and flavorsome and thirst-quenching. You could build pyramids after drinking that beer, and sometimes people did. On the barbecue the beer steamed the inside of the Sunbird, keeping it moist. As the heat of the charcoal reached them, the feathers of the bird burned off, igniting with a flash like a magnesium flare, so bright that the Epicureans were forced to avert their eyes.

The smell of roast fowl filled the air, richer than peacock, lusher than duck. The mouths of the assembled Epicureans began

to water. It seemed like it had been cooking for no time at all, but Zebediah lifted the Sunbird from the charcoal bed and put it on the table. Then, with a carving knife, he sliced it up and placed the steaming meat on the plates. He poured a little barbecue sauce over each piece of meat. He placed the carcass directly onto the flames.

Each member of the Epicurean Club sat in the back of Mustapha Stroheim's coffeehouse, sat around an elderly wooden table, and they ate with their fingers.

"Zebby, this is amazing!" said Virginia Boote, talking as she ate. "It melts in your mouth. It tastes like heaven."

"It tastes like the sun," said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy, putting his food

away as only a big man can. He had a leg in one hand, and some breast in the other. "It is the finest thing I have ever eaten, and I do not regret eating it, but I do believe that I shall miss my daughter."

"It is perfect," said Jackie Newhouse. "It tastes like love and fine music. It tastes like truth."

Professor Mandalay was scribbling in the bound annals of the Epicurean Club. He was recording his reaction to the meat of the bird, and recording the reactions of the other Epicureans, and trying not to drip on the page while he wrote, for with the hand that was not writing he was holding a wing, and, fastidiously, he was nibbling the meat off it.

"It is strange," said Jackie Newhouse, "for as I eat it, it gets hotter and hotter in

my mouth and in my stomach."

"Yup. It'll do that. It's best to prepare for it ahead of time," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. "Eat coals and flames and lightning bugs to get used to it. Otherwise it can be a trifle hard on the system."

Zebediah T. Crawcrustle was eating the head of the bird, crunching its bones and beak in his mouth. As he ate, the bones sparked small lightnings against his teeth. He just grinned and chewed the more.

The bones of the Sunbird's carcass burned orange on the barbecue, and then they began to burn white. There was a thick heat-haze in the courtyard at the back of Mustapha Stroheim's coffeehouse, and in it everything shimmered, as if the people around the table were seeing the world through water or a dream.

“It is so good!” said Virginia Boote as she ate. “It is the best thing I have ever eaten. It tastes like my youth. It tastes like forever.” She licked her fingers, then picked up the last slice of meat from her plate. “The Sunbird of Suntown,” she said. “Does it have another name?”

“It is the Phoenix of Heliopolis,” said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle. “It is the bird that dies in ashes and flame, and is reborn, generation after generation. It is the Bennu bird, which flew across the waters when all was dark. When its time is come it is burned on the fire of rare woods and spices and herbs, and in the ashes it is reborn, time after time, world without end.”

“Fire!” exclaimed Professor Mandalay. “It feels as if my insides are burning up!”

He sipped his water, but seemed no happier.

"My fingers," said Virginia Boote. "Look at my fingers." She held them up. They were glowing inside, as if lit with inner flames.

Now the air was so hot you could have baked an egg in it.

There was a spark and a sputter. The two yellow feathers in Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy's hair went up like sparklers. "Crawcrustle," said Jackie Newhouse, aflame, "answer me truly. How long have you been eating the Phoenix?"

"A little over ten thousand years," said Zebediah. "Give or take a few thousand. It's not hard, once you master the trick of it; it's just mastering the trick of it that's

hard. But this is the best Phoenix I've ever prepared. Or do I mean, 'this is the best I've ever cooked this Phoenix'?"

"The years!" said Virginia Boote. "They are burning off you!"

"They do that," admitted Zebediah. "You've got to get used to the heat, though, before you eat it. Otherwise you can just burn away."

"Why did I not remember this?" said Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy, through the bright flames that surrounded him. "Why did I not remember that this was how my father went, and his father before him, that each of them went to Heliopolis to eat the Phoenix? And why do I only remember it now?"

"Because the years are burning off you," said Professor Mandalay. He had closed

the leather book as soon as the page he had been writing on caught fire. The edges of the book were charred, but the rest of the book would be fine. “When the years burn, the memories of those years come back.” He looked more solid now, through the wavering burning air, and he was smiling. None of them had ever seen Professor Mandalay smile before.

“Shall we burn away to nothing?” asked Virginia, now incandescent. “Or shall we burn back to childhood and burn back to ghosts and angels and then come forward again? It does not matter. Oh Crusty, this is all such *fun!*”

“Perhaps,” said Jackie Newhouse, through the fire, “there might have been a little more vinegar in the sauce. I feel a meat like this could have dealt with

something more robust." And then he was gone, leaving only an after-image.

"Chacun à son goût," said Zebediah T. Crawcrustle, which is French for "each to his own taste," and he licked his fingers and he shook his head. "Best it's ever been," he said, with enormous satisfaction.

"Good-bye, Crusty," said Virginia. She put her flame-white hand out, and held his dark hand tightly, for one moment, or perhaps for two.

And then there was nothing in the courtyard back of Mustapha Stroheim's *Kahwa* (or coffeehouse) in Heliopolis (which was once the city of the Sun, and is now a suburb of Cairo) but white ash, which blew up in the momentary breeze, and settled like powdered sugar or like

snow; and nobody there but a young man with dark, dark hair and even, ivory-colored teeth, wearing an apron that said KISS THE COOK.

A tiny golden-purple bird stirred in the thick bed of ashes on top of the clay bricks, as if it were waking for the first time. It made a high-pitched "peep!" and it looked directly into the sun, as an infant looks at a parent. It stretched its wings as if to dry them, and, eventually, when it was quite ready, it flew upward, toward the sun, and nobody watched it leave but the young man in the courtyard.

There were two long golden feathers at the young man's feet, beneath the ash that had once been a wooden table, and he gathered them up, and brushed the white ash from them and placed them,

reverently, inside his jacket. Then he removed his apron, and he went upon his way.

Hollyberry TwoFeathers McCoy is a grown woman, with children of her own. There are silver hairs on her head, in there with the black, beneath the golden feathers in the bun at the back. You can see that once the feathers must have looked pretty special, but that would have been a long time ago. She is the president of the Epicurean Club—a rich and rowdy bunch—having inherited the position, many long years ago, from her father.

I hear that the Epicureans are beginning to grumble once again. They are saying that they have eaten everything.

(For HMG—a belated birthday present)

INVENTING ALADDIN

In bed with him that night, like every night,
her sister at their feet, she ends her tale,
then waits. Her sister quickly takes her cue,
and says, “I cannot sleep. Another, please?”
Scheherazade takes one small nervous breath

and she begins, “In faraway Peking
there lived a lazy youth with his mama.
His name? Aladdin. His papa was dead….”
She tells them how a dark magician came,
claiming to be his uncle, with a plan:
He took the boy out to a lonely place,
gave him a ring he said would keep him safe,
dropped in a cavern filled with precious stones,

“Bring me the lamp!”
and when Aladdin won’t,
in darkness he’s abandoned and entombed….

There now.

Aladdin locked beneath the earth,
she stops, her husband hooked for one more night.
Next day
she cooks
she feeds her kids
she dreams….
Knowing Aladdin’s

trapped,
and that her tale
has bought her just
one day.
What happens now?
She wishes that she
knew.

It's only when that
evening comes
around
and husband says, just
as he always says,
"Tomorrow morning,
I shall have your
head,"
when Dunyazade, her
sister, asks, "But
please,

what of Aladdin?”
only then, she
knows….

And in a cavern hung
about with jewels
Aladdin rubs his
lamp. The Genie
comes.
The story tumbles on.
Aladdin gets
the princess and a
palace made of
pearls.
Watch now, the dark
magician’s coming
back:
“New lamps for old,”
he’s singing in the

street.
Just when Aladdin has lost everything,
she stops.

He'll let her live another night.

Her sister and her husband fall asleep.
She lies awake and stares up in the dark
Playing the variations in her mind:
the ways to give Aladdin back his world,
his palace, his princess, his

everything.
And then she sleeps.
The tale will need an
end,
but now it melts to
dreams inside her
head.

She wakes,
She feeds the kids
She combs her hair
She goes down to the
market
Buys some oil
The oil-seller pours it
out for her,
decanting it
from an enormous jar.
She thinks,

What if you hid a man in there?

She buys some sesame as well, that day.

Her sister says, “He hasn’t killed you yet.”

“Not yet.” Unspoken waits the phrase, “He will.”

In bed she tells them of the magic ring

Aladdin rubs. Slave of the Ring appears….

Magician dead,

Aladdin saved, she
stops.
But once the story's
done, the teller's
dead,
her only hope's to
start another tale.
Scheherazade
inspects her store of
words,
half-built, half-baked
ideas and dreams
combine
with jars just big
enough to hide a
man,
and she thinks, *Open*
Sesame, and smiles.
"Now, Ali Baba was

a righteous man,
but he was poor…”
she starts,
and she’s away, and
so her life is safe for
one more night,
until she bores him, or
invention fails.
She does not know
where any tale waits
before it’s told. (No
more do I.)
But forty thieves
sounds good, so forty
thieves it is. She
prays she’s bought
another clutch of
days.

We save our lives in such unlikely ways.

About the Author

NEIL GAIMAN is the critically acclaimed and award winning creator of the Sandman series of graphic novels, author of the novels *Anansi Boys*, *American Gods*, *Coraline*, *Stardus*t, and *Neverwhere*, the short-fiction collection *Smoke and Mirrors*, and the bestselling children's books *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* and *The Wolves in the Walls* (both illustrated by Dave McKean). Originally from England, Gaiman now lives in the United States.

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