

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #10



Stories by A.R. Stone
Joanne Hall

Poetry by Mari Ness



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January

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Cover Art: *Captain Hagel's City* by Jem French

Jem French is an educator based in NY. He has recently started dabbling in imagery after he found out computers do a much better job than his hands were able to.

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Editor's Letter

Our next President might not believe in evolution.

I think I would like a President like that, if only because I have always thought evolution to be a silly idea for explaining how things began (and yes, I know some of you think the same about creationism, but I'm not arguing that point right now). To believe in evolution, the idea that over time the simplest forms of life slowly became higher forms of life until our present state, takes as much a blind leap of faith in an idea as the alternative.

My biggest problem with evolution has always been the lack of recurring examples. If fish at one time grew legs so they could get on land, shouldn't we have in the past eight thousand years or so seen or heard of a fish, or several fish, that came limping out of the water? It stands to reason that if fish at one time made the transition from water to land they might have the same desire again. Shouldn't we have found in the past eight thousand years evidence of monkeys that had startlingly human faces, or even seen wild tribes that had one human, one monkey mate? And shouldn't humans be slowly evolving into a higher form of life?

Some will argue that those changes are happening. Natural selection continues to encourage change as positive traits breed and reproduce (but I still wonder why I see so many beautiful women with real duds for guys). Birds are growing better beaks, and fish are growing different shaped mouths, and moths are changing color so that they blend in better and survive. Humans are growing taller and stronger and living longer. Cars are becoming sleeker and have begun to learn how to go green.

I'll give you natural selection. But what I find very unbelievable is that evolution seems to have stopped its miraculous leaps of change. If evolution were true, wouldn't it stand to reason that it would still be occurring? For example, for the past five thousand years babies have been born every day, a continually occurring instance that will continue to happen for the foreseeable future. So wouldn't it stand to reason that the progressive nature of evolution would be happening today and tomorrow and next week? One day a monkey would have been born slightly more human and the next day another would have and the next another. Shouldn't bacteria in the ocean be continually turning into protoplasm and algae?

The stages of evolution didn't happen suddenly. Evolution claims it takes time, a billion, billion years for change to happen. So it should still be happening, right? A hundred monkeys weren't all born with human characteristics on the same day and then decided to go off and live to-

gether. The fish didn't make a mass exodus from ocean to land in a single week. They would still be morphing, wouldn't they?

No, to believe evolution, one has to believe that evolution suddenly happened and strangely stopped in strange bursts throughout history. Isn't that far-fetched? I am not sure I can rationally accept this idea as true. I would have to abandon my senses. But then, I don't claim to be terribly science-minded. I am a writer who happens to like the constraints and suggestive possibilities of this genre.

Which brings me to another point. The Big Bang theory? How many times did you have to throw a pile of toothpicks together before it suddenly became a house? How many times did you randomly throw a hundred thousand words together until it was a coherent book that moved people? I just can't believe the idea that particles suddenly crashed together and created the unique and sophisticated world in which I live.

That's why I think I would like a President that doesn't believe in evolution.

-SC

The Ice Queen

by A. R. Stone

A.R. Stone started writing fiction at the age of nine, which is only natural considering she comes from a family of writers and fantasy world builders. She has written and illustrated many books for children and adults and loves to garden.

When I awoke, I was alone.

I did not expect to awaken alone, but to awaken from my death as I had died: surrounded by attendants in their white masks. I expected that my mother would be there beside me, to welcome me to a new world as she had bid farewell to me in the old. All my expectations were shattered, one by one, as I lay there, wondering why no one came. At first I was afraid that something had gone wrong with the procedure, yet I was clothed, lying on a high table, my oxygen tank nowhere in sight. I then grew angry, that no one was here to tell me what year it was, to tell me how long I had been dead, or to tell me what I should expect. Anger made me shift my legs; I was stiff and unsure of my strength.

I propped myself up on the table and decided that I had never been frozen at all, but was in some kind of sanatorium. My mother must have changed her mind at the last minute. Disappointed, I was relieved at not chancing the cryonics yet, for I was aware, as all of us were, that each year we could postpone our deaths was one more year that the reviving technology could get better.

Then a wild hope entered my mind. Maybe they had found a cure for the disease and I was in a hospital undergoing treatment. I was so elated by this thought that I forced myself into a sitting position and swung my legs over the edge of the table. I was wearing one of those stupid hospital gowns that now choked me. I hitched it up my back and tried to redo the tie on my neck, but the nurse had tied it in a knot and my fingers were too stiff to tackle it. So I sat, helpless, but now curious, the flannel gown rucked up around my knees. I looked around the room. It was a modern, sterile place, empty of all but the high table and a night stand upon which sat a box.

The box bothered me. It was familiar, but I could not remember what it was for or where I had seen it previously. I reached for it and

pulled it into my lap. It was the size of a box of tissues. The catch was simple enough for my clumsy fingers, yet all that was inside was a necklace that I recognized for my mother's, and some papers. A shiver went down my spine. The papers shook as I unfolded them.

My dearest Mark,

I have little time to write and too much to explain, but if you're reading this, then my wildest hopes have been fulfilled and you are alive.

You must remember that we agreed that you should be frozen before the disease damaged too much of your brain tissue and made it less likely that complete revival would be successful. At the time of your death, you didn't know that I had the death certificates forged so that we could do the cryonics procedure without getting the courts involved. However, once your grandmother learned of your death, she was able to get a court order to bury you. I hid you before I was caught. If you're alive then I was successful.

As I write this, I'm in prison awaiting death for premeditated murder of my own child. No amount of explaining satisfied the jury, who decided that I should have waited for the disease to take its full course, and then should have frozen you after you had died a natural death. So, the verdict was murder. The entire country is afraid. If I got a mitigated sentence it might encourage similar situations and set the precedent for "murder out of mercy," as they called it.

How stupid they are to think of it as murder! But we're living in the dark ages and no one will believe that a person can be revived until it is done. Your grandmother was furious that she couldn't bury you, and I hope to God that she's happy with burying me. If I'm right, then no mother will ever have to bury a child again.

I love you too much for these stupid words. Damn! Here come the guards. I'm enclosing my

necklace, so that you will know that this is true, and some articles about the trial.

Love,
Mom

There were several newspaper articles about the controversy surrounding my mother and the media hysteria. They closed down every cryonics facility in the country and made a worldwide search for my body. As I read the articles, my hands shook so much that it was hard to read.

The irony of it! Before I had even become sick, they had nicknamed my mother the “Ice Queen” for her non-stop support for the cryonics movement. It was ironic, but somehow appropriate, that she should die in prison. One of the articles showed my grandmother standing at my mother’s grave. The caption asked for help to find her grandson’s body. I was suddenly angry at the old woman, too stuck in her ways to freeze my mother, to bury her in the dark where she would rot. The idea of my mother rotting made me sick: I realized that I had never thought of her dying, but of being revived with the rest of us in a future where there was no disease or age or death.

I carefully placed the papers back into the box though I wanted to throw it across the quiet, antiseptic room. My hands shook even more as I closed the box. I felt sorry for myself for being alone. What if I was the only one who made it? What if they had not been able to revive anyone else? What if I was the first?

“Where am I?” I cried, unable to stand the silence any longer, unable to bear imagining the future I had awakened into. I needed to know.

“Follow the blue line to your quarters,” a voice intoned.

“I can’t comply!” I yelled back, wondering where the microphone was. “I’m partially paralyzed in the legs and your revivification process was not able to correct the problem!”

Silence. My memory of the last few days prior to my death was returning. I realized that I felt exactly the same as I had then. It seemed incredible that they could do such an excellent job in “thawing me out” and not be able to do something about the symptoms of my disease, or cure the disease itself, for that matter. Maybe they had to ask permission to do anything other than a perfect restoration. Yes, that must be it. I marveled at the politeness of such a society, and I

forgave them for leaving me alone on my awakening, for letting me sit here and imagine the worst. Maybe that too was part of the process so people could get adjusted to their new lives slowly. I smiled a little, now only mildly irritated that the voice did not answer with a simple mechanical solution to my paralysis.

It seemed more real that they would not have known enough to provide a wheelchair. All the insensitivity in dealing with the handicapped still survived. Actually, I was relieved. I might be able to fit in better in a world that still needed improvement. I might be able to help them revive the others; I could be there when they awoke to help with their confusion. I had known many of them. We had all tried to become friends, because if one of us made it, the others would all have a better chance. And, of course, we wanted no animosities following us into the future. The other problems would be bad enough without us old-timers fighting amongst ourselves.

To my surprise, the door slid open and in walked a young woman in a blue coverall. She stopped just inside the door.

“Not try violence, revid!” she announced. “I full am protected. No archaic aggressive system will prevail!”

I burst out laughing. She blushed and then put her hands on her hips in a way I found provocative rather than threatening.

I held up my hands, still chuckling, and said, “Sorry, ma’am, but I have no desire to fight you, I just need a wheelchair or some new legs.”

“I you understand,” she said. “I very well Amereng 21st speak. You first revid I monitor for Prfssr Sm’t’h all myself.”

“So I’m not the first ‘revid,’ as you say.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” she said in a stream that sounded so funny that I laughed again.

“You very cannot walk?”

“Very!” I mocked, but she missed it completely and cocked her head in a way which made her seem very young. I suddenly felt the weight of loneliness come down on me and wondered if she would like me despite the fact that I still had the disease that crippled me back in the 21st century.

“And what tomorrow, tomorrow?” she asked, stepping nearer.

“I hope that you will cure this illness that I have and maybe I can get to know a little about your century.” I tried to answer what I thought was her question.

She followed all this very carefully, as if I were speaking a foreign language. I shuddered, for her appearance struck me strange for a moment, despite her looking like any normal American girl: brown eyes and short, fluffy hair, about nineteen, delicate boned but intense as sometimes small people can be. Yet there was something else. . . I blinked and dismissed it as revivification strangeness.

“What tomorrow this disease?” she clarified.

I frowned. “Oh,” I said. “Well,” and I paused for thought, “the paralysis gets progressively worse and I lose most of the feeling in the extremities. I start to hallucinate and suffer extreme headaches. I begin to forget everything and then I become a vegetable. Is that what you wanted to know?” I demanded and looked away from her. She seemed too much now like the familiar med student, more interested in the disease than in me.

“This rare disease?”

“Yes,” I said. “There was no cure for it, so I was frozen as soon as it was diagnosed as fatal.”

“Wonder, wonder!” she exclaimed. “You will good my first!”

“What do you mean?” My mind began to spin with the implications of her words. “Am I the first person that you will cure?” I hurriedly asked, to stop her from saying anything else.

“No, no, no, no, no!” she said again, only it did not sound funny anymore. “You my first fatality!”

“I don’t understand? Why did you unfreeze me if you’re going to let me die?”

“Silly revid. Revids unfreeze study. Dead, no harm life. You history report. I good mark you cooperate.”

“What!” I cried with all the indignance of a rat in a lab, pumped up with chemicals for some term paper--only they didn’t have to pump me; I was already diseased.

“Viot revidrm 2530!” she cried.

The door opened and a man walked in in a yellow coverall and smock. He looked like a surgeon except for the neon color of his uniform.

“There will be no violence here, revid!” he announced in an automatic way that made me wonder how often he had said it. It had its effect in making me cool down.

I held up my hand as he advanced closer to the side of the girl.

“No violence,” I said in a calm tone. “I would just like to know

why you think that you have the right to awaken me merely to watch me die.”

“You are dead already,” he said in a callous way. “Revids are already dead, so exempt from the rights system. We have much to learn about your century and its rampant diseases. You are a find and were revived especially for the rarity of the disease you acquired in your century. I am only letting the brightest of my grad students work with you, and you should be so privileged. You will get much media.”

I gritted my teeth and nodded. I blessed my grandmother for having buried my mother and sparing her this nightmare. I reached for the box and dragged it to my hip as if it had the power to comfort me.

“Good,” he said. “You are a good revid. No hysterics. You will earn many points for your calm behavior. Maybe can buy a little luxury. Maybe choose your own meals, choose you own channel, choose your own celeb.”

“Great,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “Alclrnw, Miminry, no, no, ndcllmed.”

She blushed and nodded to the man who then left.

“Patronizing bastard,” I said when he had left. “I guess some things never change.”

“You again violent?” she asked, alerted to my swearing.

“No,” I said, “just disappointed. I thought the future would be better than this.”

“All say that. Watch many many many many disks revids get position Prfssr Sm’th. He brilliant.”

“Yeah, like Mengels. What else do they say--the other revids?”

“Much fight. Much about shout rights. Much denial. Much about anger death. Much shout and cry. I like you. You quiet. Now we work.”

“I already went through all that--the anger I mean. I’m in the ‘resignation’ phase.”

She gave me that quizzical look of hers again and pulled out a futuristic automated chair from a cabinet under the table, helped me into the chair, and carefully put my box next to my hip, in the corner of the chair under my hand. She helped me off the table and directed me out of the room, following the blue line. She walked beside me, quiet and smelling faintly of soap.

It was not far to a door in a white hallway. I was even more disappointed that the walls were plastic and not more high-tech. It really did look like some kind of hospital. My door was unmarked and there was no knob, but the girl opened it with her palm and we walked into a cubicle. No windows, one small bed, a table, a chair. Only the lighting was futuristic, glowing at a voice command. She quickly showed me the facilities and how my dinner would arrive on a tray from a cabinet in the wall.

“What is your name?” I asked as she started to leave.

She smiled for the first time. “Miminry,” she replied and gave me device that looked like a remote control for a TV. “You watch celebs. Push button here. Change here.” Then she waved in my face in a way that was supposed to be cute, but annoyed me.

I wandered around my quarters in the chair, looking at things more closely. On the wall was a certificate authorizing a Professor to conduct medical research on “frozen bodies” and my death certificate with a stamp that marked me as approved by some board for research purposes. I wondered that the certificates were in English, probably to discourage “violence in revids.”

The death certificate looked official, yet I might be the only one who knew it was forged. My mother had wasted away in prison for killing me: it was only fitting that the paper that had convicted her would be posted in the place where I really would die.

Now thoroughly bored, I turned to the remote. I pressed the button and found myself in an audience surrounded by other people looking down at a stage. It made me jump to rub elbows with other people, so I hit the “off” button and found myself back in the safety of my own room.

Okay, I thought. *This* is futuristic. So I tried the button again.

“Pardon me,” I said to my neighbor in the audience. He ignored me. Something was said and everyone around me laughed and clapped. Spooky. It was like some Hollywood game show. I changed the “channel.” Again an audience. Again, everyone ignored me. I guess none of them understood me and it was impolite to talk during the show. I flipped through the shows. They were all identical. I cursed my ancient eyes for not seeing the point and went through more channels, hoping that I was stuck in the “game show” section of some thousand-channel television. Three hundred or so channels later, I learned the sordid truth: I was stuck in a future with hundreds

of talk shows. I went around again, hoping that there would be commercials.

Suddenly, I stopped flicking channels and had to backtrack. Yes! It was someone I knew, right there in the audience! I waved to him and shouted his name. Nothing. Then I touched the fellow next to me. My hand passed through his arm.

I flicked off the remote, panting. I was stuck in some kind of future hell. My only entertainment was to be part of an audience that had no way to contact me or I them. I felt sick and this time I was sure it wasn't some side effect of being revived.

* * *

Some hours or days later (I no longer cared about the time) Miminry returned. To my shame, I was really, really glad to see her.

"You like celebs?" she asked in her shallow way that I found rude, but infinitely preferable to the alternative.

"Celebs?" I repeated stupidly.

"Celebs," she repeated and picked up my remote.

"Oh, celebs!" I said and finally understood. "Which celebs do you like?"

"Oh Krininini good-good. Barbinia so exciting!"

"Except that I can't understand a word that they're saying," I protested.

"Oh, silly revid! Push button chair arm."

"Where?" I asked looking at my chair.

"Not here. At celeb show!"

I nodded, abashed at my ignorance. I wondered if she enjoyed making me look like a fool, but she was probably too silly for that kind of pettiness. Then I had an idea.

"Which celeb very, very, very bad, Miminry?"

"Noxoff very, very very boredom," she answered. "All moon colony oxygen wars."

"Is there anyone who talks about rights and legal issues, maybe criticism of government?"

She looked at me, head cocked, and then she brightened.

"Silly, silly, silly! All revids want rights. They think go Komonova, but no good, revid. Komonova fight live issue not dead." She broke into giggles as if this were the funniest joke.

I suddenly couldn't wait for her to leave.

I should have known. Almost a tenth of Komonova's audience were other "revids," most of whom I recognized. They were easily marked by their lack of participation, their lack of clapping and laughing, and by the way they leaned forward trying to understand the celeb. However, as soon as any of them got angry, they vanished from sight. This made me realize that all our moves were closely watched.

So I tried very, very, very hard to be a good revid and never give cause for Old Yellow (as I called Prfssr Sm'th) to reprimand me. I would have to be smarter than my friends and acquaintances who, one by one, appeared and, one by one, disappeared. At times it was unbearable to sit and watch one, then two, and sometimes as many as ten start raving at the stage and the rest of the audience. They had some sense of each other across the room, but were unable to arrange their seating or converse with others around them.

I discovered that the revids in the audience were also inaudible. I soon learned to recognize when some revid was going to try to go berserk: it was a look in the eyebrows and the way the shoulders suddenly twitched forward.

I found it depressing to watch and boring not to, but I hid this from Miminry and her lot.

"You such good revid," she praised me. I had realized long ago that she considered me a dog and not an equal. "Prfssr says you choose celeb and guest image you!"

"And what's involved with this, Miminry?"

"Celeb talks you short short while then you show later."

"It had better happen soon soon, Miminry, I no longer have much sensation in my limbs at all."

"Understand. Tomorrow okay-okay-okay?"

"Sure," I said in as flat a tone as I could manage.

"Who you choose?"

"Who you think?" I winked at her.

She laughed. "Revid! You funny! I like you! You choose Komonova?"

I nodded.

"Komonova like you, revid!"

"Miminry, my name is Mark."

"No, no, no, no, no!" she exclaimed. "You no name, you dead!"

“Yes, Miminry, I’m sorry,” I said in a hurry. “I forget importance of experiment and get personal.”

She grinned and patted my head. “Such good-good revid!”

* * *

I had studied Komonova’s shows. I had learned that her audience had a perverse fascination with disease since none of them ever got sick. One of Komonova’s shows was “the gory past and how to prevent it from rehashing in the future.” Once a week she featured a disease. I was lucky to have a disease and to have missed bubonic plague, a segment that had made me sick. I had been horrified that the bubonic victim was a famous woman from too far in the past for people to remember her accomplishments in medicine--of all the ironies. That was a bad week for me.

Now it was my turn. However, unlike the revived “dead”, I had a fight I think Komonova would take up. Of course, if I told her my secret, I might blow my only chance for getting out of this nightmare. I had to gamble. If not for me, then for the other revids. Someone had to make a case.

Komonova approved of my chair. I guess, in her eyes, it made me a more sympathetic case, less likely to freak out on her show.

Komonova was grave and impressed by my good manners. She was a very no-nonsense kind of celeb who believed in the whole process. I asked her about the media and she was impressed to answer such a curious revid.

“There are thousands and thousands of media,” she replied. “Revids are confined to the talk shows because they don’t have emotional maturity to deal with the other venues.”

“Your command of my dialect is impressive,” I told her.

“I know thirty languages and over a hundred historical dialects,” she replied. She was too cool to brag; it was a way of saying “oh, that’s not much”.

“Are you familiar with the media of my age?” I asked her.

“Oh yes. Yellow journalism, Sensationalism, Celebrity Talk Shows, oh yes.”

“You don’t have those problems?”

“Everything in the world is recorded, which has a way of eliminating controversy,” she replied.

“Ah, I see.”

“Well, I must go, I have a very busy schedule.”

“Thank you for not saying very, very, very.”

“Repetition is a young slang,” she said. “I’m almost ninety years old.”

“May I give you a gift, Komonova? I don’t have long to live, you see, and you remind me of my mother. The only pleasure I have had here is watching your show.”

She bowed her head graciously. I pulled the box onto my lap and she blinked.

“Oh, that must have been in your cryonic tank with you. It’s against regulations to violate any private possessions that were in your tank with you. I cannot accept it.”

“Can I make an exception?” I asked the walls. I held up the necklace for them to see, careful not to show the papers.

“The gesture is acceptable, Komonova. You may accept the gift,” came Prfssr Sm’th’s patronizing voice over some intercom.

“It’s very beautiful, revid,” she said. “I’ll wear it on the segment. The audience will be touched.”

I put the necklace in the box and handed it to her.

“Value it, Komonova, and I hope you wear it better than my mother could.”

She did not understand the allusion, but I hoped that she soon would.

* * *

Komonova did not contact me. I had known that it was a long shot, but now I knew that it was hopeless. The disease had not yet taken my mind, but I was having trouble remembering the lists Miminry made me repeat and my speech was getting blurred. I had less than a couple of months to live. I had learned that some of the revids had been cured of their diseases after they died, were frozen and revived again with a new disease. However, they had recently stumbled upon a new cryonics dump hidden in the Rockies and were less inclined to reuse the older revids. I had no hope of being revived again.

I was depressed and no longer had the will to pretend to be good. Even Miminry noticed and tried to cheer me up by talking about my appearance on the show. The show date neared. I thought it might be

canceled when a group of revids went wild the day it was announced: Komonova had worn the necklace and had said my name.

However, I was blessed by the great, patronizing intolerance of Prfssr Sm'th, who dismissed the furor. He made some quip about revids trying anything to get media attention. He seemed to think it amusing in a pitiful way, as some vet might find the barking of the dogs in the kennels pathetic.

So I was on. Hopeless and sick, the best result I could get might be a rise out of the revids in the audience. It seemed like a futile gesture. Like putting a flower on my mother's grave. I was dying for real this time, not because I couldn't be helped, but because they thought I wasn't alive.

Komonova was wearing the necklace, which cheered me. She introduced me to her audience, which I heard in English, and explained the particular horror of my disease. She went on to explain what had caused it--something to do with the water I had drunk in the house we lived in before I was four. I was interested in spite of myself and bit back the angry irony that they knew its cause and refused to cure it.

Over twenty revids had violent reactions and disappeared, but that was the extent of the protest. The rest of the audience hung on Komonova's every word, glad that this victim was none they knew. Still, they were unable to turn away, for Komonova held them captive. Her voice changed; she sounded sad. I glanced at her, my heart pounding.

"You all know the value of understanding ancient disease," Komonova said. Every once in a while she interjected a moral into her talks. "Prfssr Sm'th's unceasing attention to the studies he performs on the dead are of greatest value in our historic efforts to prevent the past from becoming the future."

It was almost over. Komonova would end her speech with her tag line. In a way, I was relieved. I had done what I could, taken the chance, and now I had nothing left. I found some ironic consolation in the fact that soon I would not be able to remember this, remember my time here, or remember my poor mother's face.

"No one has ever questioned the value of this research," Komonova continued, much to my surprise. "But I wear the necklace of 'The Ice Queen', and feel obliged to show you her picture. She died long ago in the dark ages of our horrible youth, but I thought our audience needed to see the face of the woman who bore this child only to strike

him down in her ignorance of the environment in which she brought him up.”

The audience was silent. Komonova’s steady, cool, historical voice was full of emotion. Her eyes were too bright.

I was flattered but also angered that she should blame my mother for her ignorance.

But then she displayed the letter and the article and the revids went wild.

Komonova began to cry as she translated the letter. Her audience forgot to politely clap and forgot to cheer as she asked, “but what does this mean?”

She turned to me.

“I never died,” I whispered. “In our time, you couldn’t be frozen unless you were dead. It was considered murder to freeze a living person. But my mother was hoping to save me, to wake me when there was a cure for my disease. So she froze me while I was still alive.”

“And the state killed her because they thought she had murdered you so you could be frozen?”

“Yes,” I whispered and bowed my head.

“You’re alive.” Komonova paused and then looked at her audience.

“He’s not dead! They’re experimenting on a real person!” someone cried.

“No, it’s a lie!” someone else cried. “He’s lying!”

The voices cried back and forth, yet I could not understand most of them, knowing only the very basics of the dialect of the future.

I concentrated all my effort in trying to raise my hand to the audience. Maybe I had made my point. Maybe there was hope for other revids. Maybe my mother had died for something.

As I raised my hand I felt a terrible pain ripping through my chest and I caught my breath, for it had been a long time since I had felt anything at all. I choked and dropped my hand.

Komonova bent closer to me, but her face was blurry. I tried to smile at the tears on her cheeks. Komonova’s face faded and all I saw was my mother’s necklace.

“Mom,” I whispered. “It almost worked.”

And then the room faded around me for the second time and I heard from far, far away, Komonova’s voice, choked with tears.

Waiting

by Mari Ness

Mari Ness lives in South Florida and spends far too much time futilely trying to convince two cats that really, the computer is not a cat bed. She has been published in Coyote Wild, Reflections Edge, Susurrus, and in the Mammoth Books of New Erotica, 2 & 3.

Waiting

What they do not tell you, in all the songs,
is that two nights before he sailed for Troy
he grabbed me in the rush-filled hall,
and took me in the shadows,
calling out her name. Afterwards, he
kissed my lips, and ran
his fingers through my hair -
and again he took me, in the shadows,
but this second time, in silence.

I could hardly call it rape, not when I
pressed against him in the dark, when I
whispered words into his ear, and guided
his mouth to my breasts. I could hardly say
he forced my hands to pull him close to me.
I could hardly say a word, but I
could call him a lesser god.

And what they do not tell you, in all the songs
is that the suitors did not come by chance,
nor wait for chance rumour to fall.
What they do not tell you, in the songs,
is how I told a wandering bard
(or two, or three, or many more)
of how my mistress longed for love
and longed for many men, and how I wandered
off myself, to find men that she might love,
of the many messages I sent

of a lonely woman weak for love.
What they do not tell you in the songs,
is how I whispered in their ears
of how my mistress would take delight
in flowers and fine wine and dance
and of the threads that might win her heart
and be brought into her weaving.

And what they do not tell you, in all the songs,
is how slowly twenty years can pass
in dancing and plots and making love
and endless false suitors in roughened beds
and how sick a mere maid can become
of her mistress's endless weaving.

The Ship-breaker's Daughter

by Joanne Hall

Joanne Hall lives in Bristol, England, and enjoys listening to music, going to concerts and the cinema when she can be coaxed out from behind her keyboard. She has been published in Sorcerous Signals, The Harrow, Written Word, and Afterburn SF. Her New Kingdom Trilogy was recently published by Epress Online. Joanne is passionate about encouraging young children to read and write—a noble pursuit in our eyes.

The cliff path was rough, but Rina walked confidently, secure in the light from the swinging lantern. She had walked this way many nights, often in the bleakest weather, and it held no fear for her any more. If it had, she would have hidden it, rather than risk the edge of her father's tongue. He always said he could get other girls to carry out this duty, but she knew in her heart none would be as skilled as her.

"Lower that light, Rina." Almat's voice rasped out of the darkness, and she obeyed at once. She had been distracted, come on to her father's men quicker than she anticipated.

"That's better. We don't want them turning too soon. Are you ready?"

Rina nodded. As she approached she could see the faces of the six men crouched low to the wind-twisted cliff grass. Lean, careworn faces, weathered by the harshness of life, struggling to improve their situation. They worked the fields all day while she slept, and she sensed their resentment. It was nothing to her, water over a smooth stone. They needed her, needed her particular skills to succeed in their venture. Her father swore she brought them luck.

"Let me look at you, daughter." Almat caught her by the wrist and drew her closer. He frowned. "You're looking tidy."

"Sorry." She stood still, clutching the lantern as he released and ruffled her hair, smeared dirt on one cheek and on her shirt.

"Loosen your blouse a little," he told her. "That's perfect. Time, anyone?"

Warran, the Austover contact, glanced at the cloud-dulled moons. "By the tide, they'll be rounding the bluff any moment."

Almat gave Rina a little kiss as he turned her towards the cliff edge. “Go on then. Time for you to put on a show, my little spellweaver.”

Rina licked her lips, and her fingers tightened around the wooden shaft of the lantern, seeking comfort in its solid reality. She tugged her blouse one final time, a last spot of disarray, and stepped away from her father and his cohorts, towards the edge of the cliff. Drawing in a great breath, she began to sing.

It was already dark when the *Violet Dawn* slipped out of Austover harbour, and the moons were high as she approached One Tree Bluff. It was the final stage of a long journey from the bustling Telesian port of Behenna, and the crew were keen to press on to Poffley, and a few well-earned days on shore. Solyar leant on the gunwale and watched the ripples from their wake shatter the hazy reflection of Adeamus in the water, silver fragments dancing on the surface of the sea. His hand strayed to his pocket, where he kept his writing stick and parchment, but he hesitated at a soft cough behind him. Most of the crew were new, and some men in the past had reacted harshly when they discovered their First Mate was a poet. He tucked the image away in his mind for later. “Is everything all right?”

His Captain leaned on the rail beside him, spitting loudly into the churning waters far below. He had been reluctant to leave Austover on such a tide, preferring to wait and round the bluff in daylight, but he had been swayed by the protests of his homesick crew, and the pressure of his clients. “These are treacherous seas, Solyar.”

“They’re said to be, Captain, but we’ve sailed this way many times, and no terrible fate has befallen us.”

“Not us, no, but the *Elia Unclad* foundered between Austover and Poffley not three moons ago, and the *Lamenting Widow* before her. A dozen or more ships have gone down here in these last few years. Something in the water, or the air. Some foul thing...”

Solyar was no longer listening to his captain. In the darkness ahead, high on the cliff, a light swung gently back and forth. “What’s that?” he wondered aloud. “Is it a warning?”

The Captain looked dour. “Go talk to the helmsman,” he said. “Make sure it doesn’t distract him. There’s rocks on the far side of the bluff and we don’t want to hit them.”

Solyar did as he was bade, making his surefooted way along the tilting deck to the stern where the helmsman, arms wrapped around

his chest to ward off the damp chill, worked the great rudder. His watchful eye was turned to the mysterious light.

“Captain says you’re to pay no mind to it,” Solyar told him as he slipped in beside him. “Watch out for the rocks instead.”

“It’s not the light.” The helmsman’s eyes glittered in the darkness. “Can’t you hear it? That voice...”

“What voice?” Solyar asked. But it touched the edge of his hearing now, a wordless lament. It tumbled from the bluff like the first flakes of snow drifting lazily from a winter sky, beautiful, delicate. “What is that?”

A hush descended over the *Violet Dawn*, broken only by the creak of woodwork and the flapping of the sails. Solyar held his breath, entranced by the song. He stared at the pool of light cast by the lantern as the ship drifted closer to the shore. The singer was a girl. She wore a long white dress, her clothes and dark hair rippled in the wind.

The song took on a plaintive note, as if she was distressed. Solyar could not make out the words, but the sound wrenched his heart, and as the ship edged closer he could see her dishevelled condition. She needed his help. Without thinking, he reached out for the tiller.

“Here, what are you doing?” The helmsman tried to wrestle it back from him. “What about the rocks?”

Solyar was deaf to his pleas, unheeding of anything but the song, and the helmsman fell back and let him steer the *Violet Dawn* towards her doom.

A crunching sound, wood splintering, and a long tremor ran through the ship as her bow struck the hidden reef and reared out of the water. Solyar was thrown backwards. His back struck the gunwale and knocked the breath from his lungs. Doubled up, sucking air, he heard the panic, the running feet. They were holed badly, going down fast. Solyar grabbed a bucket and scrambled up the sloping deck, all thoughts of the singer forgotten.

The sound of the ship slamming against the rocks carried to the watchers on the cliff, the signal for action. Rina’s duty was done. She handed the lantern to her father, and watched it weave away from her down the steep cliff path, leaving her with only the shrouded moons for company. She heard the dying ship creak and moan as it settled lower in the water, could see the dark shape stranded on the surface of the sea. When she was smaller, her father had made her swim out to the wrecks. She was nimble enough then to dart in and out

between splintered beams, snatching small cargos, tugging the rings from sailor's ears. It seemed like a game then.

No screams yet; the screaming would start when the wrecked sailors reached the shore and met the blades of her father's friends. If it was a good cargo, Almat would be happy. There would be a gift in it for her, and she wouldn't have to sing on the cliff top for another moon. If the haul was poor, she would be back in a matter of days. She sighed. She missed the sunlight, but as long as she lived within her father's walls this was her duty. Her talent had come to her for a reason, and if that was to help her father make a better life for his family, so be it.

The first scream echoed from the bottom of the cliff. Rina shuddered, pulled her cloak tightly around her, and headed for home.

The haul from the *Violet Dawn* was profitable. Barrels of ale, furs, even a box of heady Telesian spice that Almat assured her was worth more than the rest of the cargo put together. He was proud of her, gave her a necklace snatched from the captain's own desk, and told her to take some time for herself. But Rina was restless. Her strange nocturnal life alienated her from most of the villagers. She longed to see new faces, talk to people who didn't know how she stalked the cliff tops like a living phantom. Her murderous singing brought One Tree Village an uneasy prosperity, but it did not make her popular.

With her parent's blessing and a purse fat with silver, she hitched a ride on a wool-cart to spend a few days as a woman rather than a spirit in the bustling port of Austover. Warran agreed to put her up, and she had been under his roof less than half a day when she discovered why her father was so happy to let her go. It was after sundown, and she was with Warran in the bar of the Rushing Tide. The inn overlooked the harbour, and the air was thick, greasy with the smell of unwashed sailors straight from the sea. Warran addressed her in a low voice.

"See that crew over there?" He made the slightest movement with his head. "The *Midnight Runner*. They docked this morning, heading north with a heavy cargo. Try and find out what they're carrying, and where to."

"Me?" Rina set down her ale a little too forcefully. "Why do you want me to do it?"

"Our regular girl got herself married. Almat thought, while you were here, we might as well make good use of you. Is that a prob-

lem?”

It wasn't the ale that brought a sour taste to Rina's mouth. She swallowed. "What do I have to do?"

Warran leered. "Whatever it takes. The sooner we know, the better." He drained his flagon and got to his feet. "I'll be waiting back at the house. Don't let us down, Rina."

He left before she could protest, abandoning her to a quaking in her belly. Even when she was supposed to be resting her father used her in his schemes. Her hand wandered to the chain around her throat. She was tempted to tear it off and throw it back to the sea, but she thought of her mother's tired eyes, the silver changing hands over boxes of fragrant spice. Surely they had enough to live on now? She would do this last favour, out of loyalty, and then she would confront her father. Tell him he had exploited her for the final time...

A hand on her shoulder jolted her from her thoughts. It was one of the crew. She belatedly realized she had been staring their way the whole time. The stranger's mouth was lined, but his eyes and voice were kindly.

"Are you all right?"

She relaxed a little. "I'm fine."

"Only you've been staring at me a good while. I thought something might be wrong."

He had a curious lilting accent, one she couldn't place. "No." Rina tried to smile. "I drifted off for a moment, that's all."

"That's a pity. I hoped you were interested in making my acquaintance."

One last favour. And his eyes had a charming sparkle. She leaned back. "I wouldn't say no to that."

His grin was infectious. She felt her own smile tugging at her lips, despite her misgivings. He introduced himself as Sergey.

"Rina," she told him. "With an 'I'."

"And would you care for a drink, Rina-with-an-I? My copper."

"I'd love one." She watched him walk across to the bar, where a small band was setting up. He had the rolling stride of a sailor, and she toyed again with the necklace, trying to push One Tree to the back of her mind.

He returned with two flagons and nodded towards the band. "Looks like we're in for some entertainment. I hope they have a good singer. You southern girls don't have the voices of the ones back home."

She let the light-hearted slight pass. He would learn his error, if Warran had picked his mark well. “Where’s home, then?” she asked casually.

He took a long draught. “Northpoint. Ever been there?”

Rina shook her head. “I heard it was a city of philanderers and madmen. Which one are you?”

For a moment he stared at her, before he burst out laughing. “Well, that bites me back for saying southern girls can’t sing! I’m neither, just a humble sailor heading for home.”

The opening she needed. She leaned forward and widened her eyes, curious but not too eager. “You must have seen many great cities. Do you trade with Telesia?”

“At times, with the luck of the moons. If you want to see madmen, you should go south of the border sometime. We were in Behenna last moon, the sights I could tell you—” Sergey broke off as the band started up, shifting his chair around to see them better. His hand brushed hers, and Rina let it linger. Fine cargoes came from Behenna.

“So are you headed back to Northpoint now?” She raised her voice over the music, and he nodded, but she sensed he wasn’t really listening as his head bobbed to the rhythms of the band. Rina looked around for the singer as her own foot kept the beat. There didn’t seem to be one.

At the end of the song, the tambourette player cleared his throat, thanked the audience, and launched into “The Lady of Greenhaven.” It was an ancient tune, and Rina knew every word. She sang along, under her breath at first, but with increasing gusto as she was swept up in the music. Hardly aware she could be heard, she only realized as the song came to an end that Sergey was staring at her, open-mouthed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him.

“I owe you an apology. Your voice is beautiful.”

“For a southern girl, you mean?” she teased.

“For a girl from anywhere. Have you ever sung on stage?”

She shook her head, but before she could say anything he gripped her wrist and hauled her to her feet, waving to attract the attention of the tambourette player. “Why have you no singer?”

The musician bristled at the interruption. “She’s sick,” he explained bluntly. “We couldn’t get another—”

“Rina can sing for you.” Sergey gave her a gentle push towards the stage, and an encouraging smile. *Go on*, he mouthed.

The tambourette player regarded her with suspicion. “Can you sing, girl?”

“It’s been said,” she demurred.

“We’ll see. Do you know “The Ballad of Elena?””

She nodded, unsure now, self-conscious under the scrutiny of so many eyes. “I..I think so.”

“On the fourth beat, then...”

Rina squeezed her eyes closed, filled her lungs and let the music sweep her away. “The Ballad of Elena” was a tragic lay, and as the last notes tumbled from her lips and she opened her eyes, she saw the tambourette player standing frozen, instrument hanging at his side and tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Beautiful,” he murmured. “Simply beautiful.” He shook his head to break the spell. “You don’t want to work for us, do you?”

Rina sighed. “I work for my father,” she explained, raising her voice over the rapturous applause and shouted demands for more singing.

“At least sing a few more with us. I don’t think they,” he indicated the crowd with a sharp jerk of his head, “want to let you go just yet.”

The tambourette player was right, and it took five more songs before the audience permitted Rina to make her escape. Sergey waited with her drink, discreetly dabbing his eyes with his sleeve.

He sniffed loudly. “Look what you’ve done to me! You could sing for copper, you know?”

“Where?” She was scathing.

“Anywhere.” He reached out and clutched her hand. “I’m serious, Rina. You could be a great success in the city. Even sing for a lord!”

“My father would never allow it.” She pressed her lips together, trying not to let disappointment cloud her voice. Almat would only let her use her talent to cause death, to bring him coin. Before tonight, she had never considered singing for her own money, lawfully earned. She had once sung for the sake of singing, but now she could barely remember the pleasure she took in it.

“Does he have to know? You could sail with me tomorrow evening. I know people who would pay to hear you sing, spice merchants in Poffley. I’ll introduce you after we unload. My wife would

let you stay with us, I'm sure."

The mention of spice reminded her of her unwelcome duty. She had pushed it to the back of her mind, but now it crowded in again. "I don't know..."

"Your husband could come with you, if that's what you're worried about." His eyes sparkled. "I'd hate you to think I was trying to dishonour you."

"My what?"

"Your husband. I assumed it was him with you earlier. Or are you not married yet? I noticed your betrothal chain, that's all."

"My..." She touched the necklace, and sickness burned in her throat. The necklace her father snatched from the cabin of the *Violet Dawn* while the water gushed in was a betrothal chain. It belonged to a grieving woman in a faceless Northern town, one who would never know the fate of her love. Rina resisted the urge to tear it from her neck. She swallowed. "I'm not married," she said. "But I can't come with you. I have to leave."

"Leave?" He half rose as she turned away, tears stinging her eyes. "I haven't scared you off, have I?"

"I have to leave!" She fled blindly, stumbling into chairs and tables, his shout echoing in her head.

"Rina, come back!"

Rina arrived at Warran's house and hammered on the door. Breathless and tearful she pushed past him as he let her in. "Well?" he said in greeting.

"Well what?"

"Did it go well? What did you find out?"

"Leave me alone!" She tried to walk away, and he seized her arm.

"What did you learn?"

A surge of hatred, hot and bitter. "Why should I tell you anything? You left me in that bar to act as a whore."

"I left you there because your father asked me to. Because you owe him, for the roof over your head, the fine food, your little trinkets." One finger flicked the necklace disdainfully. "How can you be so ungrateful?"

"Ungrateful?" But his words stung. It was true, ship-breaking had provided Rina with a rich life, and now she was paying the price. She sagged. "The *Midnight Runner* leaves tomorrow evening."

“Cargo?”

“Spice to Poffley.”

“See?” He raised her face, holding her tear-stained face to the light. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“This is the last time, Warran,” she swore. “I won’t sell myself again for any cargo, no matter how rich.”

He laughed softly. “You say that now, but what happens next time you want a fine dress, or a new pair of boots?” She could not answer. “You’ll see. Now, grab yourself something to eat while I ready the horses. It’s a good distance to One Tree, and we want to be there before dawn.”

For Rina, exhausted and emotional, the long ride across the moon-dappled countryside passed in a blur of pounding hooves and rushing wind. She almost tumbled from the saddle as she arrived in her father’s yard. The white stone cottage was stained pink with the first beams of sunlight, but Rina barely had time to notice it as her mother bustled her away to her shuttered room, tucked the furs around her and bade her sleep.

“You’ve got a big night tonight, Rina.”

She woke to darkness, to some soft bread rolls left by her bed. Still stiff from the ride, she moved with difficulty to the window and loosed the catch on the shutters. High above, the first solitary star gleamed, flashing like a beacon. Her father would come to wake her soon.

She sank onto the bed, head in hands, wondering what she could do. She considered feigning sickness, but Almat made her walk the cliff in all weathers and complained bitterly when she was struck down with fever. Nothing short of lying on her deathbed would be sickness enough.

The door clicked open. Almat, holding a candle, cleared his throat. “Rina? Time to work.”

She bit her lip. “No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I won’t do it any more. You can’t make me.”

“I see.” Her father’s voice was low. Disappointed. “What will you do instead?”

“I could sing for coin.” The words sounded foolish even as they left her mouth.

Almat laughed. “Sing for coin? And how many barrels of gold is

that going to bring in every moon?” He set the candle down and sat beside her on the bed, patted her hand. “Warran tells me this *Midnight Runner* has spice for Poffley. If we get a good price for it, we can retire for good. All I want is to give you and your mother a decent life, and your talent can help me achieve that. You wouldn’t be selfish enough to deny me, would you?”

Once, this would have convinced her, but she had heard it too many times. Sergey had shown her there could be another way. “You always say that,” she protested. “And it never happens. There’s always one more shipment, one more night on the cliff. Another murder—”

She bit back a cry as Almat struck her across the face, bringing tears to her eyes. “You listen to me, girl.” He shook her by the shoulders and dragged her to her feet. “You’re going to get dressed and come with me to the cliff without another word. Everything I do, I’ve done for my family, and I won’t be repaid like this. Dress!”

He stood by the door, arms folded, watching her with narrowed eyes as she moved slowly to her clothes chest with the waves carved on the lid. Stolen, snatched from the sea like so many of her possessions. The white dress lay at the top. Her father had sliced it from the corpse of a new-drowned passenger, washed up on the beach, and her mother had repaired it and made it fit. It was heavy as she lifted it over her head and let it fall. Weighed down with sorrow, it swathed her like the icy embrace of the tide. She fastened it with numb fingers, keeping her head down.

“There’s my beautiful girl.” Her father’s voice was warm again. “I’m sorry I slapped you, I lost my temper. Come here.”

He adjusted her necklace. It had twisted while she slept, the pendant caught up on her shoulder. Now it hung over her heart, where it belonged. He fussed with her hair, and one hand stroked her cheek. “It won’t be for much longer, I promise.”

Rina said nothing, numb as she followed him into the yard and took up the lantern. The other wreckers awaited them; she saw the same interest in their eyes as she had seen in Sergey’s, but their looks were tempered with the cold of steel. She shuddered as she fell into step behind them, tracing the familiar path up to the cliff. She knew every stone, every hollow. As familiar to her as the face of her father, and as despised.

She trailed on sluggish feet, and as Almat and his companions

reached their accustomed waiting spot, her stride faltered. Beyond them she could hear the suck and gurgle of the waves against the rocks, and as she licked her lips she tasted salt. She imagined Sergey, flung like a piece of driftwood, his body slammed against the rocks and dragged under. Those trusting eyes open and accusing as he sank away from her into the murky depths...

“Rina! Come on, light the lantern!”

She obeyed her father’s order, suddenly longing for warmth and light to chase away her dark vision. Moving towards the edge of the cliff, looking south, she picked out three bright spots, racing across the surface of the sea. Running lights. The *Midnight Runner* swept on towards her destiny, unaware.

The water was thick and black as tar. One hundred feet below, but for all she could see it might as well have been a thousand, inky and remote as the night sky above. She could not see it, but she could hear it, snarling, greedy. She recoiled, and her hand strayed to her throat, fingers brushing cold metal.

The lights were clearer now, closer. Making good time with the following wind. She could pick out the shape of the vessel, running close to the coast. They would have to swing out to round the bluff. Rina tried to calculate how fast the ship was going, how far out it would be when they made the turn. How long she would have.

The running lights shifted as the ship swung to port. Time to test Rina’s resolve. Time to find out how good her lungs really were. She took in one final, massive breath...

Warran dug Almat in the ribs. “What’s wrong? Why doesn’t she sing?”

Almat didn’t know. He raised his head, saw the lantern shining steadily. Not moving. “Let me see,” he said, standing and hurrying towards the light.

No sign of Rina. The lantern was wedged between the rocks, a steady beacon projected a yellow beam over the churning sea. He looked around, anger giving way to panic. Where was she?

“Rina!”

His foot clinked against something on the ground. He crouched. The necklace, the Captain’s necklace from the *Violet Dawn*. The one he had given his daughter for a job well done. And beside it, half undone, a pair of boots. Small boots. Women’s boots. Beyond them, abandoned amid the rough salt-grass, lay the white dress.

“Rina! Rina, what have you done?”

His despairing cry rang across the shifting sea as he sank to his knees on the cliff edge. Out to sea, in the reflection of the lantern, a splash of white. Just a glimpse, his eyes tricking him with the waves and the moonlight.

“Rina!”

The *Midnight Runner*, its precious cargo safe, sailed northwards and was swallowed up by the night.

