

OG's Speculative Fiction



Issue #26

Poetry by John C. Tremblay

Stories by John Richard Albers
David Murphy

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September

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Cover Art: *The New Superhero* by Jem French

Jem French is an educator in upstate New York. He has recently started dabbling in digital imagery when he realized computers did a much better job than his hands.

Publisher, Golden Acorn Press

Editor, Seth Crossman

Issue #26 September 2010

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Editor's Letter

I grew up like most boys, a bit wild and raw and infinitely curious. Most of my time was spent outdoors wacking the heads off dandelions with tree branches I had whittled the bark off of or fishing in the pond out behind our house. I traipsed after my sister through the woods building forts and tree houses out of fallen branches and mud and weeds tied together. But it wasn't until I was twelve that my true imagination was woken. That year for Christmas I received *In the Hall of the Dragon King*, by Stephen R. Lawhead. Books had always been a way to pass the hours I was forced to take naps on Saturdays and Sundays and most of those had been no thicker than my pinky fingers. They were books I could read in hours, days at the most. They made those naps seem shorter. But that book by Lawhead was as fat as a block of cheese and I was not excited about reading it.

It was a rainy day some months later when I picked up that book and started reading. Within pages I was hooked. Lawhead introduced me to fantasy worlds, worlds of heroes and queenly women and dangerous quests. And so a yearning was born, a yearning to visit these worlds and inhabit them and go on those adventures and eventually find a queenly woman. Thus was vision born in me.

Over the years I have come to realize how much vision is necessary for any individual. Indeed, it is the force that draws us forward. Look at some visionaries in history. Napoleon Bonaparte. The Wright Brothers. Christopher Columbus. George Washington. Harriet Tubman. These individuals had a vision for what could be. It stirred them to action. It drove them forward.

It is my encouragement that each of you develop your own vision. Perhaps it is finally finishing that novel. Perhaps it is visiting Moscow. Perhaps it is calling up your father and reconciling. Pick a vision that means something to you and pursue it. Don't just sit back and let life happen. Decide what you want. Stir up a vision for your future and make it happen.

-SC

The Lament of Foclaid

by John Richard Albers

John Richard Albers, an author, a freelance copywriter, reluctant gardener, involuntary ascetic, armchair psychologist, amateur historian, maimed carpenter, color blind painter, peacemaker, dragonslayer, warmaster and part time herald of the apocalypse, has no memory of the western Washington forest in which he was born and has since been confined to the swamps of the rural South. He graduated from the University of Central Florida in 2006 magna cum laude, receiving a BA in Psychology and has spent the interim working as a freelance copywriter and editor for New Living Magazine. First published in the 2005 edition of Authors of Tomorrow, and has since been published in Bewildering Stories and Mindflights among others. He currently lives on the Treasure Coast of Florida where's he's about to publish his debut novel. In this adventurous tale, a man must decide how far he is willing to go to save his people.

Balian.

Balian!

Confound it! Thirty-two grandchildren and one-hundred and seven great-grandchildren I've sired and only one with the silvered tongue and nimble fingers of a poet and piper amongst them.

Ah, Balian. Come closer, my lad; my eyes failed me long ago and now I fear my heart shall soon follow.

Leave us, wife and children all. I would speak to a man whose mind holds the tales of our people's victories and will not begrudge an old man his ramblings.

Yes, I was a passably fine warrior in my day; of that you already know. My club and bow saw off those who would wrest this land of bonnie fen and billowing bog from us. Many's the tale of triumph in my lifetime, but all are as shadow compared to my single most failure. Let me unburden my soul. I beg you to listen that you might sing of the man rather than the hero of the Forthreith clan.

It was in my sixteenth year that I erred. The mantle of manhood and cloak of thorns were both still raw upon my back. I was the youngest chieftain of Pict-kind since Fobaig the Unready, and so did it show.

I had seen it many times, just as our forefathers did. Like them, I was never able to reach the floating isle of *Tirfo Thuinn* before it would fade

beneath the waves. It was always off the bow of our fishing boats, as if the sacred home of the Fae was taunting us.

But this time was different. Unlike my forefathers, rest their bones, I listened to the laments of old and used their ancient wisdom. And so I found myself jouncing across the sea on the loathsome back of an *each-usige*.

Yes, I know. Such Fae-born creatures are dangerous. They take the guise of a magnificent riderless stallion, so amiable that any in passing are tempted to mount. Once upon its back, the illusion vanishes, and it shows itself for the bloated rotting carcass it is, carrying its hapless victim to a watery grave.

Such was not my fate, though; if only I had been so fortunate.

Legend of iron's properties in pacifying the Fae go back well beyond memory, though that it could be cast into shapes was new to us then. The Celts used it when they came from the Land of Ire to face us in battle.

I had sewn bits of it into my woolen breeches. And with the iron's touch, the bloated, maggot-ridden *each-usige* was as meek as a filly foal.

The glorious Land Under Wave was as close as it would ever be, in the hard, iron-grey swell of the deep sea beyond the tides. A fog wreathed it; a veil of hazy linen hugging the contours of a ripe bride's blushing cheeks, heightening my anticipation.

I knocked my arrow, taken from a Celt warrior in the most recent of their rapacious attacks, and loosed.

It was the finest shot I've ever made, and more's the pity.

The arrow struck with the meaty *thunk* of a dagger plunging into flesh. A wild, *bansheed* screech filled my head with ringing pain and the fog lifted, curling in on itself and puffing away like dried grass on a fire to reveal *Tirfo Thuinn* in all her bridal splendor.

Like a lodestone attracting a needle, I was carried straight to it. The *each-usige* left putrescent, pustular hoof prints on the strand. The gentle, rolling surf soothed them away with each fluid swell. And from the sand, my arrow stood bolt upright. A red humour bubbled from the tear in the earth.

I tensed when two riders crested the dunes on the ridge, galloping for me furiously. The only arrow I thought to bring was used. All I had was my flint dagger. Determined not to show my unease, I kept my ground.

One rider was bedecked in armor that covered his body like the shell of a turtle, all cold silver and icy blue. The other wore a metal hide like the scales of a fish, warm as sunlight and honey. They carried fearsome spears flying their respective colors. I would've fled then and there were they aimed at me.

It seemed as if they were racing, shoving each other out of enmity rather

than haste to bear me down.

They tripped to a halt in a display of horsemanship more disciplined than I've ever known, scant body-lengths away. Their spears were holstered in the stirrups of their leather saddles—padding of the sort my abused hind-quarters begged for—and removed their helms as one.

The rider in gold exuded serene tranquility despite his dauntingly wide shoulders and narrow waist, the only sign of his ire in the hard cast of his green eyes. Short bowl-cut hair the color of ripe wheat matched his rosy cheeks and full lips. The horse upon which he sat was as healthy and green as the distant scrub-grass.

The silver rider's face was as handsome as a carving's, and just as free of life. His skin was paler than my own, blue veins running through hollow, cadaverous cheeks. Long black hair hid all but the pointed tips of his ears. His horse was thin-withered and still as the dead, armored like an insect in glistening plates of purple and black.

They spoke in unison, and I fought to make sense of it all.

"Mortal!" the silver rider bellowed. "You trespass on the sacred domain of the Fae! The Land Under Wave has been injured by the thrice cursed iron of man! Come with me at once to the Unseelie Court to face the Winter Queen's judgment!"

"Honored mortal," the gold rider said. "You find yourself in the home of the *sidhe*. The Land Under Wave has been harmed by the iron you've brought here. Undoubtedly it was accidental. Please accompany me to the Seelie Court to await the Summer Queen's pleasure."

They waited, one the visage of impeccable martial reserve and the other of warlike barbarism. I knew that if the legends of our people were false my life was forfeit.

"I invoke the famed hospitality of the Fae," I said, trying to feel as confident as I sounded. "Under these laws no lie may be spoken or violence done between our kinds while we converse. You are emissaries of the Fae court?"

I did not know what a court was, save that they wished to take me to one.

"Courts," they said.

"I wish to speak to the leader of the Fae," I said.

"Which one?" they said.

"Um ... This is a matter of war."

The gold rider seemed to shrink, as if disappointed, and galloped off. The other rider's skeletal face lit in macabre victory.

"That would be the Winter Queen's domain," he said.

"Then I bid you take me to the elf Winter Queen," I said, relieved at working through their maze-like ways.

The fires of anger blazed bright in the rider's eyes. He whipped a long sword from alongside his saddle and kicked his horse forward with an ululating cry. I was helpless to do anything save close my eyes in the face my impending doom.

There was a slight tap on my shoulder, and a mighty crack split the air!

When I next looked, the rider was clutching at his charred, blackened glove and his sword lay on the grass. Crackling arcs of lighting seethed over it.

The rider glared at me with murder plain on his face.

"Hold your tongue, mortal!" he said through pain-gritted teeth. "A sparrow would not be mistaken for a hawk! Neither would a lowly elf be mistaken for a high *sidhe*! Such as we are the noble lords of all Fae!"

I was shaking so badly that I could scarce keep my mount. Only the laws of hospitality had saved me. The noble *sidhe* rider would still kill me if he could.

"I-I beg your forgiveness," I said. "Pray excuse my ignorance and humbly guide me to the Unseelie Court."

Snarling in frustration at his ethereal shackles, the silver rider viciously dug his spurs into the sides of his Fae mount. It leapt into a gallop from a standing start. The rider's cruel words trailed behind.

"Follow, if you dare. But best keep up; it's no fault of mine if you lose your way."

* * *

The silver rider's horse was fleet and spirited, far more so than its cadaverous form would suggest. The *each-usige* was tireless, but made docile by the iron on my breeches. I'd scarcely gone a mile before the silver rider's fluttering pennon disappeared over a far hill with naught but his cruel laughter to guide me. And then even that was gone.

His mount left no tracks that I could follow, but there was no turning back now that I'd gone so far. What choice did I have but to forge on?

I'd passed by rolling hill and fragrant fen for a long while when I chanced upon a road. It was little more than a mud path gouged into the ground by the tramp of countless feet, but it sufficed.

The landscape around me was changed, as if two worlds met upon that simple road.

To my right was desolation and decay. Endless bogs were filled with bubbling pools of noxious sulfur. Only the skeletal remnants of trees broke up the endless, mosquito-infested squalor.

To my left was a field of wildflowers in full bloom despite the lateness of the year. Fish—fish I say—swam through the waving long grass as if it was an undersea bed of kelp! And beyond lay a forest filled with proud oak and swaying yew.

Is it any wonder then that when the road forked I turned left?

I should've known better to listen, but the unease I felt in that strange land vanished like mist under the morning sun at the sound of that sweet voice. It dipped and dove like a falcon on the wing. I was lifted up, and yet my heart ached at its message of a love and loss too pure to be shackled by common words.

My mount was as sure-footed as ever. It picked its way through the wood without err; around toppled logs and over deep shoals of fallen leaves. And in that moment, any evils the *each-usige* might've harbored against me or man were forgiven for leading me to that wondrous maiden.

The grey stone she knelt upon was too large for the gentle, meandering brook to carry away. She was busy rinsing a shirt in its clean flowing waters. Her long, radiant hair was bound in a circlet of daisies. The song ended and her pink cheeks lifted in an enticing smile at the sight of me.

"Ye have the look o' a man who likes what he sees," she said, wringing the shirt dry. "You'll be the mortal that's got all the *sidhe* in a tither, now?"

"My name's Foclaid," I said. "I'm sorry to interrupt your husband's washing—"

"Oh, t'is not me husband's. It belongs tae a friend. Poor wee man needs a clean shirt tae be buried in. But that's neither here nor there. You'll hae lost your way, I'll wager?"

"I'm trying to find the Unseelie Court. Can you tell me where it is?"

She blew an errant strand from her face and stood. Long legs fluttered under a skirt that hugged her hips as she hopped across the stream, sauntered up, and ran a hand down my mount's neck. The rotten *each-usige* nickered at her touch.

"Now why would a fine figure o' a son o' man want tae head intae Winter lands?"

She shrugged, not waiting for a reply, fixed me with a playful grin that set my blood afire, and started to walk away.

"There's a *ceilidh* brewin' at Cylwyleidh Croft for the Windfall Feast. Come, if you've a mind. Perchance someone there'll hae the kennin' o' the way."

How could I refuse those swaying hips?

It was a short trip in all, her walking and I riding. The forest thinned and gave way to an apple orchard, empty from the picking. I could hear the

haunting lilt of pipe music from further in.

We were close to the towering wooden croft when a frightening figure leapt out from between the orchard rows.

The *fendoree* are known as tireless Fae who work mortal man's fields all the night long if you leave a bowl of fresh milk for them in payment. I used to lie awake at night and listen to the swish of their blades at the harvest when I was a boy. I never thought them so imposing until I beheld one up close. Covered from head to toe in thick brown fur it was, its lanky form bursting with muscle. It hefted a wickedly curved scythe and regarded us with a fearsome glint in its eye.

"Undine!" it said. "Will you ever come back from your washing without bringing along every wayward wretch that crosses your path, gel?"

The maid left out a long-suffering sigh, as if such menacing figures were no more troublesome than a bluebottle buzzing about her head, and faced the *fendoree* with dainty hands on generous hips.

"Shush, you! This here's Foclaid, a son o' man. Cylwyleidh will be wantin' tae greet him."

The *fendoree* shouldered its scythe and the irritation bled from its form. A shifting in the fur suggested it was smiling. "Found a dance partner, have ye?"

"That's no business o' yourn!"

"Hah! Fair enough."

The *fendoree* furrowed its bushy brows at me. "Riding when a poor gel must suffer to walk? Where's your sense of decency, son of man?"

Realizing my error, I made my apologies and dismounted. The moment my breeches left its back, the *each-usige* bolted. It pelted off and away, leaving me flat on my back. I felt a profound sense of loss once I was helped up off the grass.

The *fendoree* grunted, oddly painstaking and motherly in brushing me clean for one so fearsome. "Good. Twas not right for a Winterborn creature to pollute Summer lands, anyhow."

Undine grabbed me by the wrist and started tugging.

"T'is no great loss," she said. "Now come, the band's already playin'!"

I allowed myself to be led by the laughing maid. Out from the rows we passed into the midst of a rollicking *ceilidh*. All the fantastical legends of our people were given form in a colorfully bunted clearing set between orchard and field, watched over by a towering wooden croft.

Stout dwarves, waist high and with long, flowing beards, stood around a pile of oaken casks, sinking one tankard after another in gruff silence. Milling elves seemed to be the majority. Some looked no different than Undine

or I. Others, a lesser breed, seemed little more than children. Their skins all the colors of a fallow field in spring, they ran and danced and played with abandon, making general nuisances of themselves. More *fendoree* minders watched from the outskirts. Angular *cluricaun*, red-faced from drink, were surprisingly spry for their apparent old age. They flung about the plank-wood dance floor before the croft, spinning in circles, green coat-tails flying. It was all to the pipe and drum of a *trou* band. Little more than slight, dainty claws and chicken feet were to be seen from the depths of their thick, oversized coats.

I was struck dumb by the frantic energy of it all, and started when my hand was tugged again.

“Well?” Undine said. “No use in gawpin’! Let’s be about a drink.”

Not an eye was cast my way as we skirted the dance floor. The dwarves made room for us at the taps, and Undine eagerly pushed a tankard into my hand. The rich, scintillating taste and throaty burn were familiar.

“You know how to make whiskey?” I asked.

“Unfortunately not,” a high-pitched voice said, and I looked around for the source. “*That* magic isn’t quite within the remit of the Fae. The sons of man are kind enough to ... *ahem*, shall we say ‘donate’ it in exchange for living on my lands.”

Seeing my confusion, Undine giggled and pointed at the nearest cask.

A well-fleshed, ruddy-cheeked man no higher than my ankle regarded me. His portly frame was clad in a wool coat and leggings of strange cut with a set of modern leather shoes. Nearly hiding his pointed ears was a cockaded cap, tipped rakishly over graying locks. A tankard the size of a thimble was raised amiably in my direction.

“I don’t much care for whiskey myself,” the tiny man said, “but the dwarves can’t get enough of it.”

He gestured at one droop-eyed fellow who passed out with the creaking finality of a tree falling to earth. His tankard was still raised. Even on the grass, one arm was still held up; he never spilled a drop. The other dwarves snorted in derision at his weak stomach.

“No,” the tiny man continued, “give me Fae cider any day of the week. So, you’re the one that’s caused a big to do with the courts?”

“This is Foclaid, sire,” Undine said. “Foclaid, this is King Cylwyleidh.”

“King?” I said. “Then you head one of the Fae courts?”

For one so small, Cylwyleidh had a powerful laugh.

“Me?” he said, wiping away a tear. “Good gracious, no! I’m a Low King of Summer; I pay fealty to Queen Titania. If it weren’t for the Windfall Feast I would still be at home in the Shetlands. Wonderful place, simply

wonderful. You must visit if you're ever there. It's the big mound atop Cherbolg Hill; can't miss it."

Undine gave a delicate cough.

"Ah, but listen to me," Cylwyleidh said, "nattering away. I suppose I should make the announcements and get things underway."

He put down his tankard, straightened his coat, and, somehow, his voice filled the clearing. The Fae hung on his every word.

"Children of Summer! Today we find ourselves twice blessed! Not only has the Apple Tree Man deigned to share the windfall of man's crop with us, without which we could not enjoy our annual feast and this delicious cider—our kind thanks, sir"—What I thought was an apple tree standing beside the far end of the croft shifted and inclined a branch—"but we have with us here Foclaid, the very mortal who's gotten up the courts' noses."

A dangerous mutter swept the crowd. Cylwyleidh raised his hands for quiet.

"I know, I know. He's bound for the Unseelie Court, it's true. But let's not hold that against him. He is to be our guest of honor. And in the short time he has before he must go, let's show the son of man that not all Fae are gloom and doom!"

Silence.

Undeterred by the owlish faces and their guarded looks, Cylwyleidh swept a hand out at the croft.

"Let the Windfall feast begin!"

Gone were the untrusting glances, borne away on the wind of an approval roared so loud it blasted clean through me. The croft doors were thrown wide and the air filled with the most delicious smells. The crowd swept us up and carried us within. I didn't mind the jostling in the slightest.

We took places at the low tables—they had to be low for much of the crowds' sake—and dug into the most wondrous delicacies with gusto. Sweetmeats, fresh fruit, iced dainties, heavenly dumplings, fowl, fish, and more besides that I haven't the words to describe filled the tables until they creaked under the weight. The warmth, laughter, and smiles on every face made me feel right at home.

I must admit that I was deep in my cups when the sun went down. The whiskey was powerful, but I was curious of the nectar that the Fae sipped. It didn't seem to tire them. If anything, they became more boisterous and energetic as they drank.

"How do you brew such a clear cider?" I asked, peering into the depths of a pitcher. The contents were as red and peerless as a sunset.

As the guest of honor, I sat at the head of the table, Undine hanging at

one side with such smug pride that I quite felt like a prize deer displayed by a hunter. Rather than being beside me, Cylwyleidh had his own doll's table set next to my plate. His ruddy cheeks bulged and he swallowed a smidgeon of black bread before answering.

"You'd have to ask the Apple Tree Man; he knows the secret. Good luck prying it from him, though. I often think he keeps it to himself so we have to throw a *ceilidh* for him every year."

The Apple Tree Man stood trunk-deep in a tub of sugary sap; the smell of strong spirits pouring off it was palpable even from the far corner. He'd begun to sway a little as the feast wore on, leaves jangling. A knot that might've been an eye winked at me.

"Oh, look!" Cylwyleidh said, clapping his hands in excitement. "He likes you! He gets like that when he's been at the syrup, you know."

"Right. I'll ... uh-try to keep clear of any low-hanging fruit," I said, "Anyway, might I try a little?"

"Of course," Cylwyleidh said. He sank his own thimble-full and smacked his lips appreciatively. "Aaah. *Braap!* Oh, excuse me. Do be careful; it tends to take the sons of man oddly."

I couldn't help but laugh. There I was, sitting in *Tirfo Thuinn*, talking with a tiny king, being winked at by a drunken over-amorous tree, with an elf maid smiling at me in a delightfully familiar way, and someone was worried that I would act oddly!

Still, the cider tasted like nothing else. It overwhelmed my senses and left me seeing stars... And then the stars began to move. They gathered outside the croft doors and swirled down to hover over the empty clearing.

I paused and looked at me cup. The cider didn't seem that strong.

"Ah!" Cylwyleidh said. "The pixies are here; right on time."

I watched the lights of blue, green, and red, blinking like fireflies, and made out the miniscule forms of men and women flitting about on blurring wings.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Cylwyleidh said, nudging my little finger with his elbow and giving me a knowing wink.

"Yes," was all my befuddled mind could come up with.

Undine pouted and cuddled against me. "Not more beautiful than I, I dinnae hope."

"Of course not."

Cylwyleidh laughed.

"Just be careful," he said, "sting like hornets, don't you know."

"Pixies or Undine?" I asked, and got a light cuff on the arm for my troubles.

Cylwyleidh just grinned.

“Take your pick.”

A *throw* marched in from the winking lights with all the solemn regality of a funeral procession. Free from the dangers of burning daylight now, this one wore a kilt and little else. Its coal-black skin, sunken rib cage, and chicken legs were bare for all to see. It hefted a set of pipes under one arm and tiny, lidless pink eyes surveyed us all from underneath its dusky black bonnet.

“Take your places for the henking, everyone. All who would take part in the henking, take your places.”

Its announcement made, the *throw* marched out.

“What’s the henking?” I asked.

“A *throw* dance,” Undine said. “Very difficult, wonderful fun.”

“Sounds good,” I said, rising from my bench. “I could do with a step or two after such a fine meal.”

“But you’ve never danced it,” Undine said. “Won’t you make a fool o’ yourself?”

“I won’t know until I’ve tried.” I offered her my hand. “Join me?”

Her expression of worry gave way to that joyous, inviting smile that I’d come to admire. Her hand was burning hot in mine, and we walked out with the other couples.

Once placed in a grid, the *throw* dance master addressed us all with a solemn, officiating nod of his beak. The rhythm of his stamping foot was taken up by the drummer; a fast, sprightly beat. The harpist picked out a few high, sonorous notes before the dance master came in with the pipes to carry the deep, soulful melody. And, with a lurch, we were off.

My feet seemed to move on their own, carried by the music that both glorified life’s wonders and lamented its hardships, so like Undine’s song.

It was a harvest dance, and a wild one, lit crazily by the flashes of swirling pixies above. One hopping step in, two dainty steps back, a reckless slide forward, a laughing whirl around the partner, and a reel of mixed pairs until the dozen-odd couples were back with their partners. The elf couples weren’t so bad, but the cluarican were difficult. I found myself holding them off the ground, what with the difference in height. Some of the women’s beards scratched terribly.

Then the music slowed to half speed. It deepened, like the dolorous beating of a whale’s heart. We hugged in, swaying gently in one another’s arms for a spell before starting over.

For all the quick changes, jumps, and lively switchbacks, I felt tireless. I was an endless font of strength, lost in the warm eyes of Undine’s laughing

face. We could've danced the sun up and the moon down, but it was over all too soon. Or so I thought until Undine led me from the dance floor.

The rear wall of the croft was dark, cozy, and well away from prying eyes. She pulled me into the hay pile and my hopes were realized. Our lips met in a sea of ecstasy. My hands explored her tantalizing curves and burning flesh. Her hair smelled like wild roses tainted with the faint tang of sweet sweat.

I could feel her hands on my back when she grimaced.

"Thorns?" she said. "Why would you wear a cloak o' thorns?"

"To remind me of my duties as chieftain of the Fortrheith clan," I breathed into her ear.

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Not once the scars finish healing."

I went to unwind the cloak's clasp. Undine smiled wickedly and reached for my breeches.

"Let me help."

"Wait!" I said. I was too late.

There was a crack, flash, and piercing scream.

Undine lay in the hay. She sobbed and clutched at the hand that touched the scraps of iron ringing my breeches.

The pounding of feet heralded the *fendoree*. His scythe was ditched in his haste. He barreled into the stricken maid, scooped her up like a child in his lanky, corded arms, and shielded her from me. She cried against his chest.

"Shush, dear. It'll be alright," he cooed, cradling her. "Don't you worry. I'm here."

That dangerous glint returned to his eye and his snarl was terrifying.

"*What'd you do to her?*"

"Me? I-I didn't-noth—"

I sucked in a horrified breath when Undine looked up.

She was changed. Just as when a taut, ripe apple is left on the branch, so had the young maid sagged. She was a withered bag of flesh and warts.

"What-what's happened?" I asked.

"Glamour."

I turned at the voice to behold the gold rider. He looked down at all three of us, martial bearing stern but not unkind. The *fendoree* gave the rider a humble bow of his head; and Undine, sobbing and stricken as she was, still managed to show deference.

"She hides her true nature behind a pretty face," the rider continued. "Glamour is a magic most Fae have, but few are so strong as hers."

I went to touch Undine's shoulder, to apologize, to say how sorry I was to cause hurt. The *fendoree's* monstrous growl stopped me dead. Undine waved me away, hiding her face behind her stringy hair.

"Go," she sobbed. "Just go."

I looked up at the rider, who shook his head.

"Best let her be, lad. Besides, you're wanted. Queen Titania's decided you've overstayed your welcome and bid me escort you back to Winter lands."

My mournful glance met the *fendoree's* unyielding one. And seeing no forgiveness, I left the *ceilidh*, its haunting pipes, and its low sobs behind.

I expected to stumble around in the moonlight, but found that the orchard was no longer dark beyond the ring of flashing pixie light. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon.

"I didn't realize how long I've been here," I said as we left. "I must've danced all night."

"You drank the cider, didn't you?"

"How did you know?"

The rider snorted.

"Because you've been here a month if it's a day."

I stopped walking. He saw the look on my face and waved a hand dismissively.

"Try not to let it worry you overly much. Time doesn't work the same way on *Tirfo Thuinn* as it does in the mortal realm. The cider has the same effect on me. I'm Nulod, by the way. Now come along."

As I walked, I realized he was right. My mind was clear of the fog of spirits. I didn't even have a headache. The food must've sustained me somehow, for I felt as hale and hearty as ever.

"It has the same effect on you?" I said, trying to grasp hold of a world that seemed to throw me whenever I thought I understood it. "Then you're not a *sidhe*? You're mortal?"

"Half," he said, brushing aside his bowl-cut hair to show pointed ears. "My da's mother didn't watch the crib as well as she should've. Turned her back once and found a changeling in her boy's place. They've got to thicken the blood now and then."

I wasn't looking where I was going and nearly tripped over a stump when we passed out of the orchard and into the forest. "Is that what Undine wanted with me?"

"A child? Probably, though I hear she likes a good roll in the hay as much as any. Got round heels, that one."

Without the silver rider to test himself against, Nulod was proving to be

companionable and open. Most of all, he was direct. In a land where everyone seemed to say anything except their minds, it was as welcome as water to a man dying of thirst. It must've been his mortal blood.

"What is Undine? She's no simple elf, I know that much."

"A *bean-nighe*."

My heart skipped a beat. The *bean-nighe* are washerwomen and harbingers of death. They clean the shirts of those who are soon to die, even if the dying do not yet know their fate.

"Then... that shirt..."

"Did it look like it would fit you?" Nulod asked. He cast me a sidelong glance and grinned. "You may be protected through the laws of hospitality, but it would've been no fault of hers if you drowned or walked off the roof of the croft. Have a care. Just because the Summer Fae seem friendlier than our Winter kin, it doesn't mean we're any less dangerous."

I didn't like the wolfish cast of his smile and quickly changed the subject.

"Why has my presence angered Queen Titania? I've done nothing to insult the Seelie Court."

Nulod shifted uncomfortably in his saddle and let out a long breath.

"The Seelie Court isn't angry with you, more nervous really."

"Nervous?"

"Winter and Summer are at constant odds with one another. They have their domain and we have ours, but Winter is always looking for something to shift the balance in their favor, just as are we."

"Oh, so it's like cats," I said, "isn't it?"

"Eh?"

"Think about it. Two cats facing one another growl and spit and posture, but neither will attack until one's already assured of winning."

Nulod blinked, then slapped his thigh and roared with laughter.

"A fine comparison!" he said. "Though I don't believe the courts would appreciate its nuances."

"Probably not, no."

We traveled in amiable silence for a while longer, beneath dappled trees and across running streams. The sun was almost overhead by the time we made it through the forest. The stink of the bogs wafted from beyond the tree line.

"Foclaid," Nulod said suddenly. "I think I like you. That's why I'm not going to try to persuade you into coming back with me to the Seelie Court. Titania will only try to make use of you instead of Mab. Is there any way that you would be willing to go back to shore and leave?"

I shook my head. Nulod nodded, saddened but understanding.

“I didn’t think so,” he said. “But might I offer a piece of advice?”

“Of course.”

“Nothing is free. Don’t expect anything from Mab without giving fair value in return.”

My thoughts went to the bag at my belt.

“I know.”

Nulod held my gaze, searching for something, then looked away. I never did know if he found what he sought in me, but his wistful pronouncement suggested otherwise.

“I hope you do.”

The mud road was found. It took us back to the fork, where a group of Winter Fae waited. Six giant ogres stood with the infinite patience and blank eyes of born idiots. Their hairless heads were three times higher than mine, and tiny compared to their naked, hulking frames. Rocky, horn nailed fists as thick around as tree trunks rested idly in the wet bog.

And in the center of them all, a cruel smile on thin lips, was the silver rider.

Nulod let out a sigh. “No turning back now. They’ll take you the rest of the way. Will you be alright?”

My eyes never broke from the silver rider’s slight, distant form.

“I’ll be fine. He can’t hurt me. Show no fear and he’ll leave me be, just like a dog.”

“A good strategy,” Nulod said.

“Do you think it will work on Mab?”

Nulod shrugged. “Perhaps, if anyone’s ever managed it.”

We walked up; the border between Winter and Summer was just a few paces of trodden mud. In that tiny little road, two fantastical worlds met, coalescing and congealing to create a miniature version of the one I’d spent my every waking day on. I instantly felt at ease, placed on the threshold between planes. The Fae didn’t seem to notice the depth of what their enmity had created, but such is the way of all beings who know not the rigors of the mortal world and haven’t the capacity to learn through change.

“Half-blood,” the silver rider said, inclining his head.

“Inbreed,” the gold rider replied, doing the same.

The silver rider refused to look at Nulod any longer in favor of me.

“Well,” he said, “it seems the son of man can’t follow the sort of trail even a Summer Fae could see.”

“Or I found their idea of hospitality more agreeable,” I replied, returning his glare with one of my own. “Any fault for making Queen Mab wait lies entirely with her errand boy.”

There was a muffled snort from Nulod. The silver rider's hand strayed to the hilt of his sword.

"Careful," I said. "Remember what happened last time. How's your hand, by the way?"

Only a choking sound came from the silver rider's pallid lips. I doubted the arrogant prig had ever been spoken down to before.

"Silence is more befitting a servant," I continued. "Well done. Nulod, thank you for your aid and the benefit of your company."

We clasped wrist-to-wrist.

"Good luck, friend," he said, and rode off.

"Now," I said, surveying the monstrous Winter Fae with hands on hips, "since you didn't have the forethought to bring me a horse, I guess I'll have to walk. Let's take it more slowly this time."

So furious that he could do little more than spit in reply, the silver rider wheeled his horse and began to lead the way through the bog.

* * *

I finally knew what a court was: their ruler's great hall. And until I walked into it, I've never been one for appearances. Though I stand as high as any of our people, the shortest *sidhe* amongst them was a head taller.

The chieftain's tattoos might be faded on my sagging chest now, but then they were as bright and clear a blue as the sky. They were nothing compared to the grandeur of my watchers.

Elegant *sidhe* women swathed in cloth finer than any linen or wool looked at me as if I was a rat that just crawled from the depths of a stinking privy. They hid their noses behind perfumed kerchiefs and giggled to one another at my expense.

My ears burned with embarrassment on the long walk across the flagstones. They were white and veined like clouds. I could feel their smooth chill through my soil-stained moccasins.

The *sidhe* men were worse. Their slender, fine-boned faces were shows in calculated boredom. They acted as if I was not even there, but their hands never strayed far from the jeweled swords at their belts, wrought with far more skill than even those of the Celts.

I was not a dozen paces past the wide doors when they boomed shut. A plump, white-haired servant called out in a flowing, mellifluous voice.

"Presenting the Lady of Air and Darkness, head of the Unseelie Court and ruler of all its fiefdoms, Her Majesty Queen Mab. Presenting the mortal chieftain of the Fortrheith clan, Foclaid, son of Drostan."

A dais stood before me, filled with the huddling forms of mortal men and women, for no Fae ever looked so downtrodden. Amidst the silver-encrusted Fae splendor, amidst the filigreed fern and ivy trailing up the night-blue walls and around the cloud-like pillars, they stood out as slaves; cold, pinched, dirty, tired, and wretched.

In the center of them all, perfection reclined on a throne of ice. She accepted a goblet from a rag-strewn slave and idly chewed a grape from the tray held by another. Her hair was so black it was blue, and flowed like a waterfall to pool on the dais. A simple gown covered her from shoulder to foot. The low cut emphasized a swan-like neck that segued into a narrow chin and high, slender cheekbones.

My breath misted the air and I fought to keep from pulling my cloak tighter. My skin was nearing the color of my tattoos.

I remember very clearly thinking nothing in her echoing presence. She was the most beautiful thing I would ever see in this long life, but I felt only fear, and it showed. Damn my strategy. I could do nothing but stand, a sparrow enthralled by that serpentine gaze.

“We bid thee greetings, mortal,” Queen Mab said.

Her low, sultry voice broke the spell.

“Majesty,” I said, remembering the title the servant used.

She paused, as if waiting, and a few hushed giggles rang through the court. The slaves whined and huddled closer to one another.

I did the only thing I could think of. I dropped to my knees and bowed my head in the fashion of a warrior pledging loyalty before chieftain and clan.

It seemed to appease her, and she gave an amused smile.

“Speak,” she said. “Why cometh thou to Our demesne? What is thy need so great thou must injure Our beloved isle with evil iron?”

I swallowed in hopes of wetting my throat. It didn’t help.

“The Celts to the west of my homeland send war parties across the sea to harry my people. Men are slain. Women and children are borne away as slaves. We dwindle by the day and have not the weapons or numbers to fight the enemy.”

“This is Our concern how?” She asked, raising a delicate eyebrow.

The court chuckled.

“I have come to make a request.”

“Oh?” she said.

“Grant me dominion over the seas that I might destroy the Celt ships before they land on our shores.”

Mab stroked a finger across a snow-white chin and I held my breath.

“Such a thing is within Our power to grant, little mortal. But something of equal value must be given in return.”

I took the bag from my belt and poured its generous contents through my fingers for all to see.

“Gems, gold, and silver,” I said. “The choicest pieces from every chieftain of the Picts.”

My hopes were dashed when the court erupted into laughter. The *sidhe* let out high, tinkling peals, so delicate against the rude guffaws of the hulking ogres that stood guard. Many held one another lest they collapse.

Tears streamed down Mab’s face and froze before they hit the ground. She stood, and the court’s sudden silence was a thunderclap.

“Watch, little mortal, and learn.”

Mab’s long tresses rose up to float around her like seaweed bobbing on the tide. The hall grew dim, and all the world’s warmth was sucked away. Mist rose up from the smoking bodies of the huddled slaves; one groaned and slumped, not breathing.

The mist took form. It gathered and coalesced into her clenched fist.

When she was done, she flicked her wrist carelessly. A diamond as large as my eye tinkled across the stones.

“What need have We for your baubles?” she asked, sneering in contempt.

“B-but what else is there?” I said. “What else could you want?”

Her tones were slow and clear, as if she spoke to a child.

“Thou would ask for the power to save many lives. Should not lives be given in return?”

Horror filled my being.

“I will not slay my kinsmen!”

“Nor should thee,” she said smoothly. “Instead, We would claim thy issue.”

“My issue?”

“Yes. Thy progeny, thy bloodline ... thy children.”

“But I—”

“Be at ease,” she crooned. “We shall replace each of thy children with Our own on the nights of their birth. Thy tribe’s numbers shall not dwindle, and no one need ever know.”

My gaze went from her eager face to the wretches trembling at her feet.

“I cannot,” I said. “My children do not deserve lives of slavery. My bloodline will die out.”

Mab scowled and cast her empty goblet aside.

“Wouldst thou condemn the children of all thy people just to preserve thine own? The Celts will be thy doom without Our aid!”

“I-I don’t—”

“Alright,” she said, gritting her teeth. “Thou wouldst drive a hard bargain for a mortal. The child of thy choosing and all his progeny shall be spared to retain thy bloodline in the mortal realm. Hang a piece of iron upon thy doorway on the night of its birth. There! T’is Our final offer.”

It was in that moment that my weakness overcame me. To have such power; to destroy my enemies at a stroke. It was tempting. It was everything I ever wanted. It was the most terrible mistake of my life, save one.

“I accept,” I said.

She leaned over me from the edge of the dais.

“Art thou certain of thy intent?”

“Yes.”

“Truly?”

“Yes!”

Mab clapped her hands together, a satisfied smile on her pristine face.

“Thrice said and done!” she crowed to the cheering court. “Our bargain is now binding.”

“Return to the realm of mortals and ye shall find thou hast mastery of sea and storm,” she continued. “Thy trespass upon this isle of the Fae is forgiven so long as thou wilt take thy iron with thee that We’ll be pinned here no longer.”

At a gesture, the doors of the hall were thrown open and blessed warmth caressed my skin. I inclined my head and stood, rubbing the life back into my frozen legs.

“I thank you, Majesty. Now, if you’ll call the *each-usige*, I’ll take my leave.”

“And why would We do that?” she asked.

I blinked.

“But the creature shot away when I dismounted.”

“Then thou art at the mercy of thine own carelessness,” she said to the sneers and derision of the court.

“But we have a bargain,” I said, trying not to panic.

Mab took up her throne once more and nodded, the very picture of emotionless power and cold nobility.

“Indeed we do,” she said. “But how thou should depart was not specified in our agreement and is none of Our concern.”

She blurred for the tears welling up in my eyes.

“Am I never to return to my homeland?” I cried. “Will my people be helpless in the face of the Celts’ brutalities?”

Mab cocked her head to the side, regarding me with empty, lifeless eyes.

“Thou brought those gems from all the chieftains of thy people,” she said thoughtfully. “Art thou then the emissary of all Picts?”

The gems went scattering across the hall at my kick.

“Yes, for all the good it’s done me! What of it?”

“Then calm thyself, little mortal,” she said, flashing me a predatory grin. “Certainly we can come to some sort of ... agreement.”

* * *

There you have it, Balian, my failings as a chieftain. The man who single-handedly turned back the Celts is nothing more than a coward who sold his own flesh and blood to face the cruelty of the Fae rather than die on that wretched island like any true son of man should’ve.

But, what? You don’t believe me?

Hah! If only I *were* such an addle-minded old liar.

Think hard on it, lad. Think of your cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandkin. Is there not something different about them? Other, perhaps? How queer that they should all be so tall and thin. How queer that they’ve all become rich from such shrewd trading. How queer that dogs bark when they pass and little grows where they tread.

Yes. I can see you beginning to understand. Changelings all.

How did I return to my homeland?”

That’s the one question that I wish was never asked, and yet it’s the most important if our people are to survive. *That* was my weakest moment.

I *could* take it to my grave, and so be thought of as a decent man in the short time all Pict-kind has left ... but I will *not* succumb to weakness a third time!

I’ve told you all this so that someone will know what happened to the Picts. I’ve told you all this so that you will know that you must flee before Mab comes to claim her due.

This arrow has been the cause of our doom. It seems the Celts have won at last. May its ill fortune be gone in the hands of a better man and grant you protection, and may your feet carry you safely south.

I know, even in our people’s twilight, I am still thinking only of myself, worried that I will be forgotten without your songs. I will pay for that selfishness soon enough.

In the meantime, save yourself, that the bloodline of the Picts as well as the songs of their deeds will not be entirely lost to the mortal realm, I beg you!

A Shade of Guilt

by John C. Tremblay

John C. Tremblay is an award winning technical writer. His first paid fiction sale was to AlienSkin Magazine in 2005. Since then he has published five other stories. His website was a finalist in the 2005 Best Writer's Website Contest sponsored by Writer's Digest. He also wrote the introduction for Mark L. Eshbaugh's Day's End, available from RMR Press.

A Shade of Guilt

Hear these words, oh Summoner.
Twas a tragic tale, but true.
Share in my quest for answers,
that will spare you from my doom.

Was the poison my killer?
It boiled and churned in my veins.
Or did the viper kill me?
For it pierced me with its fangs.

Perhaps Lord Starr's the culprit.
He devised the clever trap,
which caused the snake to escape,
when I stabbed him in the back.

Could his wife have done the deed,
with the scrying that she shared?
Exposing my betrayal,
before "falling" down those stairs.

You could accuse my brother.
Naxor sent me to Eastcliffe,
to drug and to deflower,
Lord Starr's daughter while she slept.

So maybe fault the heiress,

for the plan that she inspired.
Wed the orphaned pregnant girl,
for the lordship I desired.

I bet The Fates condemned me,
to the fiery Planes of Pain,
eternal retribution,
for my legacy of shame.

Alas. No.
The truth is...

I let ambition rule me,
so I am the one to blame.

September 2nd

by David Murphy

Over ninety of David Murphy's short stories have been published and translated worldwide, including the 2004 collection "Lost Notes" (Aeon Press, Dublin), the title story winning the Maurice Walsh Award in 1995. His stories have also been short-listed for the Molly Keane and Aisling Gheal awards. A novel "Longevity City" was published by Five Star in 2005 and well received. A novella "Arkon Chronicles" was published in 2003 and his most recent novella "Bird of Prey" is due for publication later this year. In every man's life there comes a day when he must make a choice that will forever shape his destiny. Today is Uncle Ron's day.

"Hello Denny. Where's your mom?"

"In the kitchen, Uncle Ron." Denny's eyes never left the screen, his fingers a blur on game-console buttons.

Lucy was packing a water filter into a box when she heard me step her way. She turned from the counter-top. My late wife's sister has always been, even at forty-six, one of the most gorgeous women I have ever known. A trophy wife with brains and sensitivity, but light from the window caught her badly and gave her the look of an older woman hoarding things. She looked woebegone and shabby. It was a shattering moment, like cracks appearing on the face of a porcelain doll. Time was catching up on Lucy, the mother of my nephews, ten year-old Denny and twelve year-old Mark.

She moved from the window into a kinder light. "Just packing the last few essentials for the journey," she smiled. "Did you see Peter?"

"No," I lied.

"He's in the car. We're going over to the Davenport's for 10 p.m. The final meeting is on then." She turned away too quickly, her thoughts also caught in a current of dangerous subliminals.

Ours had always been a platonic affair. Think often, do nothing: that was my motto. Right now, in another of my Lucy-moments, I wanted her to offer me her heartache and torment at what her husband was doing to her and to her children, but I couldn't. The memory of her sister, my wife Margie, would not allow me to. But sometimes I could see it in her eyes, as she could no doubt see it in mine; that certain complicity, that unspoken conspiracy. Someday, when the kids were older, someday... She had turned

back to her box of essentials, leaving me to wander out to the driveway, to her husband.

Earlier, I had seen Peter sitting in the car on the drive. He had not noticed me pass by. He had been studying a road map; such a useless item these days. Now I saw him crouched behind the wheel peering through a gloomy windscreen knowing he wished he could rev up, spew fuel, head for good old gridlock days. Mindful of running down the battery, he switched off the wipers and stared glassy-eyed through the windscreen. Hearing my light-fingered rat-tat-tat on his passenger window, he put his indicator on and checked his rear-view mirror before releasing the central locking.

I sat into the car and belted up before I knew Peter Chaney would tell me to.

“Where to, my friend?” Another glance in the mirror; a flick of the indicator stalk suggested that the car was pulling out.

“Wherever.” I leaned forward to wipe a small patch of condensation from the window. It re-fogged at once.

He switched on the blower to demist and give me a view of the goings-on across the road at the Davenport’s.

“The queue’s died down over there,” I said.

“Hundreds of people had visited Mr. Davenport today. At one point the queue had stretched across the lawn.”

“People are so inconsiderate.” I clucked my tongue in mock annoyance and craned my neck to look sideways. “What the hell is that?”

He lowered the window and switched on the hair-dryer perched on a high stool alongside the car. “It’s the wind-in-the-hair effect. I’m sorry, I should have installed one for the passenger side, too.”

I sat back, shaking my head slowly from side to side. Of all the craziest contraptions to come up with in a motionless car on a lonesome driveway... “Wind-in-the-hair?”

“Pippa likes it.”

“You put the dog in the car and switch that thing on for her?”

“Pippa loves going for a ride. She puts her paws on the sill and sticks her head out, just as if ...” Peter let his voice tail off. He switched off the dryer, a hurt look on his face. He raised the window.

“You have the hair-dryer rigged up from the house?” I tried to look and sound interested. “An extension lead? You always were an inventive brother-in-law.”

“What does that mean, Ronnie?” Peter glared across the car. “Do you always have to be so smart?”

“Keep your eyes on the road.” I smiled tightly, trying to keep irony and

sarcasm out of my voice. The man was so strung up, so high-low these days, who knew how he might react? I was ready for anything in his company. I was not short on practice. It was the same dealing with so many people in these neuroses-ridden times of crises and shortages. People flew off the handle at the slightest provocation.

He turned his gaze to the driveway, to the Davenport's house on the other side of the street. He gripped the wheel in the eleven and one position because he was thinking, reasonably, that I was making fun of him. "What is the matter with you today," he snapped. "You think you've got troubles?"

"It's the first day of September."

"So?"

"I used to do things on September 1st. For years, decades, I always caught fish, or at least went fishing, on that date. Know why?"

"You and Margie always went to her folks for the first week of September." Peter relaxed. I sensed he felt sorry for me. "All things come to an end, Ronnie; all things, including the phases of our lives. Lucy never goes back there any more, either. Not since her parents died." His face had switched to a mournful mask.

"Yeah, I used to do things on September 1st," I went on. "Now there's hair sprouting out of my ears and nostrils. I go for static drives with my brother-in-law. My wife died of cancer last year. The world is in a state of..."

"Watch out!" Peter hit the horn with his fist. Arms rigid, he stood on the brakes. "Look where you're going!" he yelled at the kid cycling across the front of the driveway. The boy peddled on hard, raising a finger and a come-get-me grin that begged a chase.

"Do you do that whenever anyone goes past your house?"

"You'd prefer me to run them over?"

"But..." I opened my palms. It was no use explaining that the car was stationary. Not for the first time, I was a zombie passenger sharing my brother-in-law's imaginary drives to nowhere.

"You think I'm a sad case, don't you?"

I looked across at the Davenport's. How could I answer 'yes' when the man was sad? How could I answer 'no' when it would be a lie? It reminded me of trying to deal with my late wife's emotional gambits. "You've got it pretty bad, yes."

"That's where you're wrong, my friend. I don't over-wax. I don't customize for no reason. I don't paint my tires. I don't wash my car every day despite the water shortages."

"That's only because the police would drag you away for breaking the water laws."

I kept looking straight ahead. A family approached the Davenport's: mother, father and two teenage girls. They walked like pilgrims, heads bowed. I could see the mother's hands joined reverentially in front of her breasts. Her husband walked behind, a grown man's dreams hanging from his shoulders like a detaching carapace. If placing a fan or a hair-dryer on a stool alongside the car to give an impression of wind-in-the-hair was not a severe symptom of a serious neurosis, what was? I sighed at the madness afflicting so many people. All over the world, hard cases like Peter glared out over headlights hooded and immobile, the lure of life gone from the glazed-over lenses on their bulbs. They dared not switch on their lights too much for the same reason as turning on the wipers. Daredevils considered pulling out onto the road but most thought better of it for fear of the police. The cops these days were a sight to behold. Not like the carefree days, the days of fuel and fun... I straightened my back. Peter was a hard case but never a daredevil. "What happens if the battery runs out before tomorrow?" I asked.

"I re-juice in the garage." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I have a charger in there. It's not on the list of banned items under the electricity rationing laws. Not yet."

"You could turn on the headlights?"

"Why bother?"

I wanted him to turn on the lights to illuminate the gloom that hung over the suburb. I shrugged and bit my lip. We were both helpless under the crude tonnage of unattainable fuel. I shifted on the seat. Sweat-stained plastic rose with me, warm and sexually punctuating. I wanted to go to war. I wanted to switch on the lights in all the heads of all the drivers in all the driveways of the world. I wanted to trot up to them with a rag in my pocket, shine up their windscreens, check their levels and fuel their tanks, not so they could go driving again. No, I wanted to shine their windscreens, check their levels and fuel their tanks for a genuine revolution.

"You okay, Ronnie?"

"Yeah." I rubbed my head in my hands and re-focused on the Davenport's. The rain had eased. More families gathered in front of the porch. Nobody was standing on the lawn.

"If I switched on the lights they'd know we were watching them."

I ignored Peter's remark. A vision walked by on the driver's side. Lucy. She beckoned us to follow her across the road. I stepped out of the car as her husband re-engaged the handbrake. I checked the time on the dash. It was 10 p.m.

* * *

Old Davenport sat on a high-backed chair in the bay window of the lounge. Floor-to-ceiling curtains, regally purple, added to the aura surrounding him. A one-time eco-warrior, he had made the cover of Newsweek aeons ago. According to Lucy, he would be on it again. I leaned against the wallpaper in the hallway. I stared through the beaded curtain that separated me from dozens of people in the lounge.

The Davenport's house was a figment of a bygone age. Candles wavered in regimental lines. I could see nothing electrical. That the place had not seen a decorator in fifty years added to the mystique. Eucalyptus oil burned in little pots everywhere. I heard the whispers of family groups awaiting their anointment by the Apostle of the Apocalypse. It was the turn of the family with the teenage girls to sit on the carpet before him. Their time had come. I saw the husband's dreams re-kindle on his shoulders. I looked away. I felt disconnected and slovenly, an unbeliever in a cathedral. I looked sideways. The earlier erosion had gone from Lucy's face and eyes. She was gorgeous again. God help me, I wanted to take her in my arms there and then. In her profile I saw her sister. Eighteen months ago I had wanted Margie's cancer to eat my liver also. Time's friendlier face had healed me but even now the healing was incomplete. With Margie's death, Lucy's blood family was dead and gone. She and Peter Chaney and their sons Denny and Mark had no living relatives apart from me. Neither had I, which made us ideal material for the venture proposed by Mr. Davenport. It was Lucy and the boys who came up with the idea of including Uncle Ron.

She looked at me. Her eyebrows lifted theatrically. A hint of a mischievous smile raised the corners of her mouth. That glance was her way of saying our turn had come. It was as though I had been super-glued to the worn-out wallpaper behind me. I had often seen a stridency in Davenport's eyes I did not want to see again. Yet I wanted to be with Lucy. I felt so conflicted I could not move. She looked hard at me, her brow furrowing. I averted my eyes by hooding them and rubbing the bridge of my nose with my fingers. That was the way I operated back then: my actions always convoluted, ambiguous, machinating, never once clear-cut, blatant, incontestable. Ever since Margie had died my brain had been a contest between conflicting emotions of every hue. It was the same now as I hid behind the mask of my own hand. When Lucy, her husband and my nephews had taken their place for a final pep talk, I edged my way like a nervous cat down the hallway out into the rainy night.

My empty home was half an hour away by foot. It had started to rain again but who cared. I walked between a tableau of dripping leaves, ours having been a leafy suburb, the white line in the middle of the road a safe

place these days when the only traffic allowed, apart from police and the few services that were left, were the convoys of migrants such as the one proposed by Davenport, which were allowed leave only during daylight hours. It struck me as ironic that Peter, who hated the influx of so many migrants, now looked forward to becoming one. As raindrops lead to wet faces, so Peter leads to Lucy. Lucy the Giver, Lucy the Carer, Lucy who would never in a million years abandon a husband, once a high-flying businessman, just because he had turned into a neurotic wreck. "If he thought I was weak-minded he might think I'd leave him, but I won't," she had said to me in that complicated hint one wine-drenched night when we were alone. I was fed up with complications.

The white line went on and on. I walked along it with a stoop to keep the rain away, like a druggie bending over a cocaine-fuelled conveyor belt. Davenport was leading them to a promised land out West where they would abandon their cars and hike a hundred miles to a commune in the valleys where people like Peter would be cured of their neuroses and live happily ever after raising their fine sons, my nephews, by chopping wood and larking around in pony-drawn carts. I kicked out at a flattened beer can but missed. Here we were with the best years of our lives behind us, uprooting ourselves because there's no one left to carry on in the place where we grew up, and nobody gives a damn. I felt a chill. The white line curved left as I pulled my collar about my neck. Peter was gone too far in the head to be cured. Lucy had made her choice and so must I. In her forties, I knew it was not too late for her to go somewhere new. In my fifties, I hoped it was not too late for me. Those valleys would be full of too many fucked-up, crazy neurotics escaping this crazy, fucked-up world. I needed a faraway place where the twenty-first century had not impinged too much, such as an island several hundred miles off Samoa or the mountains of Peru or deepest Africa.

Next morning the rain had cleared. I walked out past my old car, the long-abandoned saloon with the potted plants on the roof and the sunflower poking its head out of the window. Now there was a crazy driver! I smiled at my little joke and strode around the corner. The road had dried. The white line no longer glistened so I walked on the pavement beneath leaves that seemed pale and frayed around the edges. It was September 2nd. I breathed in the air, crisp with the first autumnal kiss. It was the time of year for shedding: the shedding of leaves, the shedding of old days and old ways, including convolutions, complexities and futureless fantasies.

Half an hour later I walked up the driveway past Peter's car, the roof-box no doubt crammed with more essentials. He would be looking forward to the drive, a final fix before Davenport's cold turkey. All four of my sister-

in-law's family were in the kitchen. Even Pippa sat there all collared up, panting with anticipation of real wind-in-the-hair. I sneezed as I entered.

"You've a cold," Lucy said.

"Where the hell is your bag?" said Peter.

As the two boys greeted me with "Hi, Uncle Ron," I leaned against the fridge-freezer and looked at them each in turn.

How could I tell them I was not going with them? That I was going elsewhere to seek a new life? I wanted to form words that were deep and meaningful, words that would resonate for a long time; words they would take with them and remember until they were put in their graves in the place they were going. One look at Lucy made me forget my much-polished speech. In the softness of her eyes I saw a thirty year-old memory. She was sixteen and blushing. She was meeting, for the first time, the exciting new boyfriend of her older, more experienced sister. I saw all the intervening years of Margie and Lucy and the birth and growing up of my nephews, who meant so much to me because of my own childless marriage. I witnessed all that in an instant and zoomed out through her eyes again, which were moist now. She knew. In that solar plexus moment I realized that the real reason she was staying with Peter Chaney was for the sake of my nephews. Deep down, I had known that already from other wine-drenched conversations on nights when I almost, but not quite, took her in my arms. I regretted not telling her that I loved her, yet was glad of my restraint. I was now an inhabitant of that land where I regretted everything and regretted nothing. It was time for a clean slate, a new start, and every other cliché: under the sun, of course. I looked from her to the boys, who by now had puzzled expressions on their faces. I looked from them to the floor. For some reason that I could not then fathom I felt it important to keep my voice from cracking.

I cleared my throat, looked up again, dragged my eyes from Lucy to my nephews, and said in my manliest voice, "There's something I have to tell you."