

The **Clarendon House** Short Story Magazine

**Satisfying Fiction from
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**Issue
9**



**Three gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet:
Jim Bates, Alexander Marshall and Gary Bonn**

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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Face Lift by Jim Bates

Ray was his best friend. The guy who'd saved him and his father from an attack by a bear nearly

twenty-five years ago. But Ray had paid a terrible price. Would he keep on paying it?

Seed of Death by Alexander Marshall

The distant future: Time Bubbles have been around for ages, ever since it had found out that quantum physics was wrong and that it was not only possible to travel back in time, it was easy... Trouble was, no one ever predicted that life would become so *boring*...

The Boy On The Beach by Gary Bonn

Sunset on a beach, and a little boy, maybe eight or nine years old, stands there, right at the point where crescents of foam reach his toes. Her husband can't see him, though the boy is only a few metres away. Who is he? Why is he there?

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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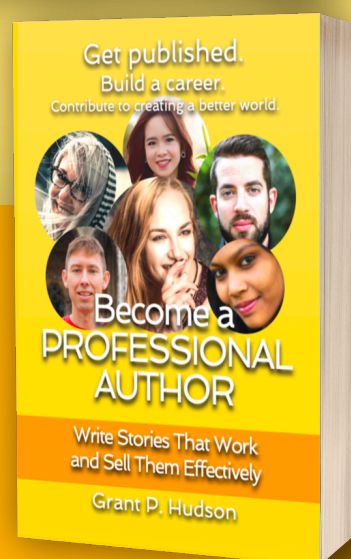
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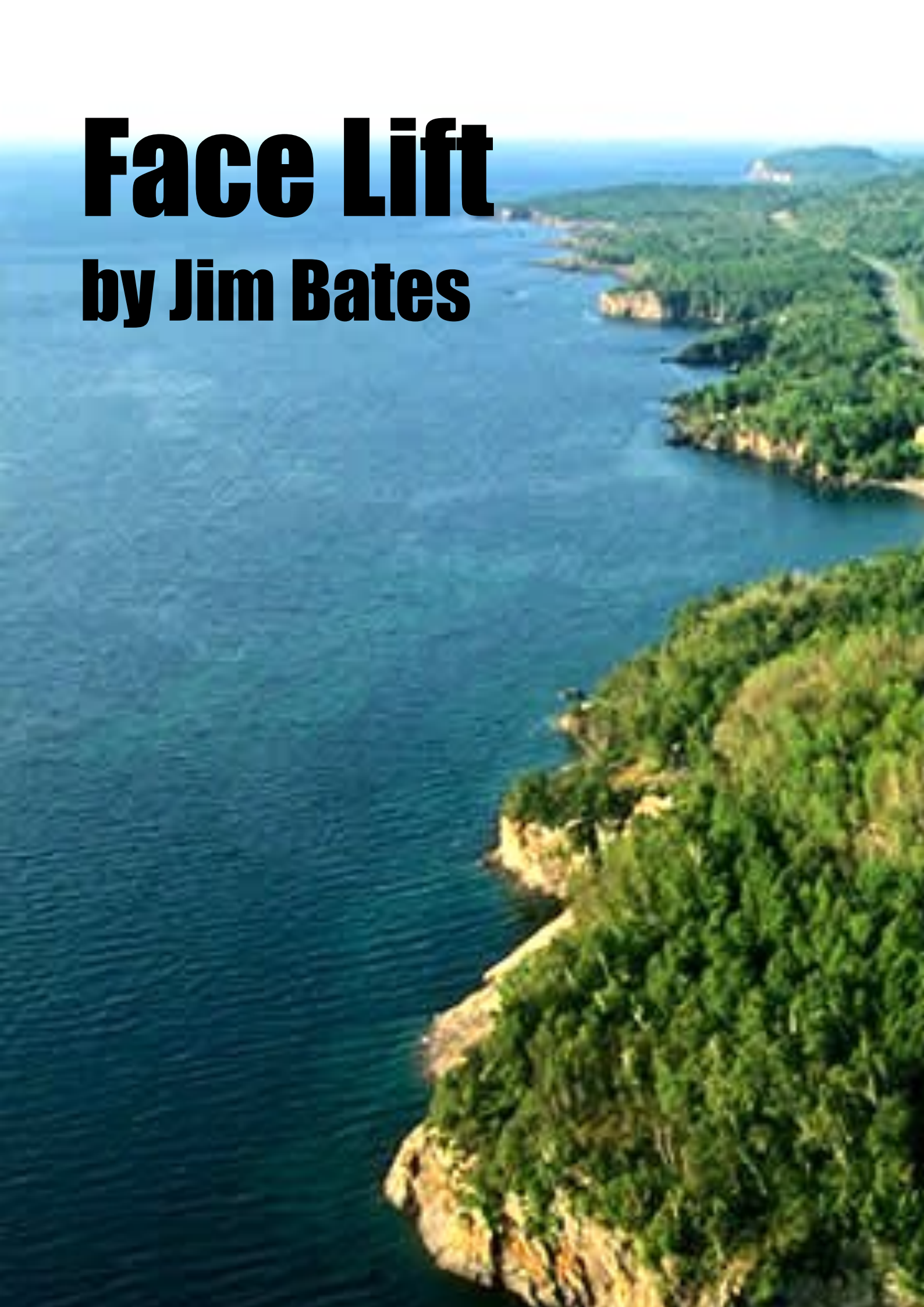


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Face Lift

by Jim Bates



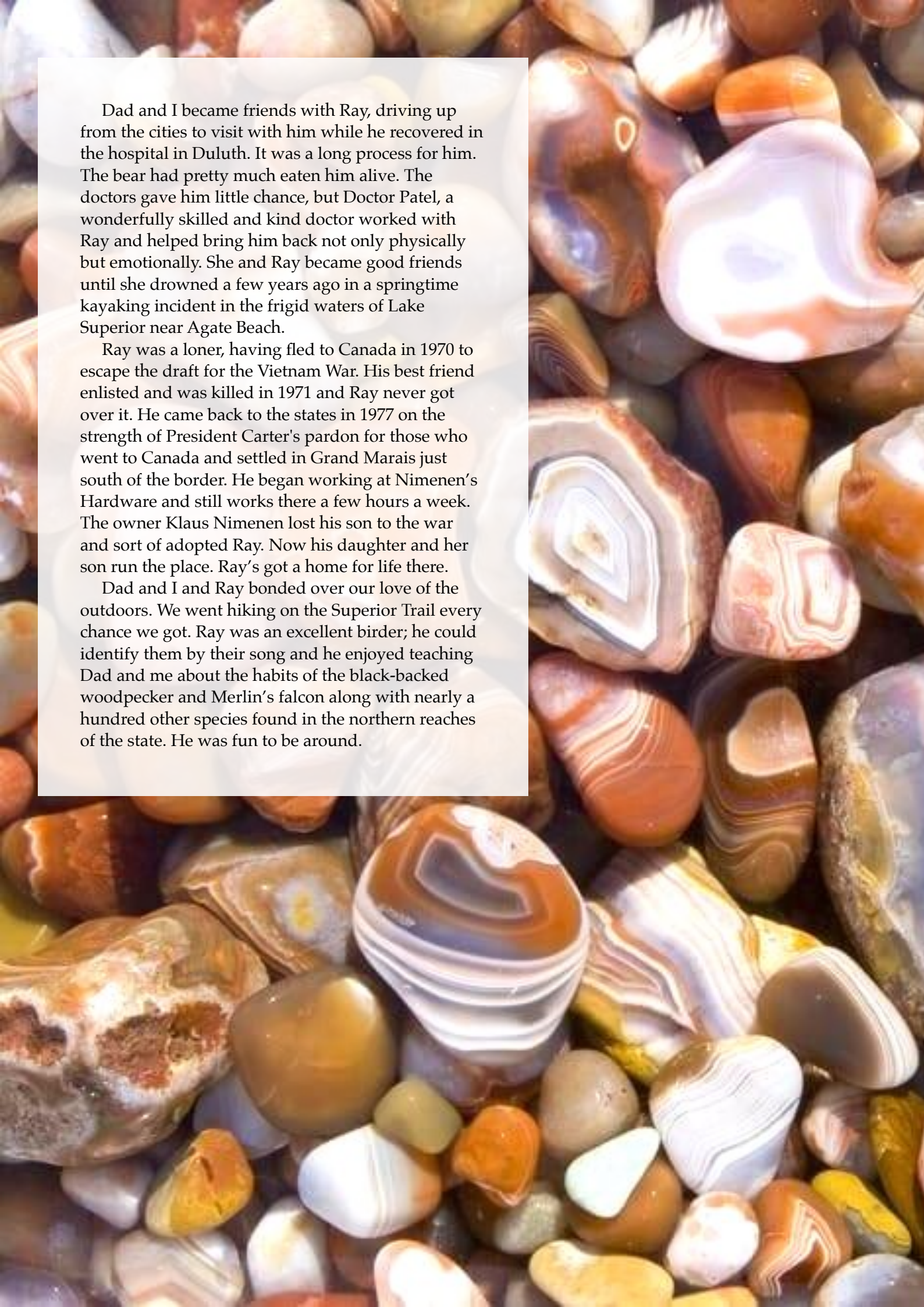


"Do you think Ray will be here?" My wife Clare asked. "You know he's got a thing about his face."

"He'll be here," I said confidently, although, honestly, I wasn't too sure. But, to make my point, I added, "He adores Blue."

Which was true. My daughter was having her second birthday, the first one where we didn't have to Zoom. She was part of that generation that is now and forever going to be known as the Covid Kids; children born in the year after the pandemic began. Thanks to the vaccine, social distancing was a thing of the past, and Clare and I were looking forward to a small gathering at our tiny home in the hills above Duluth.

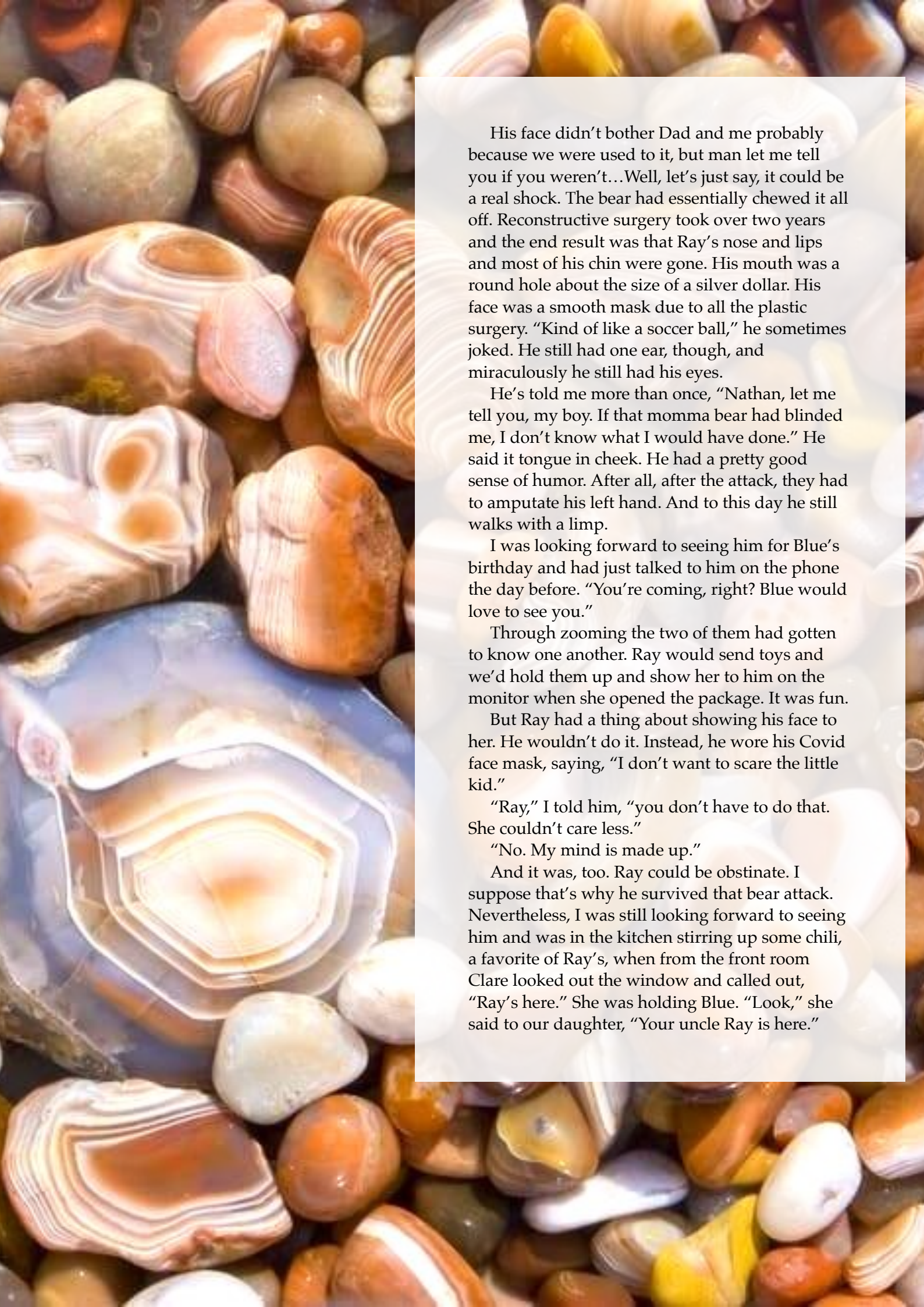
Ray was my best friend. The guy who'd saved me and my dad from an attack by a momma bear nearly twenty-five years ago. He took on the bear while we ran, dad dragging me along as we crashed through the trees and down the steep cliffs of the Superior Hiking Trail. Fortunately, we met a game warden who was able to take over from there. In fact, Susan Bessimer's quick action not only saved Ray's life but set the course of my life as well. I'm now a game warden with the Minnesota DNR. I have been for ten years and I love it.



Dad and I became friends with Ray, driving up from the cities to visit with him while he recovered in the hospital in Duluth. It was a long process for him. The bear had pretty much eaten him alive. The doctors gave him little chance, but Doctor Patel, a wonderfully skilled and kind doctor worked with Ray and helped bring him back not only physically but emotionally. She and Ray became good friends until she drowned a few years ago in a springtime kayaking incident in the frigid waters of Lake Superior near Agate Beach.

Ray was a loner, having fled to Canada in 1970 to escape the draft for the Vietnam War. His best friend enlisted and was killed in 1971 and Ray never got over it. He came back to the states in 1977 on the strength of President Carter's pardon for those who went to Canada and settled in Grand Marais just south of the border. He began working at Nimenen's Hardware and still works there a few hours a week. The owner Klaus Nimenen lost his son to the war and sort of adopted Ray. Now his daughter and her son run the place. Ray's got a home for life there.

Dad and I and Ray bonded over our love of the outdoors. We went hiking on the Superior Trail every chance we got. Ray was an excellent birder; he could identify them by their song and he enjoyed teaching Dad and me about the habits of the black-backed woodpecker and Merlin's falcon along with nearly a hundred other species found in the northern reaches of the state. He was fun to be around.



His face didn't bother Dad and me probably because we were used to it, but man let me tell you if you weren't... Well, let's just say, it could be a real shock. The bear had essentially chewed it all off. Reconstructive surgery took over two years and the end result was that Ray's nose and lips and most of his chin were gone. His mouth was a round hole about the size of a silver dollar. His face was a smooth mask due to all the plastic surgery. "Kind of like a soccer ball," he sometimes joked. He still had one ear, though, and miraculously he still had his eyes.

He's told me more than once, "Nathan, let me tell you, my boy. If that momma bear had blinded me, I don't know what I would have done." He said it tongue in cheek. He had a pretty good sense of humor. After all, after the attack, they had to amputate his left hand. And to this day he still walks with a limp.

I was looking forward to seeing him for Blue's birthday and had just talked to him on the phone the day before. "You're coming, right? Blue would love to see you."

Through zooming the two of them had gotten to know one another. Ray would send toys and we'd hold them up and show her to him on the monitor when she opened the package. It was fun.

But Ray had a thing about showing his face to her. He wouldn't do it. Instead, he wore his Covid face mask, saying, "I don't want to scare the little kid."

"Ray," I told him, "you don't have to do that. She couldn't care less."

"No. My mind is made up."

And it was, too. Ray could be obstinate. I suppose that's why he survived that bear attack. Nevertheless, I was still looking forward to seeing him and was in the kitchen stirring up some chili, a favorite of Ray's, when from the front room Clare looked out the window and called out, "Ray's here." She was holding Blue. "Look," she said to our daughter, "Your uncle Ray is here."

I set the spoon down, wiped my hands off and hurried to join her. He'd driven his old Chevy pickup down from the little apartment he'd lived in for almost fifty years. I smiled. So did Clare. It was going to be good to see him.

"Let go greet him," I said.

Clare gave me Blue. "You two go. I'll wait. Give you three your time."

I smiled at her. "Thanks." She knew what I was going to do.

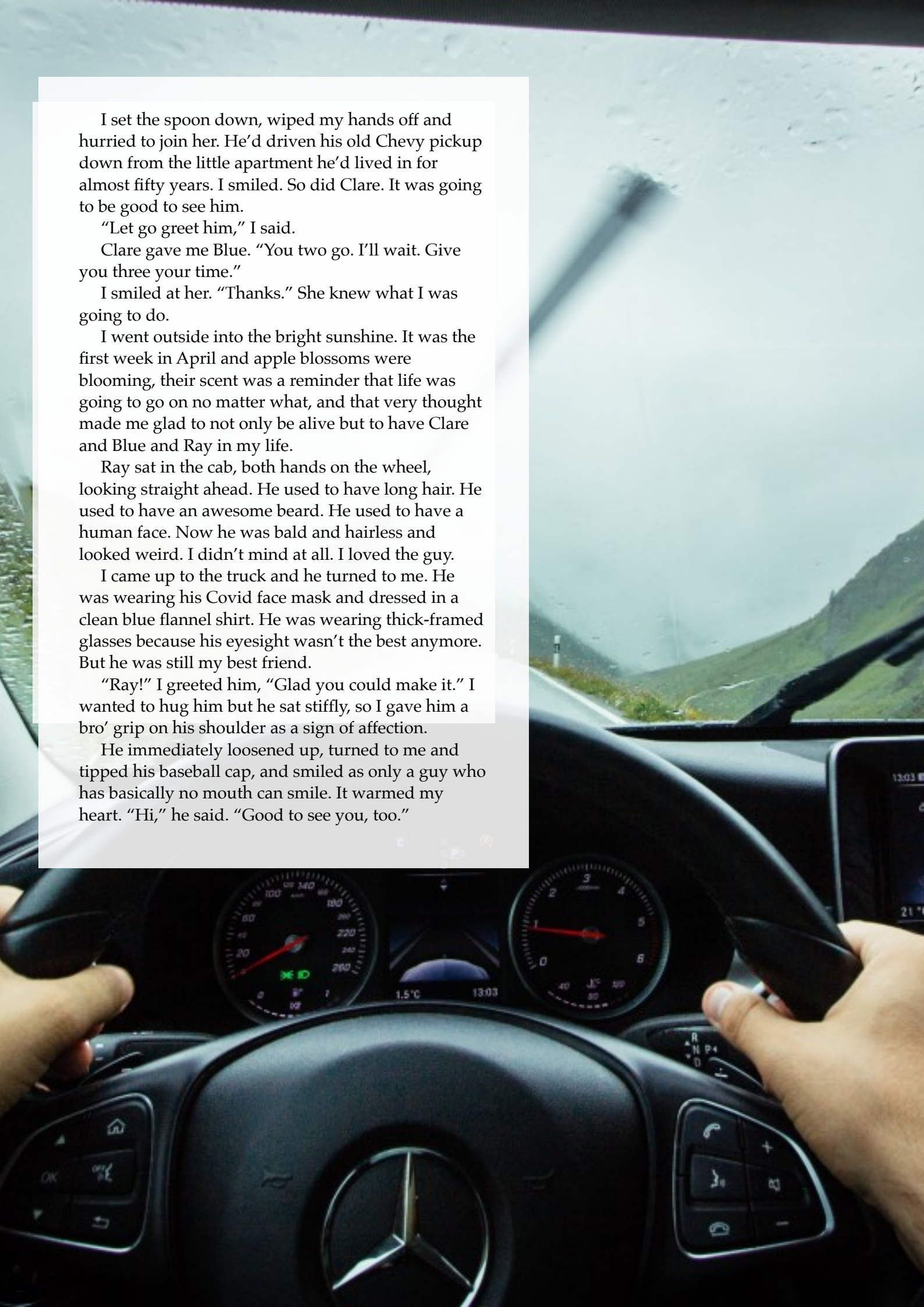
I went outside into the bright sunshine. It was the first week in April and apple blossoms were blooming, their scent was a reminder that life was going to go on no matter what, and that very thought made me glad to not only be alive but to have Clare and Blue and Ray in my life.

Ray sat in the cab, both hands on the wheel, looking straight ahead. He used to have long hair. He used to have an awesome beard. He used to have a human face. Now he was bald and hairless and looked weird. I didn't mind at all. I loved the guy.

I came up to the truck and he turned to me. He was wearing his Covid face mask and dressed in a clean blue flannel shirt. He was wearing thick-framed glasses because his eyesight wasn't the best anymore. But he was still my best friend.

"Ray!" I greeted him, "Glad you could make it." I wanted to hug him but he sat stiffly, so I gave him a bro' grip on his shoulder as a sign of affection.

He immediately loosened up, turned to me and tipped his baseball cap, and smiled as only a guy who has basically no mouth can smile. It warmed my heart. "Hi," he said. "Good to see you, too."





It was hard for him to speak. His voice was muffled like his mouth was filled with marshmallows.

I held up Blue. "Blue look who's here for your birthday. It's your uncle Ray."

Blue peered into the cab. Ray looked back. She recognized him immediately. "Ray!" She exclaimed and started jiggling around in my arms.

"Take your mask off Ray. Let her really see you."

He shook his head, "No."

"Come on. Don't worry. She won't care. You're family."

Ray was quiet, watching little Blue. Who knew what was going through his mind? He'd been a loner his whole life. My dad and I were the closest he'd ever been to people. Well, Dad had died ten years earlier. Now it was just me. And Clare and Blue.

He made his decision. He opened the door to the truck and stepped out and walked around the back. We met him at the tailgate. He took off his face mask and tossed it in the back. Blue reached out her arms for him and I gave her to him.

"Ray!" She smiled as he took her in his arms.

"Hi there, little one," he said. "I'm your uncle Ray."

There were tears in his eyes. Tears of joy.

"Hi," Blue said. And she kissed him, right where his cheek would have been.

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

JIM BATES



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SHARON FRAME GAY



*Sharon Frame Gay has been internationally published in many anthologies and literary magazines, including Chicken Soup For The Soul, Typehouse, Lowestoft Chronicle, Literary Orphans, and others. She has won awards at The Writing District, Wow-Women On Writing, Owl Hollow Press, and Rope and Wire and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her first collection of short stories, **Song of the Highway**, was published in 2020 by Clarendon House Publications. Her master storytelling continues in **The Nomad Diner**.*

The Nomad Diner

A Short Story Collection



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Seed of Death

by Alexander Marshall

'Holy frag!'

I was making an impression on her. I popped another orgasm tablet into her glass of vodka and watched it fizzle away. She was still trembling a bit from the last one.

'You're serious aren't you? You're really going to break into the Tree?'

Drink up darling, I thought — I was dimly aware of the fact that I couldn't remember a damn thing about the last three days, so I wanted to keep her talking to give me a chance to recollect. All that I could remember was that I'd seen Jessica with some blond German thug driving away in his Turbo Mercedes heading for Haiti, before I lost my mind. Well, that was

last Tuesday, and Tuesday was our Frolic day when according to time-honoured custom, relationships didn't matter and promises of fidelity took a back seat to pure lust, so I supposed I couldn't complain. And now here I was at Frederick's Bar, picking up this animated ball of fluff whose name escaped me in my drugged haze. I shrugged in response to her amazement. So what if it was a Wednesday.

'That is sooo momentous. That's the most momentous thing anyone's ever told me they were going to do,' she blabbered on as she sipped her effervescent vodka and began making funny noises.



Yeah, I thought, momentous and fragging stupid too. I still couldn't figure out how I'd gotten involved. Dirk was the technician — he reckoned he could crack the code to the Time Bubbles, take a tour back to before the security perimeter went up around the Tree, actually step out of a Bubble into the early part of the Twenty-First Century and plant an undetectable hyper-explosive device right underneath it. Then he reckoned he could recreate the Bubble, bring us all back home and trigger off the bomb in the present, blowing the Tree up and thus crashing the whole World System. That was Dirk the Anarchist, Dirk the Druggie, Dirk the

Fragging Maniac — but what the hell? There wasn't anything better to do on a Saturday night and it was probably all a bunch of crap anyway. The Space tablets I'd been on for eight months — to get me off the Timers, you understand, 'cos they were really screwing me around, making me think I'd been sitting around doing nothing for thousands of years and shug like that — these new tablets made me kind of not have to think about anything, so I could listen to Dirk, even when he was trying to explain something technical, and not want to slit his throat or put his head into a turbo shaft.

It was the Time Bubble bit that worried me — whenever I was capable of being worried, I mean. Bubbles themselves had been around for ages, ever since McQuarrie had found out that quantum physics was a load of crap and that it was not only possible to travel back in time, it was easy. Since then, once the fragging government got a bit less rigid than a dead man's dong about it all, there had been thousands of excursions back into the past. The only thing was that you had to be contained in an energy bubble, so that as far as the past was concerned you didn't exist, otherwise the world could explode or something. The brains had since figured out that you could use the whole principle to generate more power in a second than the sun put out in a century, and so they solved the world's energy problems, and that was the end of war and poverty and all that crap, blah blah blah. Trouble was they never predicted that life would become so fragging *boring*. It was all a big thwank really — there was nothing left to do. With all this power available, tons more research got done, millions of people could do whatever they wanted, and people were discovering and inventing and creating and travelling and you name it — but there's only so much you can do, isn't there? A century after McQuarrie, humanity started to frag itself — Time Bubbles really came into their own, so to speak, and if there was still a thing called money by then someone would have made a fortune running the Time Tourism industry. I guess people were hankering after the times before McQuarrie when things actually *happened*.

I'd been on school trips, of course — the usual bullshug, Hastings, the Magna Carta, the American War of Independence, World Wars I to IV — but since then the whole thing had become much more sophisticated: when I was at school you had to sit still and watch everything out of a tiny window in the Time Bubble and not move, and most of us threw up on the way back home; nowadays you could walk around in a transparent envelope which moved organically with you, and actually go into shops and things and see things like dead bodies or naked women close up and then come back before you even had chance to feel queasy about it all — but woe betide you, brother, if you tried to burst the Bubble: not only would you fry like an egg, but the bottom-line non-particles which

make up the fabric of what they call reality would disperse — multi-level dissolution I think Dirk and the other brains called it — and it would be as though you never existed, like Time itself chewed you up and spat you out into some kind of void. That's what they told people, anyway — who the frag knows what would happen really? I mean, if they'd sent hamsters and stuff back there and burst their bubbles, did the hamsters cease to exist? How would you know? Some of the brains said you wouldn't actually cease to exist, just spin off into a parallel universe. There was another school of thought that said you'd be caught in a time loop, forever repeating the same set of events, over and over for eternity.



But who gives a frag anyway?

The second orgasm tablet was starting to really work on this chick — she was all over me like a bursting Time Bubble, and I suddenly remembered I was supposed to be round at Dirk's that night so he could go over his Master Plan. I thought to myself, why not take her and Jessica could go screw herself? So I grabbed her — her name was Jinky or Jocky or something like that, my brain was trying to tell me through the watery haze that sloshed around in my head — and we started down the street in the warm night air with her leaning on me and me leaning on her.

We got halfway down the street and her bleeper went off.

'Oh frag!' she said, after taking a few minutes to read the message through her own haze. 'My audition!'

'Audition?' I muttered. I vaguely recalled that she had said that she was an actress. That's right — she'd been a child celebrity, elected at the age of seven to the Kid's Parliament, one of the first Kid Members to resign during the Sugar Scandals. Then she'd made a fortune in the movies, but now, at twenty-one, she'd been considered past it for about five years and hung around in bars hoping jerks like me would keep her in a permanent semi-narcotic daze so she wouldn't have to handle life. The last thing she'd been in had been 'We Were Seduced by Godzilla', a B-grade classic holograph, two years ago.

She had a great body. I couldn't help noticing it more as she pulled out a phone disc and slurred some instructions into it and the street cameras rotated and lights came on and she started stripping off.

'Yeah, my audition,' she said, remembering I was standing there when she was down to her underwear. 'I've got an audition tonight. For the part of Ophelia in Jude Squinty's 'Hamlet'.'

'Jude Squinty? I thought 'Hamlet' was by that Shakespeare guy,' I said as she brushed her hair and patched the camera network through to London's theatreland.



'Well, this is the sex version,' she said, dropping her makeup bag and launching half-naked into a speech from the play which I must admit seemed kind of surreal there even to me, on the pavement under the street lights in Mexico City:

*And will not come again? And will not come again? No, no he is dead,
Go to thy deathbed,*

He will never come again.

His beard was white as snow, All flaxen was his head,

He is gone, he is gone,

And we cast away moan,

God have mercy on his soul!

As she cavorted around under the harsh lights I couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for her — you'd have to be pretty desperate to want to be in the sex version of 'Hamlet' enough to do

an audition for it while in Mexico City, patched through in 3D to London on the Worldwide. But then I mellowed and went all fragging philosophical on myself, which I hate, and I started to wonder how desperate we all were and what would become of us all — humanity I meant — and I knew that the sooner I got this girl back to Dirk's place and fragged the living shug out of her the better I'd feel about things. So I let her speak to the clowns who auditioned her on her Udisc as I piled her into the Turbo and took off. This is what Shakespeare does to my head, I thought. She wasn't in good shape — some bastard down in the city got a faceful of her vomit as we clipped cloud level and veered south. It was never a good idea to mix alcohol and orgasm tablets.



By the time we got to Dirk's place in Buenos Aires he'd reached Phase III. Dirk had three phases: mad maniac, serious mad maniac, and psychotically serious mad maniac. He'd forgotten to tell me — though he insisted with his fist in my face several times that he hadn't — that this was the Big Night, this was when we were supposed to Do the Deed and Save the World from Itself. I thought it was next week, but after I started to feel the pain of his punches even through the Space tablets, I concurred, and we tumbled into his cruiser with various large bits of equipment that I couldn't make out through the blood trickling down my eyes. I pulled the almost-naked Jinky in with us while she was still screaming at Dirk to stop hitting me, and we were away. In less than half an hour we were at the Atlantis Time Bubble Departure Centre and Dirk was getting past the entrance machine.

Time tourism was now so common that they hadn't even bothered with real security staff — I mean, with every inch of the planet's surface scrutinised by every man and his dog and cat through satellites or local and international camera networks, anything that anyone did could be on your lounge screens within minutes, so the live security trade took a dive. But then, in a world where anyone could do anything, who would choose to be a jerky security guard?

So Dirk stuffed all his gear into his pants and a big bag he carried and moved off down the silvery passageways. He looked at me kind of funny as we walked along. I could barely see his eyes through his long straggly green hair. But that look signalled his descent back into Phase II. I chanced a communication.

'So tonight's the night, hey Dirk? The night we blow up the world!' I said conspiratorially.

'Shut up, you stupid fragger!' he groaned, clamping a dirty hand over my mouth. 'Do you want to screw it up now? Do you think this place isn't miked? Come on, let's get into the ramp before some bastard stops us!'



I dragged the dishevelled Jinky down a long gangway and into a little car on rails that took us deeper into the unmanned complex. After a few minutes we emerged into a foyer where we could choose our destination. The possibilities were almost endless: Prehistoric Times, Ancient Rome, the Dark Ages, Mediaeval Europe, all the usual tourist bullshit, plus a host of research and academic times and locations which looked about as interesting as a six-week-old fried egg. Dirk entered 'Other' and specified 'Early Twenty-First Century' where it said, 'Please Specify'. When he tried to get 'North Yorkshire Moors' into the Location slot and it wouldn't go, he pulled out a thing that looked like a musical instrument and plugged it into the console and began grunting and looking around.

Dirk was a classic anarchist. He and I had spent our whole six months of school plotting ways of destroying the system. He had burned his house down at the age of ten and tried to blow up the Kid's Parliament before he was sixteen. Then he got into this thing about the Tree.

The Tree was, they said, the most important computer node in the world. From its banks, that sprawled across the Yorkshire Moors like some kind of weird organic growth, grey and silver and lit up at night like a crashed alien spacecraft, Dirk reckoned most of the world's computer systems were coordinated. Its sheer size meant that, with moletronics having reduced computer circuitry to submolecular level, it had the capacity to outthink the human brain. This made it Dirk's arch-enemy. And the fact that its destruction might plunge mankind into a new Dark Ages in which humanity would once again find some kind of meaning to life meant that I was behind Dirk all the way. At least, as long as I could keep taking Space tablets so that I didn't really have to think about any of it.

Dirk entered a few figures on his keyboard thing and the console obligingly gave in — we could specify our own location. He typed in the location of the very heart of the Tree, and a date just before the site of its construction was cordoned off. The circular doors ahead of us slid open obediently. We walked through into a white room, empty of anything but a white couch and, rather disconcertingly, a white hatstand.

'What's a fragging hatstand doing here?' said Jinky, and she started to shake.



Dirk gave her a Phase II shut-the-frag-up look and brought out from under his jacket something that looked like a cross between a large spanner and a bazooka. He looked around — the chamber was hard to see, it was so bright. I couldn't tell where the ceiling was and my head ached even more than it always did. We walked on, past the couch, looking for the opposite wall through the whiteness. Then suddenly I realised that we were walking through a white mist and all around us was a translucent bubble that walked with us. Ahead the mist parted and we were in open countryside.

Jinky began shivering and making whimpering noises, either withdrawal symptoms from the orgasm tablets or just plain fear. It affected some people like that for some reason, time travelling. Like some people can't handle heights.

I thought it was probably both unsafe and inappropriate to give her another tablet at this point and I turned to Dirk, whose face shone with that same maniacal glee that I'd once seen on Emperor Nero's face as Rome burned.

'So what now, oh great leader? How are you going to deprogramme the Bubble?' I asked.

'Frag deprogramming it,' he said, levelling the bazooka at it. 'I'm going to blow the fragger away!'

'No! How are we going to get...' I began, but the last word was lost as he pulled the trigger and a molectronic enclosure occurred, the technical name for a bastard great explosion which blew me and Jinky back so hard that we hit the ground about thirty feet away.

Well, I thought as I shook my brain back into gear, at least there's some ground to hit. The eggheads were wrong — there was life after Time Bubbles.

I dusted myself off and kicked Jinky to see if she was still alive. She groaned and got up, covered in mud like me. Dirk was some distance away digging a hole. Nearby there was a plain concrete structure, perhaps the construction site of the beginnings of the Tree. I looked around. The sky was a weird blue colour rather than the dull brown I was used to. It seemed a lot lighter generally and the air was like the stuff you get in a First Class apartment air bottle. I could hear things twittering, like tiny beepers going off all around us.



'Listen,' I said, coming up behind Dirk, 'what's that noise? Maybe they're onto us!'

'That's birds, you shughead! Haven't you been on a Time Trip before? They had birds remember?'

I remembered. You can't hear too much through a Time Bubble, and I'd never paid much attention at school, but now there was no bubble between me and the reality of it all and this wasn't school. I looked back at Jinky — she was about twenty yards away throwing up. I could hear that fine too. And now something else — something that sounded familiar but out of place.

'What's that?' I said, and Dirk looked up with the look I'd once seen on Charles Manson's face before he killed Sharon Tate — but then he heard it too.

The three of us ran around the concrete structure and saw three figures drilling into a wall with molectronic drills, which might not have been so unusual except even my foggy brain told me that molectronics hadn't been discovered until a hundred years from when we were supposed to be.

'Shug!' Dirk exclaimed eloquently as the strangers turned and saw us. They wore face plates but looked strangely aggressive even through the black opaqueness. Dirk ran for an ancient machine that stood unattended nearby. To my horror, he looked even more scared than I was and I realised I'd been using his courage as a substitute for mine and that the sudden disappearance of his nerve exposed mine for the charlatan it always had been. I swallowed another Spacer to compensate, and ran so fast that I beat him to the vehicle, some kind of excavator, and clambered on. Looking back as Dirk started the thing up I saw Jinky stumbling after us.

'Quickly!' I shouted, but Dirk had trouble with the old electric/diesel driven motor which gave Jinky time to catch up. She gave me a look like a bucket of shug and then we were jerked forward as the thing started to move. The three strangers with their anachronisms were nowhere to be seen as we trundled away.

Dirk was fiddling with his bazooka.

'What do we do now? Who were those people?' yelled Jinky above the noise of the motor.



‘What we do is we come back — before now. Before they get here,’ he muttered, and fitted something into his weapon.

‘But how do we get back?’ I asked the obvious question even though this, I knew, was always unwise with Dirk.

To my surprise he didn’t smack me across the jaw with the barrel of the bazooka, he actually answered me.

‘I didn’t blow the bubble,’ he said with a childlike grin on his hair-matted face, ‘I sucked it.’ And, as if that was somehow significant and highly amusing, he chuckled to himself, revealing a cavernous absence of teeth, and patted the cannon that he clutched so possessively to his chest.

When we were about a mile from the original landing site Dirk switched off the excavator and we climbed down. He pointed the bazooka at a piece of ground about four feet in front of us and pulled the trigger. I flinched, expecting an explosion as before, but there was a very undramatic slurping sort of noise and a huge bubble appeared at the end of the cannon and slowly grew. It was kind of hypnotic — before I understood how or when, it was all around us and we were in a white space again, but this time Dirk was frantically at work on his keyboard and we didn’t appear back at the Departure Point but in his apartment. The man might be a complete psychotic, I thought to myself, but he was also a genius of magnitude. He’d basically built a portable Time Bubble Generator complete with guidance system.

Dirk raced around his Hiroshima-like apartment in a frenzy of activity. While he did so, I approached Jinky. She shrank back.

‘Keep away from me, you spineless jerk!’ she snapped. ‘If I had any clothes, I’d be out of here!’

‘Put these on!’ ordered Dirk at that moment and we climbed inside black uniforms and put tight-fitting helmets over our heads. Dirk then handed us molectronic drills, and before I could ask any questions he’d fired the gun again and we were away, travelling back in time from an apartment on the thirtieth floor of the San Marco-Ramirez building in downtown Buenos Aires to the North Yorkshire Moors of a couple of centuries ago. We stepped out at exactly the same point we’d appeared at before, and everything looked exactly the same. Even the same birds were singing.





So the brains must be wrong, I thought again. It must be possible to step out of Time Bubbles with no ill effects because we were doing it.

'I can't handle much more of this,' muttered Jinky, just managing to lift the black opaque headshield on her helmet in time to expel another stomach load of something she'd eaten earlier.


Dirk and I walked off to the concrete structure and I tried to understand what he was saying.

'See, if we plant the bomb *inside* the concrete, they'll never find it. They won't be able to detect molectronic drill traces for another two hundred years and by then they won't be looking here. It's kind of majestic, isn't it? They are going to build the whole Tree around this little bit of concrete, and inside that concrete is the seed of its destruction all the time!' He laughed, a sound reminiscent of Jinky throwing up, and indicated to me where I should drill.

Jinky caught up with us and followed my lead in a kind of brainless fog a bit like my own.

Yeah, majestic, I thought. How things contain the seeds of their own death. Frag me, there was that Shakespeare crap again. I concentrated on dispelling the atoms of the wall in front of me.

We'd been drilling away for about five minutes, a high-pitched whine like the sound of a descending V2 rocket in World War Two, when the strangest mind-frag of all happened. Round the corner of the building who should appear but a tall, thin guy in black jeans and a loose jacket, sort of good-looking in a rugged sort of way, followed by a shorter, dirty guy with straggly green hair and arms full of equipment, and then a young half-naked girl with frizzy hair. These three stood gawping at us for a few seconds and then ran off and climbed onto an excavator that was standing nearby. They started it up and drove off.



It was like déjà-vu or something — I couldn't quite figure it out. It was Jinky who put it all into words.

'That was us, wasn't it?' she shouted above Dirk's drill. 'Those guys we saw when we went back into the past — they were us now, dressed in these outfits!'

Dirk shrugged his shoulders and kept drilling. I followed his directions and soon a large hole had been made in the ten-foot-thick wall. Dirk took out another device from his pocket, like a large, spiky egg, and placed it lovingly into the hole. Then we slammed the drills into reverse and filled the hole from a molecular level upwards, covering the egg and leaving no trace that we had even scratched the surface.

Dirk began to laugh again, but I dragged him away.

'Let's go,' I said. For some reason I'd grown unaccountably nervous. This was all too easy. Stepping in and out of Time Bubbles, interfering with history, it was all supposed to be impossible. It was all building up in my head like a wave at a Hawaiian beach and I

started to feel sick. I fumbled in my pocket for a couple of Spacers and swallowed them dry.

'Let's go!' I shouted again, clutching Dirk's arm.

Jinky was scared suddenly too — she grabbed my arm and hung into me tight as Dirk pointed the bazooka and created another bubble. We were soon in the white space again.

Dirk sat on the floor of the bubble giggling to himself. I suppose he had succeeded. All that remained was to get back and trigger the bomb. The Tree would go up, Worldwide would crash, and human civilisation would never be the same again, all because of this hairy creep sitting sniggering at my feet. He started to fiddle with his control keyboard.

'They said it couldn't be done,' he kept muttering to himself.

I looked at Jinky. She'd raised the faceplate of her helmet and she looked kind of sweet with that anxious little face peering out at me through those curls. Frag Jessica, I thought, I'll spend some time with this chick instead. I made to step closer to her when Dirk said something that made me freeze.

'Something's wrong, man,' he said quietly as his fingers raced like madly dancing spiders across the keys.

'What do you mean, you green-haired little shug?' I said, my untraceable fear mounting suddenly to a crescendo.

'I mean something is fragging wrong, dildo-head! I'm gonna have to crash us.'

'What's happening? Can't we get home?' said Jinky, kneeling by Dirk.

'I don't get it. I've lost control,' Dirk said to her.

'You lost fragging control about twenty years ago, you charmless flurd. Get us back home or I'll put that fragging bazooka...' I couldn't think where to put the bazooka that suitably reflected my fury, and just at that instant there was an explosion. I remember thinking about Jessica and the German, about Dirk and his smile, about this whole fragged-up, boring little world and Hamlet and his last line 'The rest is silence', and I reached out to Jinky and shouted 'Let's meet up!' and then it all went blank.

'Holy frag!'

I was making an impression on her. I popped another orgasm tablet into her glass of vodka and watched it fizzle away. She was still trembling a bit from the last one...



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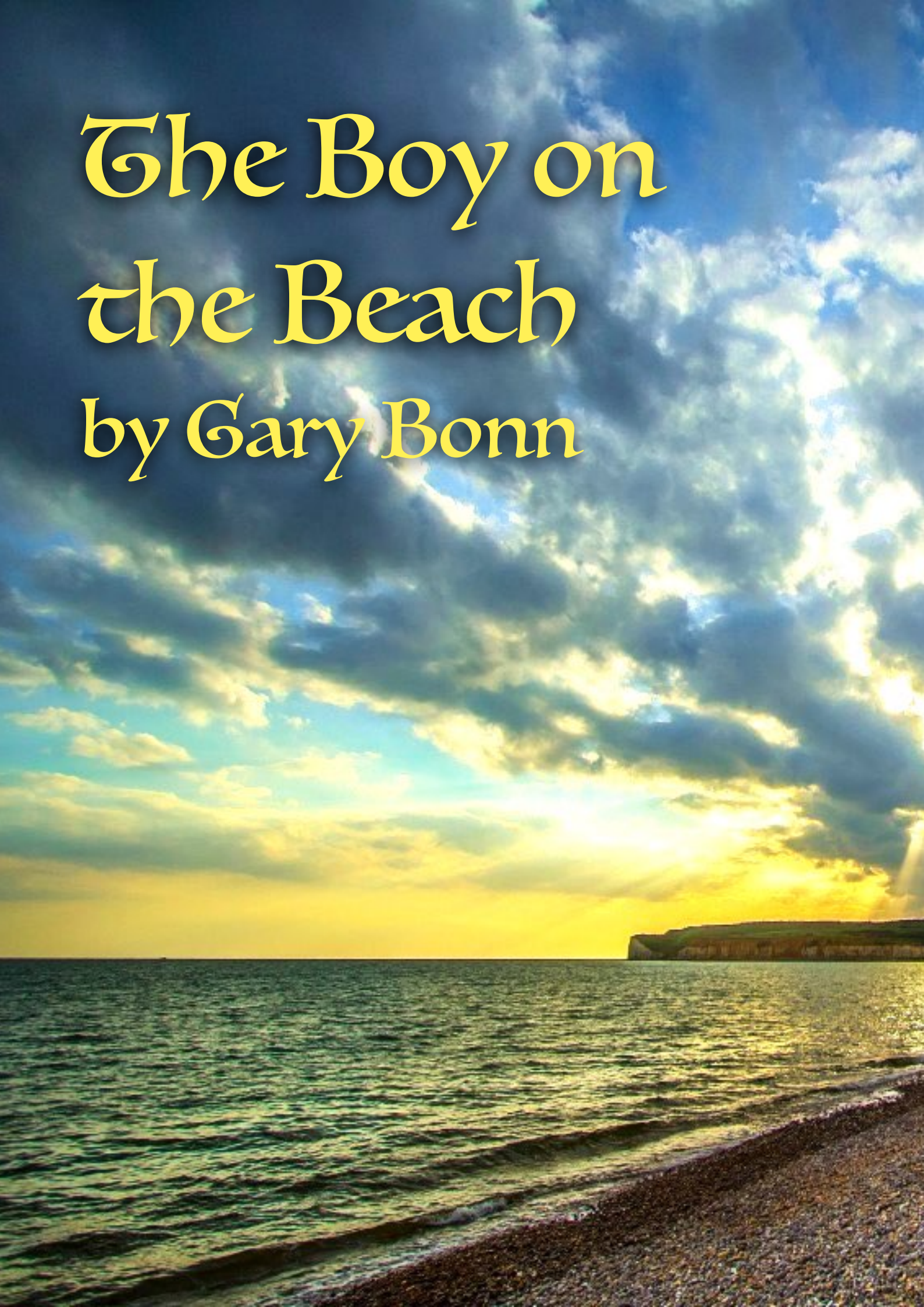
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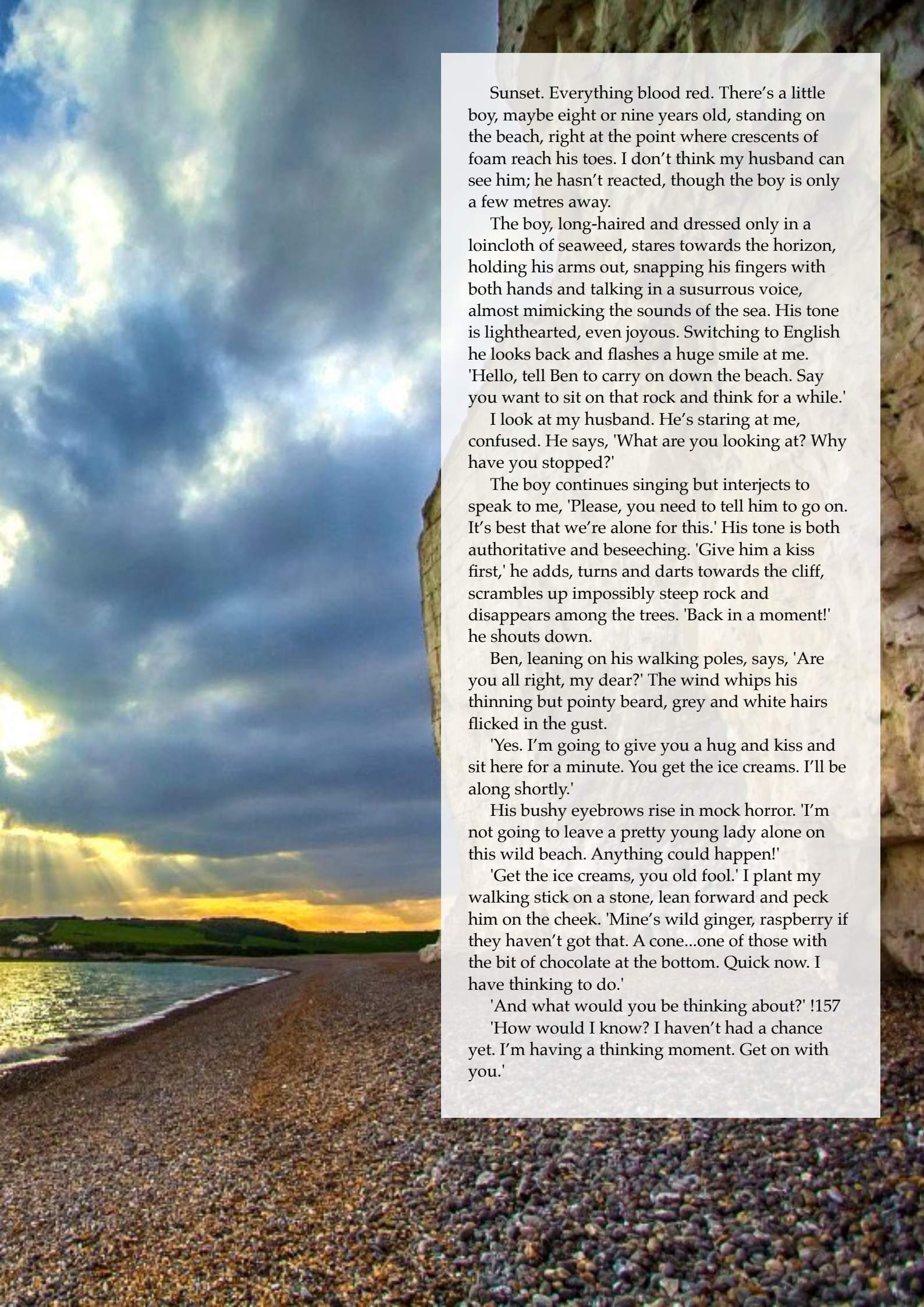


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The Boy on the Beach by Gary Bonn





Sunset. Everything blood red. There's a little boy, maybe eight or nine years old, standing on the beach, right at the point where crescents of foam reach his toes. I don't think my husband can see him; he hasn't reacted, though the boy is only a few metres away.

The boy, long-haired and dressed only in a loincloth of seaweed, stares towards the horizon, holding his arms out, snapping his fingers with both hands and talking in a susurrous voice, almost mimicking the sounds of the sea. His tone is lighthearted, even joyous. Switching to English he looks back and flashes a huge smile at me. 'Hello, tell Ben to carry on down the beach. Say you want to sit on that rock and think for a while.'

I look at my husband. He's staring at me, confused. He says, 'What are you looking at? Why have you stopped?'

The boy continues singing but interjects to speak to me, 'Please, you need to tell him to go on. It's best that we're alone for this.' His tone is both authoritative and beseeching. 'Give him a kiss first,' he adds, turns and darts towards the cliff, scrambles up impossibly steep rock and disappears among the trees. 'Back in a moment!' he shouts down.

Ben, leaning on his walking poles, says, 'Are you all right, my dear?' The wind whips his thinning but pointy beard, grey and white hairs flicked in the gust.

'Yes. I'm going to give you a hug and kiss and sit here for a minute. You get the ice creams. I'll be along shortly.'

His bushy eyebrows rise in mock horror. 'I'm not going to leave a pretty young lady alone on this wild beach. Anything could happen!'

'Get the ice creams, you old fool.' I plant my walking stick on a stone, lean forward and peck him on the cheek. 'Mine's wild ginger, raspberry if they haven't got that. A cone...one of those with the bit of chocolate at the bottom. Quick now. I have thinking to do.'

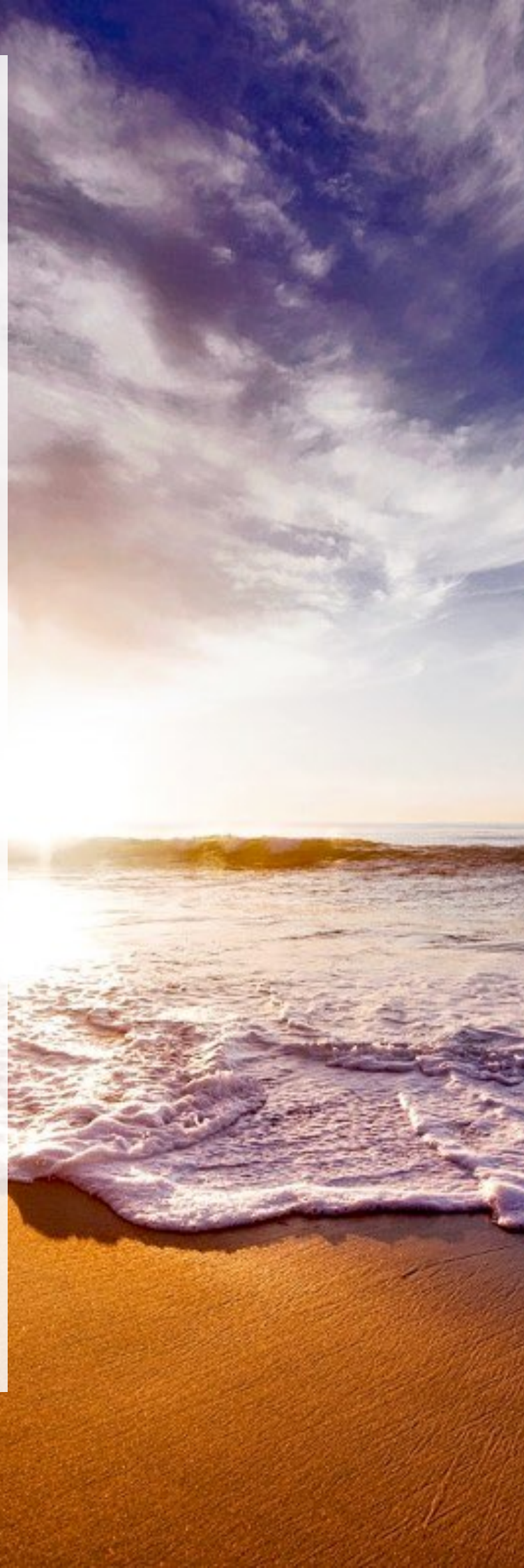
'And what would you be thinking about?' !157

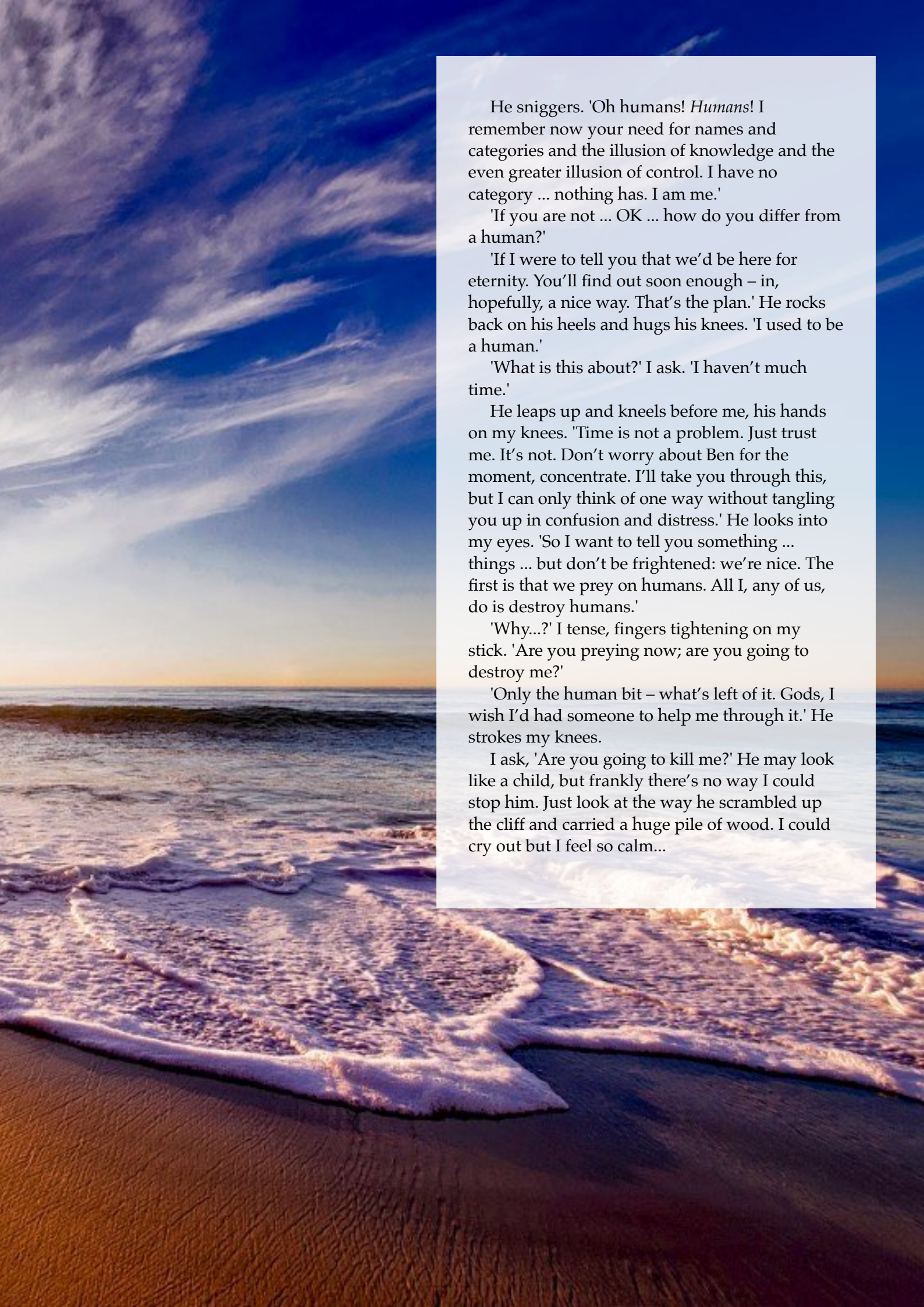
'How would I know? I haven't had a chance yet. I'm having a thinking moment. Get on with you.'

He jerks his beard to point along the beach. 'Ginger or raspberry. Message received and understood.' He totters away. Really, we're too old to be walking on uneven surfaces but we have both aged without grace, kicking, fighting and screaming against the rebellion of our bodies. He's unstable as I watch him disappearing into the dusk. We shouldn't have come this far from the promenade but neither of us have ever been sensible. We're so close, so similar; two aspects of the same person. I love that man so much.

A sound makes me turn. The boy is back on the beach. In those insufficient moments he's collected firewood, thin sticks, kindling and what looks like a nest of dry grass. He's squatting down and talking to the grass in his hands. It's like I'm hearing half a conversation in a foreign language, his voice, laughing, chiding, coaxing and chuckling in turns. A ghost of smoke rises from the nest like a pirouetting dancer, thickens and a tiny flame erupts followed by more. Within seconds the boy has a small cone of twigs alight on the sand and piles sticks over them. He turns, winks at me and dashes among the breaking waves. Reaching into the water he sings, laughs again and straightens up while lifting two lobsters. Returning to the fire, he kneels, places the lobsters on the sand and strokes them once on the head. They stop moving. Dismembering and cleaning them with his fingers, he places the tails on sticks over the fire and the rest around the base. All the time he's busy singing, whistling, and talking to things or people I can't see.

I seat myself on the rock, and study him. He's busy and doesn't seem inclined to talk to me. I'm fascinated. He's not human, that much is obvious. Everything I've ever seen has clearly recognisable states, but his is ... are ... ephemeral. One moment he's so insubstantial I wonder how it is I can't see through him, in another appearing beyond massive, as if he could walk through rocks and they would have to shatter around him. In the end I'm so mystified I ask, 'What are you?'





He sniggers. 'Oh humans! *Humans!* I remember now your need for names and categories and the illusion of knowledge and the even greater illusion of control. I have no category ... nothing has. I am me.'

'If you are not ... OK ... how do you differ from a human?'

'If I were to tell you that we'd be here for eternity. You'll find out soon enough – in, hopefully, a nice way. That's the plan.' He rocks back on his heels and hugs his knees. 'I used to be a human.'

'What is this about?' I ask. 'I haven't much time.'

He leaps up and kneels before me, his hands on my knees. 'Time is not a problem. Just trust me. It's not. Don't worry about Ben for the moment, concentrate. I'll take you through this, but I can only think of one way without tangling you up in confusion and distress.' He looks into my eyes. 'So I want to tell you something ... things ... but don't be frightened: we're nice. The first is that we prey on humans. All I, any of us, do is destroy humans.'

'Why...?' I tense, fingers tightening on my stick. 'Are you preying now; are you going to destroy me?'

'Only the human bit – what's left of it. Gods, I wish I'd had someone to help me through it.' He strokes my knees.

I ask, 'Are you going to kill me?' He may look like a child, but frankly there's no way I could stop him. Just look at the way he scrambled up the cliff and carried a huge pile of wood. I could cry out but I feel so calm...

He winks at me, 'Yes, I look like a child but that's not the whole story. The important bit now is that I'm in your mind, reading your thoughts and slowing them down, blocking others so you ask the right questions. I'm doing this with all the intelligence and love I can muster. Afterwards we can talk about it and see if there is a better way. You're going to need to do this – what I'm doing now – very soon. This is my first time.' He sighs. 'Yes, a child. I was a human child: I *loved* being a child. Then I grew into an adult and it all went wrong. I tried to be what everyone wanted, what society expected and encouraged me to be. Too many conflicting pressures all claiming to be the most important ... and somehow I failed to pick up sufficient wisdom and a thick enough skin to deal with them. The result was a malformed, twisted grotesque: a poisonous homunculus. I was revolted by the man I became. I didn't admire or trust him ... and I had to *be* him!' He pats my knees, rises and turns back to the fire. He calls, 'If I remember rightly, I killed myself.'

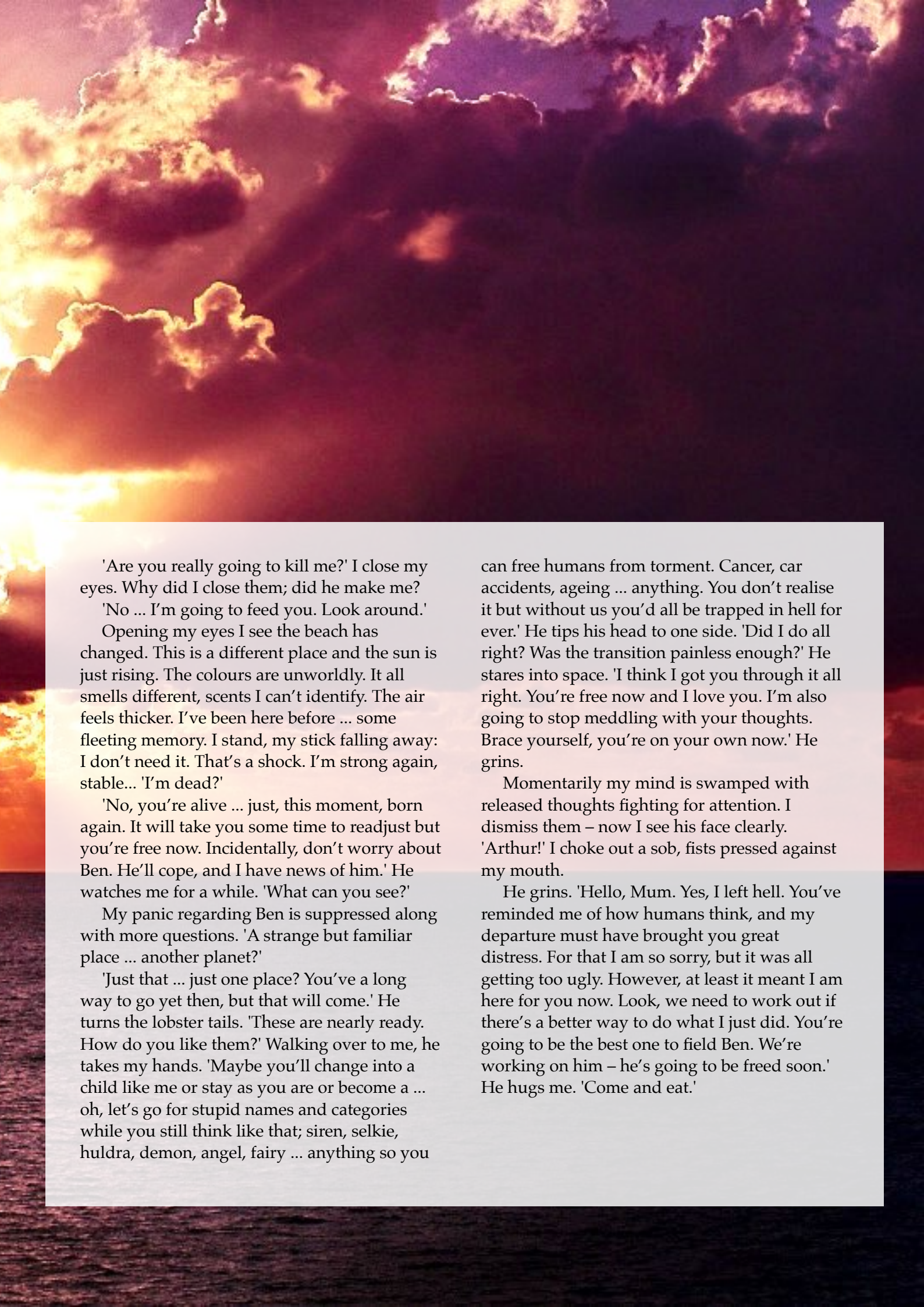
'You're dead? You committed suicide?'

'Yes ... yes. I only killed the adult. I kept the best bit. There are so few benefits to being human. Keeping the best bits is one, family ties another. There are friendships too, but you get all these things anywhere. It's hard to find any point in being human at all.' He turns the sticks and other pieces of lobster. 'Do you like mackerel? There are some close. I can call them.'

A thousand questions in my mind seem to evaporate. Yes, something is messing with my head. But for all that's happening I remain tranquil and able to think clearly.

He looks back to me, pulling hair into a ponytail to clear his face. He ties it with a strip of semi-dried seaweed, fragments tumbling from it. 'I love you!' He lets those words hang for a moment. 'We go into people's heads, hearts, bodies and destroy everything we can. It takes a lot of us and a lot of effort. Why do humans even exist? Is there any point to them?' He stands, pushing a lobster claw with his toes. 'Nothing suffers anything like humans do. Nothing is so ignorant and out of control ... and so removed from reality.' He looks at me, head tilted to one side. 'Tell me, what's the point? Did you ever find a point?'





'Are you really going to kill me?' I close my eyes. Why did I close them; did he make me?

'No ... I'm going to feed you. Look around.'

Opening my eyes I see the beach has changed. This is a different place and the sun is just rising. The colours are unworldly. It all smells different, scents I can't identify. The air feels thicker. I've been here before ... some fleeting memory. I stand, my stick falling away: I don't need it. That's a shock. I'm strong again, stable... 'I'm dead?'

'No, you're alive ... just, this moment, born again. It will take you some time to readjust but you're free now. Incidentally, don't worry about Ben. He'll cope, and I have news of him.' He watches me for a while. 'What can you see?'

My panic regarding Ben is suppressed along with more questions. 'A strange but familiar place ... another planet?'

'Just that ... just one place? You've a long way to go yet then, but that will come.' He turns the lobster tails. 'These are nearly ready. How do you like them?' Walking over to me, he takes my hands. 'Maybe you'll change into a child like me or stay as you are or become a ... oh, let's go for stupid names and categories while you still think like that; siren, selkie, huldra, demon, angel, fairy ... anything so you

can free humans from torment. Cancer, car accidents, ageing ... anything. You don't realise it but without us you'd all be trapped in hell for ever.' He tips his head to one side. 'Did I do all right? Was the transition painless enough?' He stares into space. 'I think I got you through it all right. You're free now and I love you. I'm also going to stop meddling with your thoughts. Brace yourself, you're on your own now.' He grins.

Momentarily my mind is swamped with released thoughts fighting for attention. I dismiss them – now I see his face clearly. 'Arthur!' I choke out a sob, fists pressed against my mouth.

He grins. 'Hello, Mum. Yes, I left hell. You've reminded me of how humans think, and my departure must have brought you great distress. For that I am so sorry, but it was all getting too ugly. However, at least it meant I am here for you now. Look, we need to work out if there's a better way to do what I just did. You're going to be the best one to field Ben. We're working on him – he's going to be freed soon.' He hugs me. 'Come and eat.'

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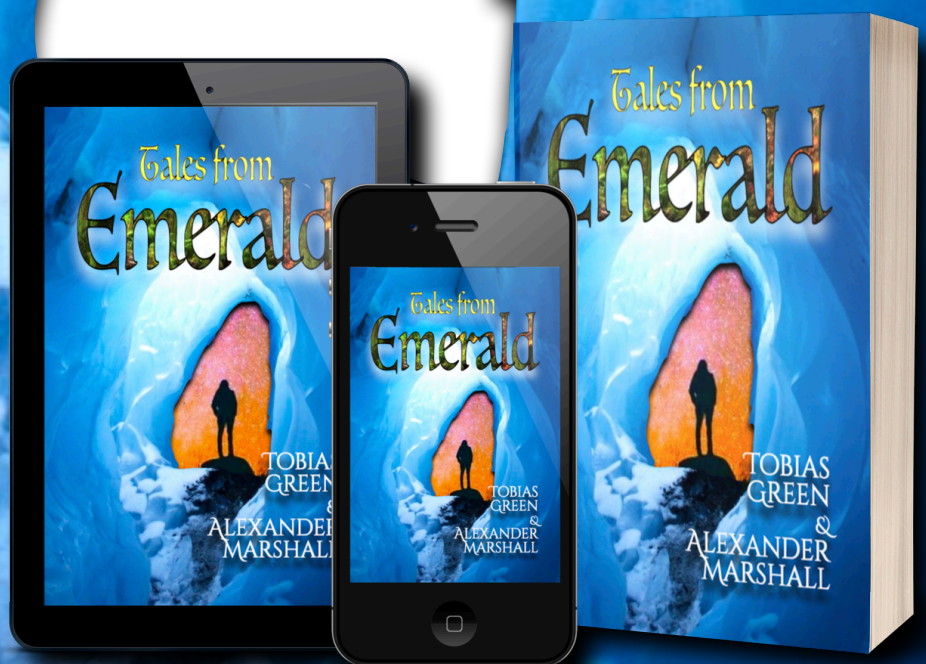
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