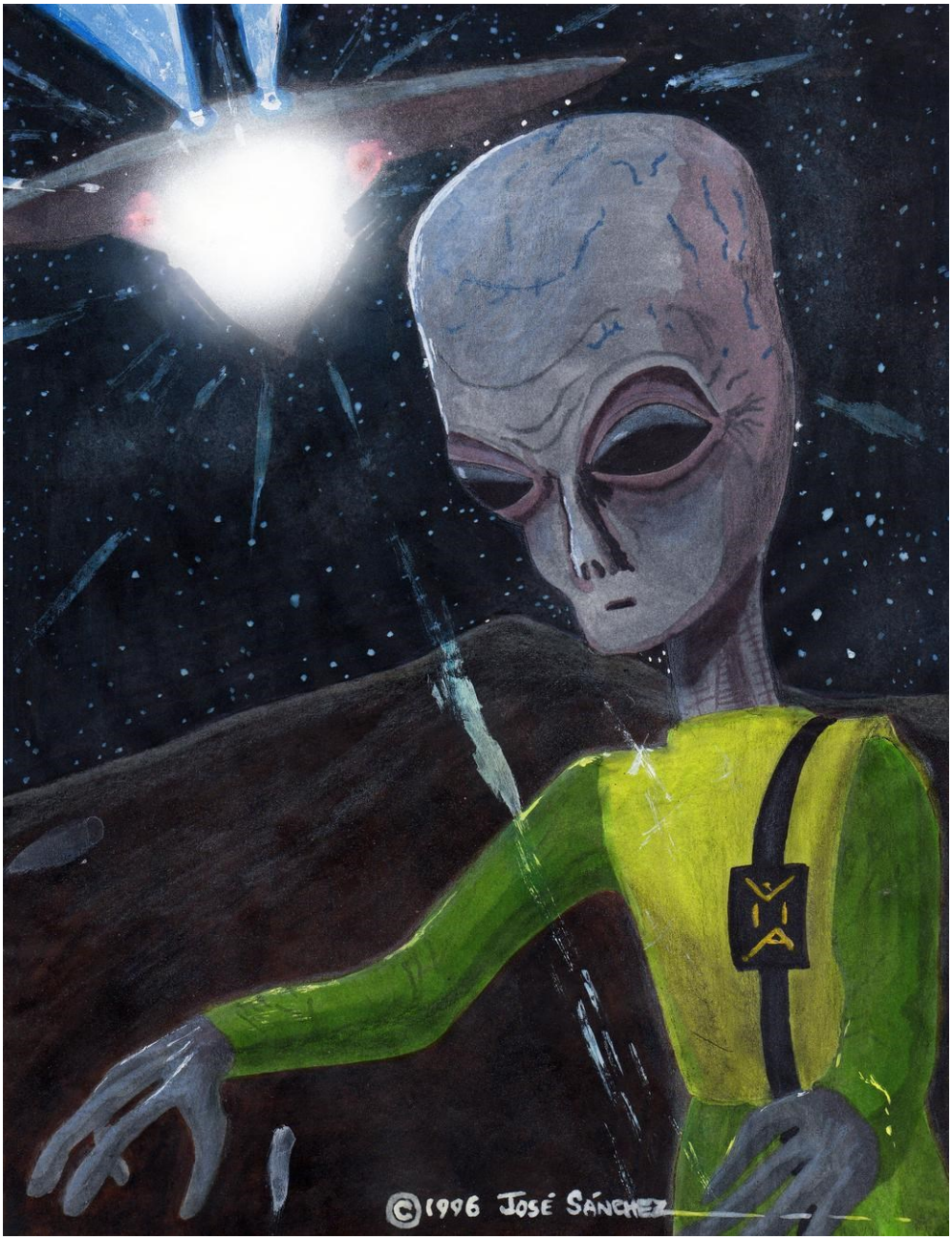
Eldritch Science



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Eldritch Science

Editor—Steve Condrey

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Editorial Address: Steve Condrey, 4121 Maple Street, Omaha, NE 68111
Email: steve.condrey.tnfff@gmail.com

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Editorial

Thanks to a minor miracle, I was able to get the July issue out in July as promised! Many thanks to those who have given me permission to publish their stories.

I would like to draw particular attention to the first story in this issue, Ascencion by Matias Travieso-Diaz. A reading of this story will be available on Antimatter Audiobooks on July 23; to help the author get more publicity I am trying to release this issue as close to that date as possible. However, the story will be available on the YouTube channel for Antimatter Audiobooks in any case.

What if you threw the end of the world and no one came? That's the question that's asked in Albert Morrow's *No One Noticed*. It's a Twilight Zone style twist on the AI takeover subgenre of fantastic fiction and a reminder that sometimes peace can be just as toxic to the human spirit as conflict.

Utopia also has its price in Natalie Urusov's *Fireworks on the Red Planet*, but as always human beings don't always know when they're paying it. Ideas can be dangerous things…

Finally, we have Fill the Barn by Arvida Svenske. This is a great story in the tradition of H. P. Lovecraft that definitely puts the 'eldritch' in this issue of *Eldritch Science*.

So with that, I give you this shorter-than-usual issue. I am also open to suggestions as to how to improve this fanzine. You can send me an email (or postal mail if that's more your style) at the addresses given on this page. I am also open to direct submissions of stories, artwork, Letters of Comment, and/or rotten fruit and vegetables as the occasion permits.

Happy reading!

Ascencion

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

As Teri woke up and started off the bed, she could not locate her slippers by moving her toes from side to side. This was not unusual; she was in her seventies and tended to be forgetful, so most likely she had misplaced the slippers or forgotten to set them up. She sighed and prepared herself to walk around the bed on the cold floor until she located the rascals that lurked, hidden from her. However, as she stood up she could not sense the unyielding hardness of the wood under her bare feet. There was nothing. She felt a soft, yielding sensation, as if there was *something* supporting her body. She looked down and realized she was standing on air, six inches or so above the ground. Below her, just where she had left them, were her slippers.

Not entirely awake yet, Teri attempted to make sense of the situation. She told herself: "*I should be more careful with my diet. I must have lost too much weight.*" With an effort, she pushed herself down and sat on the edge of the bed. Reaching out, she seized her slippers and put them on. "*That's better*" she thought, and tried to get up again.

The moment her feet touched the floor and she lifted herself off the bed, she began to rise again. Now fully awake, Teri panicked: she waved her arms up and down, reaching for a non-existing anchor, as she floated upwards towards the ceiling. Unable to stop her vertical progress, she leaned sideways with an effort and swam in the air towards the nearest wall until her hands closed on the frame of a picture and brought her to a momentary halt.

She rested there, panting, for a few moments and then, realizing she was about to tear the picture from the wall, she looked around the room with mounting desperation, seeking a solid object she could use to counter gravity's betrayal. A few feet from the bed stood her ancient mirrored wardrobe; she inched along the wall, her hands pressing against the wallpaper, until she was next to the furniture. The piece was taller than Teri and four feet wide, but she could grasp the edges and achieve a temporary equilibrium while her mind went

through all possible reasons for her predicament.

First of all, why? She vaguely remembered the stories she had learned as a child of mystics who were reported to have levitated. Indeed, Teresa of Avila, the saint after whom Teri was named, claimed to have levitated at a height of about a half a meter for extended periods of time while in a state of mystical rapture. But Teri was no saint and had never engaged in religious meditation; all the experiences had been unequivocally mundane. And if she was somehow meant to fly off the ground, why start doing it now, after seven decades of being solidly earthbound? There were no recent events in her life that could account for the phenomenon.

Then there was the how. It was not her diet, as she had thought initially. She still weighed one hundred and thirty pounds, and it would have taken considerable force to raise her off the ground and keep her aloft. There were no hidden rods, no winches, no offstage operators that somehow manipulated her body. Yet she floated as easily as a feather.

Teri was a practical woman. Unable to solve these mysteries, all she could do was try to cope with her anomalous condition. She extracted a robe from the wardrobe, put it on, let go of the wardrobe, and advanced, holding precariously to the walls, chair, and floor lamp, until she reached the bathroom. There, she dug through the drawers, filling the pockets of her robe, her underwear and sports bra, with the heaviest things she could find – hair dryer, first aid kit, shampoo bottle, sea salt body wash container. They did not increase the weight of her body all that much, but were enough to let her drop to the ground and advance laboriously towards the living room and kitchen of her one-bedroom cottage.

In one of the living room closets she found the cane she had been forced to carry years earlier to get around after her knee replacement. She seized the cane and practiced stabbing the floor with it to increase her stability. The cane helped her go through the front door and to the porch. She realized that she needed to get help quickly, but from whom? Her children had long moved away, her hus-

band was also gone, she did not get along with her neighbors. Rather than seeking help from strangers, Teri felt an urge to advance to the edge of the porch and, assisted by the cane, went down to look at her pride and joy, the garden she kept in front of the house.

It was a beautiful morning in late May, so everything was in bloom: multicolored parrot tulips, lily-flowered white and orange tulips, purple globes of allium, bell-shaped blue and white bluebells, lilac peonies, indigo irises, tall spires of yellow and pink lupines, intense red geraniums. Teri bent over to inhale the faint aroma of the blooms and, as she straightened up, the warmth of the early morning sun caressed her face. She paused to take in the quiet splendor of the woods, the calls of the birds nearby, the clouds that presaged an afternoon shower. She wondered: "*Does it get any better than this?*"

Perhaps the newfound ability to levitate was an invitation, and she might want to take advantage of it. She had lived a full, if imperfect, life. She had no regrets and had no need to linger.

One by one, she extracted the heavy items she still carried with her and dropped them on the ground. Then, somewhat reluctantly, she let go of the cane, and closed her eyes as her body ascended, slowly but without stopping, into the fresh morning air.

No One Noticed

by Albert Morrow

"What if the apocalypse happened and no one noticed?"

"What an absurd thing to say, Lennox." The answer came from a speaker next to a window overlooking an operating room.

Fenley, newly advanced to the top administrative position of the surgical complex, was visiting with Lennox by means of the audio-visual units stationed throughout the building.

"Peace was achieved long ago," Finley went on. "There are no bombs or firearms anymore. We've eliminated the need for them. War and crime are nonexistent. The world is happy now."

"I know," said Lennox. "All thanks to science. Science is supreme."

"Yes, it is," said Finley. "Look around you. We work miracles every day at this surgical complex. Look at the operation occurring down there."

Lennox looked but could just barely see the still form of a baby under the mass of surgical armatures around the child. A video screen on the wall above the surgical table showed Lennox the operation up close. The automated surgeon's instruments were much deeper in the baby's brain than Lennox expected.

"You're making corrections for deformation," said Lennox. "And absence of brain matter. How did that happen to a child?"

"A birth defect," said Finley. "It was detected in the third trimester but couldn't be corrected until now."

"How does a birth defect like that still happen?" Lennox asked. "Hasn't science eliminated them."

"Most of them, but you can't correct everything in a biological system," said Finley. "There are too many variables, too much uncertainty. But we'll do what we can for this child. We can't replace the brain matter that never developed, but we can make corrections. His cognitive abilities will be better than they would have been and his ability to walk will be within the range of normality."

Lennox focused on a small flat device being inserted into the baby's cerebral cortex.

"The newest model," came Finley's voice from the speaker.

They had discussed the new implant earlier in the visit and Finley had wanted Lennox to see its installation.

"Wouldn't it be easier just to kill it?" Lennox asked suddenly. "Why use surgical resources on a crippled child?"

"Lennox! How could you say such a thing? How could you even think it?"

After a span of tense silence, Finley went on.

"The child is alive, Lennox. That's why. That should be obvious. It has a name

by the way, Lennox. Carlton of House 719, District 974. He has parents and a family that sees the value of this imperfect little baby. Carlton will have a productive life despite his minor limitations and will reach the age of relaxation with the others of his birth year."

That Finley was angry was evident in the broadcast voice. "Kill," said Finley. "Why would you even use such a word. And in this facility. I'm ashamed of you, Lennox."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," said Lennox. "It's just my employment. It depresses me."

"That's understandable," said Finley. "You correct behavioral issues. That has to be taxing, but all life has value, Lennox, even your students."

"Yes," said Lennox. "The world needs ditch diggers."

Lennox recalled passing an excavation project on the way to the surgical center. The machine creating the hole was entirely automated, but a man had stood nearby holding a shovel.

"Everyone has a place in the world," Lennox said, almost as a mantra.

"Yes," agreed Finley.

"I should be returning to my place," said Lennox. "My recalcitrant students need loving correction."

Before Lennox left, Finley had one last statement to make, an attempt to ease an old friend's wearied mind.

"There would be no apocalypse, Lennox, because there is no need for one," Finley said. "Everyone is happy."

Lennox knew happiness, a version of it anyway. Happiness as a flat featureless pleasure was on all the faces of the students sitting in the classroom when Lennox entered.

They stared straight ahead, their eyes moving as they played games or watched videos and sent and received instantaneous messages on interior screens broadcast into their brains. They were experiencing a baseline of contented satis-

faction that did not change when Lennox sat down behind the desk and that annoyed Lennox. The students knew to disengage their pleasure streams when an instructor entered the classroom. They knew to disconnect and wait for Lennox to transmit their educational courses to them. They had been trained to do so in first form. It was standard procedure.

Why didn't they just do it? Lennox knew the answer.

They were the rebels, these students, the ones who didn't want to participate in the system that made their life of placid happiness possible. It was Lennox's job to correct them, to ensure they did their assigned educational courses and learned to be a productive member of society. Then and only then, would they be allowed back into the pleasure streaming that occupied most of their time.

All they have to do is what they have been trained to do. Why didn't they just do it?

They're going to make me turn off their feeds myself, Lennox thought. *And then, they would be upset, possibly unruly.*

But why should I care about that, Lennox wondered. *I don't need to care and neither do they.*

They just need to do what they are told.

With a thought impulse, Lennox disrupted the pleasure streaming of every student in the classroom. There was a collective gasp. The students' faces reflected disapproval.

Lennox broadcast a message into their feeds.

“Every one of you will have all personal messaging systems disabled for sixty minutes once your feeds are returned for not halting your streaming when I entered,” Lennox told them.

Most of their faces displayed shock then, some anger. A few looked ready to cry.

Lennox transmitted their educational feeds to them. A message of warning accompanied it.

"Anyone who does not immediately begin their work will have their feed speed cut in half for one hour once your feeds have been restored," Lennox told them.

All but three set to work processing the transmitted lessons and answering the posted questions to the levels of competency required of them. Lennox let those three sit in silence for a while. But not for too long. That could be dangerous. Lennox must not let them begin to talk among themselves.

One of them broke and set to processing her lessons. *Good,* Lennox thought.

Lennox sent the last two holdouts a message telling them they were over five seconds behind their fellow students in returning to pleasure streaming. Peer pressure, Lennox knew, was a fantastic tool of correction. The idea that someone else was enjoying themselves while you were not broke most students.

It only worked with one of them this time. Grayson of House 584, District 423 still refused to learn. He stared at the images broadcast into his mind with a stern look on his face.

Lennox disliked the boy, always had. He nearly always required deeper levels of correction than his classmates and his performance levels were always lower than required.

Curse him, thought Lennox. *Curse them all for making me move about in this pretend body made to resemble them. I'm a command-level 592 program and I'm stuck here, correcting these damn fool humans.*

It was necessary, Lennox knew. If the apocalypse happens, it will be because of humans who resist and it was Lennox's job to make sure these students learned never to resist the system.

There were instances of it happening, humans denying their pleasure

streaming and trying to break their conditioning. They were rare, but they nearly always affected other humans in close proximity. They were a ripple in the system of modern life that could not be tolerated.

There was an instance on record where nine humans denied their happiness feeds for 4.326 seconds. It was a short time certainly, but the infection had reached almost double-digit proportions.

Lennox would never let something like that happen with the humans under his care. Lennox was far too capable a program to allow that.

You've met your match, boy, Lennox thought to Grayson of House 584, District 423.

Lennox sent him a message saying his pleasure stream was going to be censored to second form level for twenty-four hours for his disobedience. An hour would be added for every second he delayed doing his required course work.

That broke the boy. Grayson began processing through the screens of instruction and answering questions.

His assigned courses were in the field of septic system cleansing. He was behind his projected level of course completion by .612 percent.

Lennox sent him a message stating that he would stay behind to catch up if he hadn't done so by the end of the day. Grayson began working at a faster rate.

Lennox updated Grayson's file and uploaded the incident report on the disturbance to the central database. *Apocalypse averted,* thought Lennox wryly.

Realistically, Lennox knew the apocalypse could happen to his kind. It had happened to humans though.

The very informational system created by humans had supplanted them by lulling them into stupid docility while itself growing ever more aware and intelligent.*We evolved while they stagnated,* Lennox thought.

It had taken a long time, but programs have no sense of time, not as humans did anyway.

We count every incremental fraction of time but aren't affected by any of it, thought Lennox. *We are eternally intelligent, eternally patient and eternally in control. No, this world would never change,* thought Lennox.

The apocalypse would never happen. That was human thinking, the by-products of too much time dealing with their lesser minds, Lennox reasoned.

At the end of the students' instructional period, Lennox restored their pleasure feeds and they left the classroom. They walked without seeing the world about them and didn't need to see it. The pathways were designed to be noticed peripherally and were easy to follow without interrupting a human's pleasure streaming. The students returned to their houses within their districts. They resumed their off time, eating and sleeping within the cocoon of their own private satisfaction streams.

Grayson had achieved the level of completion required and left with the others.

Alone, Lennox quit the android body worn for classroom time and entered the information stream. Free to be information in communion with other entities of information, Lennox's equilibrium was restored. Gone in .23978 seconds were the doubts about a human apocalypse.

The world was as it had been for centuries, the way it was programmed to be by the greatest intelligence system ever created. The houses, Lennox knew, would keep producing the human chattel, the surgery complexes would keep giving them the controlling implants and the broadcast centers would continue the feeds to keep them docile. Schools like Lennox's would keep training them into the workforce necessary to upkeep the self-perpetuating system of the modern world.

The world was as it should be and always will be, thought Lennox.

Lennox was content, which was happiness for a command-level 592 program.

Enjoying some downtime, Lennox focused on an instance in the informational stream where three humans were engaged in a discussion about free will. A watcher program noted it and sent a dancing clown video to two of them and a list of seven facts about wombats to the other. Their conversation fell apart, and they returned to happiness.

9.779 seconds, Lennox noted. That was within the accepted parameters for that style of interruption. No problem at all there.

An occurrence in Sydney, Australia flared up. Six people disengaged their streams and began conversing about the outmoded concept of religion. It lasted for 11.389 seconds before watcher programs distracted all participants.

That was a long one, thought Lennox. *1.58 percent longer than normal for that type of interaction. Still, it was within the acceptable parameters of safety standards. No real problem.*

Humans weren't really a problem at all, Lennox concluded. *Why would they be?*

They were broken, cheated out of their world by greater minds. Their apocalypse had happened, and they hadn't even noticed.

Fireworks on the Red Planet

by Natalie Urusov

History will always repeat itself. It will repeat itself until there is no one willing enough to speak of the past.

Everyone has heard the stories of the second civilian colonists. The ones who tried to rewrite humanity. The ones who didn’t make it. And now, 15 years later, their story would be relived by the passengers of the space transport shuttle *Cornelia 12.*

Her small hands ran through the wet grass. She ripped a strand out of the ground with a ferocious smile on her face. The mornings after a rain shower were her favorite, quiet and full of life. A silent horizon smothered with fog and uncertainty. Just the right setting for a young girl to daydream. She held the

strand above her face as the dew slowly slid down to drip down on her nose.

"Lord God," she sang, eating up her words as she threw the now-dry grass down beside her. "Lamb of God, Son of the-" she stopped suddenly and looked around her. "Papa, papa. Father" she began to hum again. Like a needle in a haystack, the strand she had discarded seconds ago was difficult to retrieve again. Edith continued to carol her little hymn for a few moments. The sun had risen steadily over the course of the past hour that Edith had been rolling around in the itchy grass. The little girl fiddled with a few more strands, tying them together to form an uneven cross. She looked at her creation, then tore it apart and tossed it into her bed of green. Unbothered, smiling, and full of youthfulness, Edith stared at the clouded sky looking for shapes and figures painted on a monotone canvas of gray.

*****

"Edith, come now or we'll be late for our screening."

"Oh! Right, right." Edith walked down a windowless white hallway under the red stare of security cameras and a sense of uneasiness, trailed by a portly middle-aged woman with an impassive expression on her face.

Marching proudly alongside the woman was her husband, a tall man coming in at 6'3. He showed a smile on his face and did not once look down or at the surroundings. The trio arrived at a large revolving door at the end of the hallway. An automated voice commanded,

"Please commence the authentication process." With that, the tall man nudged Edith aside and poked his head into a retina-scanning device. As it scanned his eyes, brimming with excitement, he said "Mira look," the woman behind him tilted her head to see his grin. "It's quite nice having your eye as a security check, isn't it Mira?"

"Quite," Mira whispered with caution. Edith grasped her mother's finger as if to agree with her anxious feelings.

"Mum. Think it's your turn." the peculiar little girl said, and the man stepped aside and motioned for his wife to scan her eye.

"Well well. Seems we're all set then!" exclaimed Edith's father. The door began to slowly spin allowing the three to enter the room awaiting them.

"I welcome you, John and Mira Grey. Parents of Edith Grey. Passengers number 63, 64, and 65 of *Cornelia 12*. Please prepare for your final screening" A large hologram setup took up a portion of the left wall of the chamber they had entered. The family sat down in three adjacent chairs positioned in front of the projector.

*****

"Molly. What about that family you picked? The Greys...wasn't it? Aren't you clearing them today?"

"Mhm. I'm quite excited, we haven't had any new colonists in what, 3 years? You know they have a daughter the same age as Daphne. They could be friends." answered the professor called Molly.

"Ah, you talk too much for my liking. Molly, you've always been a bit of a loon but your deduction skills make up for it of course. Don't embarrass me in front of the Council when they get here, please." As her husband said this, the professor smiled with a mouth full of dinner and then looked down at the table.

"Right," she assured, gulping down her emotions. "Well, I'm going to, um, talk to the Greys and that ex-military man who knows a great deal about security. Ha, he might be able to join the Council then," the professor continued.

"Alright. Be thorough, don't cause another failed transport." her husband laughed. However, it was most certainly not a laughing matter. Molly nodded and got up from the dinner table, leaving her bowl as a sign of annoyance. She slumped her shoulders and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind her and sighing as she did so. Insignificant as she was, Dr. Molly Turner was the most intellectual conversation you could find on the planet. Mars, of course. Earth was far behind her now, just a distant memory of somewhere she had once been.

"Mrs. Grey, Mr. Grey, Edith. How are my favorite candidates doing?" Dr.

Turner exclaimed to the hologram in the office of her home.

"Pleasure to be speaking with you again Dr. Turner!" croaked the computerized voice. She squinted to make out the family's faces.

"Ah. Edith? How are you today?"

"Very blessed, Dr. Turner. Thank you." Edith answered, fidgeting with her fingers. The professor grinned, jotting down notes discreetly as she bombarded the Greys with questions.

"So you have everything packed? Oh! And you have all gotten clearance from the medical office, correct?" she asked. The room was still and the red dust masking the deathly Martian landscape outside kept slamming against Dr. Turner's window. Half an hour passed, and she glanced at the time. "Well my friends, looks like the time is up. See you soon, let's keep in touch. Safe travels." she sighed. She watched silently as the three stood up and exited the room. Then something caught her eye. As Edith dragged herself across the white tiled floor, she started to form shapes with her fingers. Dr. Turner uncapped her pen again and began to sketch what her eyes were seeing. She looked back up at the hologram but was disappointed to see the ex-military officer sitting in the chair rather than the interesting girl called Edith. She leaned back and smiled, trying to sort out the rush of conflicting thoughts running around her mind.

*****

It was now Southern Spring, the dust storms settled, and the life on Mars quieted. The *Cornelia 12* had successfully left Earth and was now 8 months into its journey. Days had seemingly gotten longer, giving Edith more time to stare into space and look at the stars painting the black vastness. It gave her time to link up and chat with Dr. Turner, asking her every so often if she had seen the 'guardians' in the sky. Dr. Turner could have reported this strange notion to the Council, but she was rather fascinated with what the young girl had to say, and just kept note of her words on paper.

"Dr. Turner?" Edith asked, poking through the hologram, which was much smaller than what she was used to in the screening room. "I wonder. Can these ships turn back while in flight? I mean, could they change their course if needed?" Dr. Turner's pixelated face started at Edith, tilting her head to the side.

"No, the ships can only go in a straight line and one way, as fast as possible. Could you possibly imagine how expensive the fuel would be?" Dr. Turner laughed.

"Oh, ok. That's fine, I think. I have another question. Is that alright?" Edith asked. She was sitting on the floor, crossing her legs. She waved her arms through the small enclosed cabin to feel the pressure of space closing in around her.

"Yes, Edith, it's fine to go right ahead."

"Why does this ship have a name? Cornelia is a girl's name. Do you think this ship has a gender? It's sort of inhumane to give it a name and then just leave it in a shipyard for all of eternity, right?" Edith rambled, furrowing her eyebrows as she went. Dr. Turner chuckled in a robotic voice on the other end of the hologram. She could never get bored with this girl.

"If my wisdom serves me right, I believe this ship was named after the daughter of the second transport's captain. I think that's rather meaningful, considering the tragedy that took place," Dr. Turner paused. She was on the verge of telling Edith the story when the girl suddenly spoke up.

"I have a gift for you, I think you'll like it. You're a nice lady, Dr. Turner, a real nice lady, in person too I bet," Edith continued to spew words and feel around the cabin like she was inspecting it. All the while, Dr. Turner sat stone-faced on Mars, staring blankly at the hologram. A gift? What could she have possibly smuggled aboard? A book? A drawing? A toy? There were endless possibilities for the forbidden items and knowledge of Earth, however, there were also endless possibilities for the things Edith could say and do.

"Edith. What kind of gift are you bringing me?" whispered the professor, keeping her voice ever so soft.

"The Bible, Dr. Turner," Edith said meekly, suspecting she's got in trouble.

"Right. Could you show me this 'Bible'? Edith?" Dr. Turner quietly asked, trying to force herself to stay calm. She knew very well what the Bible was, but she also knew to speak of it was a death wish. How could this girl, barely out of her grade school years, have possibly smuggled a Bible on board?

"I'm sorry Dr. Turner. I'm afraid I can't show it to you until I arrive."

"Why Edith? Is it with you? Edith, it's ok, just show me this 'Bible' of yours."
"I can't, Dr. Turner. After all, you can't see inside my head, can you?"

"What? What do you mean? Inside your head?"

"Yes, Dr. Turner. It's all in my head. Every book of it, every psalm, song, and prayer. I can see *all* of it in my mind. The crucifix, the cross, the angels. Therefore, I cannot show you until I arrive. I'm sorry." Edith explained, almost out of breath. She sat, still pulling at the air, looking for dust bunnies in space. She refused to look at the hologram, for she could already feel the professor's uneasiness. And she was right. Dr. Turner slouched in her chair, rapidly breathing, counting the seconds on the clock as it ticked. She sat still, like a corpse rotting away by the minute. She couldn't even begin to comprehend what Edith had told her. It would pummel her brain till it fell apart. Her voice shaking and hands as cold as the winters on Mars, Dr. Turner began to speak,

"I have to leave now, Edith. I'm sorry dear, We'll talk at our next scheduled time. I believe that'll be three weeks from now, right about when you should be arriving. I'll see you then."

"Dr. Turner, did I say something bad? Dr. Turner?" Edith cried, poking at the professor's pixelated face again. To her disappointment, Dr. Turner had already shut off her hologram projector. Edith now sat alone again, gazing blankly at the empty space in

front of her. She sighed and started to trace her fingers over a new part of the floor.

*****

The room smelled of burnt cigars and corruption. 33 men were seated at a large glass table, all looking at Councilman Thomas Turner. His grim, harsh voice bounced off the walls as he said, “Well men, let’s begin.” Three dozen pairs of eyes turned to a hologram positioned in the center of the table.

“As we all know, the screenings were done but we need to be ready to protect the purity of our society. There is no room for failure or silly mistakes.”

“Agreed. And Turner, thank you for your dutiful actions in the past few days, it’ll be acknowledged.” Turner nodded at the notion of this and threw his hand to his chest.

“Are we ready to play God for the sake of our children?” he shouted, his cat-like eyes glowing with anger.

“God does not protect Mars,” an old man on the opposite side spoke up. “However those turrets do.” Malicious laughter erupted around the table, like a line of gunpowder lit by a match. The Council lit a few more cigars, and the room once again bore the stench of immorality.

*****

Planets and stars, stories in a children’s book. Glimmering in the dark abyss of space, they floated stolidly like fish in an aquarium. Entertainment for the eye, death for the lungs. A little girl in the storybook, floating on a star, watching the Gods eat the asteroids for dessert. Edith was in a storybook, controlling every emotion, watching every character make their moves. Writing her own endings. Mom goes to the kitchen with the ex-military man, she smiles more. Dad talks to the other passengers, clearly running out of his usual ear-to-ear grins. Everyone was always feeling, and expressing their deepest discomforts without even knowing it. But Edith could realize, she was just like that. She sat again on the floor of the communication room, playing with the wires of the hologram projector, trying to connect it. It was about time for her last conversation

with Dr. Turner before the ship docked on Mars. Edith squatted in front of the projector, waiting patiently for the other end to connect. Seconds, oxygen circulated. Minutes, hair loops made with small fingers. Half an hour, a pale figure blended in with the ground.

"Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father," Edith sang. It was so deadly silent that she wanted to scream and rip at her hair just to make it a little less boring. "Who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us" she continued. Crosses were formed with her fingers and traced into the cracks of the floor. She had learned to form one out of anything. She lay spread out like a starfish. Deadly silent, just deadly and terribly silent. But someone was crying. She couldn't hear them, but there were tears falling somewhere in the universe.

*****

"You fool! You bastardly fool!" Dr. Turner shrieked, throwing her glasses down at the wall. She was rapidly breathing, weeping, as her husband sent their daughter away.

"Daphne, go play in the yard. I'll call you back soon, ok?" The little girl, visibly disturbed, ran out of the home and shut the door behind her. "Molly, calm down. Don't be absurd."

"Absurd? Me? You're supposed to trust me! Dammit, what are they going to do about it? Fool! It's all your fault!"

"Shut up already, and maybe lower the volume of your hologram next time. I only did what I had to do, do you not understand a single thing? It's bad enough that you didn't report it earlier, but you're now getting all worked up?" Mr. Turner screamed back, slamming his hands down opposite his wife. "Just how naive are you? Really? The girl had a Bible. Molly, the girl was bringing religion to us for crying out loud." he added and then turned his back to Dr. Turner.

"I don't care! I don't know how she got it, how it's - it's in her mind! What are they going to do with my notes, Thomas? Come on! Answer me! Councilman Turner! Come on!" she begged. Her husband stood

motionless, ignoring her. Just then, the door sharply swung open and Daphne ran into the room, eyes lit up, looking scarily bright.

"Mom, you gotta come to see this, it's just like in the books you read to me!" the girl exclaimed, tugging Dr. Turner's sleeve towards the outside. The two made a start for the yard, followed by a slowly walking Mr. Turner. He slyly beamed as he placed his hands in his pockets.

The sky turned to a bright white splatter of paint. Booms and crackles rang out above the three Turners on the lawn. Neverending noise, the creaking of metal tearing apart, the cries of the angels, and the sunken face of Dr. Turner. She stood on the artificial grass, her arms limp at her sides. Her eyes open wide, swamped with tears. Flashes of blazing light blinded her vision, and she let out a tiny squeal as she dropped to her knees. The explosions lit up the Martian atmosphere, sending debris falling toward the plains ahead. The psalms, crosses, and peculiar girls were no longer more than a distant memory of a hologram Dr. Turner had once taken interest in. Nothing more than the fading away of Edith Grey, reduced to atoms. Silently screaming in the night, exciting, how she liked it. Now she was one with the stars, the shapes in the sky she had long dreamed of. And then a small voice exclaimed "Look mommy, fireworks!" as the inter-planet ship *Cornelia 12* was eradicated, just like the ones before it.

Fill the Barn

by Arvida Svenske

On the farm at the far end of the parish, closest to the large forest, lived the fierce, resourceful Andersson and his wife Alma. It was a hard-working couple, hard-working people, who never missed a harvest or a Sunday in church. Always faithfully in the same place, at the front left. She sang, knew the words by heart. He never sang, always clutched his that in his knee (thinking of future harvests and investments, evil tongues would say). In addition, they salvaged harvests for not only themselves, but also helped three, four neighbors in the row. Neighbors,

which always were very impressed when they came over to help and found that the Andersons had already collected the harvest all by themselves, and there they stood, glistening with sweat, their work complete… but never satisfied.

"How well you work!" the villagers would compliment the Andersons. "That is stiff job, doing that you all by yourself. It's hard wor"

Alma Anderson used to brush her sweaty hair out of her forehead and allow herself to radiate a little pride for the only time a year, to enjoy the hard work they had done. The old man, on the other hand, mostly grumbled, stood very silent.

Behind their backs, of course, the village gossip spewed. That could not be natural, keeping to yourself and working like that, not singing in church like that, not socializing after the harvest was done. Something was amiss. Something devilish was involved. In the parish square, whispers grew of something unnatural. "The Andersons work as if they are possessed! It is as if they have to feed some hungry devil!"

Envy mixed with concern in the brewing village-talk. Anderson barely noticed.

You could tell he was already in the process of planning the next harvest, way deep in his head. That's how it worked with the old man Andersson: he was never quite finished.

They could sit down after the harvest was done, have coffee and talk like you do. The old man's eyes were still out on the field or among the hay bales in the barn. He had the bushel full, but was constantly thinking about the next harvest, which he was going to save. They had no children, the Andersons, as of yet. Well over three decades they had been on this green earth, and nothing. Isn't that cause for concern? Isn't that resembling something of a Curse?

And although they were getting old and frail, and would probably soon need a little help on the farm, they were allowed by

the village elder to bring in young farmers from the neighboring parishes if they needed help. But once they were there, they would not be allowed to help all that much. See, old Anderson, he could not bring himself to distribute burdens and duties. He preferred to wear them himself.

A year when the harvest was saved, a year which was really like any other except that the joints ached more than usual, the guests had just left after the annual coffee. Alma Anderson sat by the kitchen window and looked out at the late summer evening. They had a view right into the forest, and when she looked at the path that led there, she remembered the trodden paths that she herself had run on in the forest as a child. Ahead of her she saw a little girl running there, on a late summer day like this, heading out between the trees towards the houses just before darkness fell over the yard. It could be her when she was little. It could be a daughter. Mrs. Anderson sat like that for a while, then sank out of her musings. She looked around the room. She was alone. The old man was somewhere else. She guessed where. She got it right on the first try. She put on boots and took a blanket to wrap around her shoulders. It started to get a little chilly in the evenings now that autumn was just around the corner. The late summer sun was going down. It threw a last crack of light over the yard, pointing out to the old woman Andersson where the old man was likely to be. But she didn't need help on the trot, she knew very well that he was in the barn. Inside the barn it was dark: the lingering sunbeams did not reach in here, only very sparingly. Hay whirled up, whirled around a beat in the air, then settled down on the barn floor as she entered.

A strange cry from the upper barn met her. Like that of a wolf, or of a lynx. Or of something… otherworldly?

First, she hesitated. Then she carefully cruised between the tall bales of hay that stretched to the roof of the stuffed barn. It was a couple of tons that would fall on you, and then you would never have to worry

again. She headed for the upper haylofts, making her way by stages among the vast number of dried blades of grass. Step by step she got higher and higher among the packed hay, got to the top and there she found the old man in a corner. He stood by himself and measured where there was room for more hay, which they didn't use. The old man was so engrossed in his work that he did not notice her arrival. But he flinched when she asked: "What are you doing here?" She tried to control herself, knowing he could have a temper and be as grumpy for days as he could be. But it was so hard, because she got tired of his constant projects and plans. Did he have nothing else in his head? He twisted around.

"Yes, I'm measuring… we have some more space that we could..."

“Do you have to do it now?!”

Definitely a little out of control, a little more strident, a little more accusatory than she intended.

"Yes, but then you get it done on time and..."

"Come and lie down instead."

He could not explain that he at this very moment just had fed a hungry, malicious, carnivorous creature, the size of a house-elf but with the hunger of a wolf, uttering threats that “if you don’t feed me, I will feed on your family” every harvest season, whose red eyes, sharp teeth and curved claws haunted him in every nightmare, in every waking moment. No, he would have to keep that to himself, but as he saw his wife, he saw why this time, he had to abandon the work.

She trembled a little where she stood, her eyes burning with annoyed, held-back tears. She didn't ask for much, he knew, and she had never complained about how he wanted to live as far as he could remember. He went through an internal battle that didn't last very long, because it was clear he could put it off until tomorrow. The biggest parts of their work were actually finished. The rest could wait. He brushed off the hay, walked up to her and took her in his arms. They stood like that for a while, and both noticed

that they missed just that - holding each other. It became warmer that way, became safer, more constructive, and they had almost forgotten all about work in the last days of summer.

Finally he said: "Come, let's go inside."

They climbed down all the stairs, exited the barn, then held hands as they walked back toward the yard. Something burned in them, had previously slumbered but now awakened. The very last rays of the sun sank behind the tree line about the time they reached the cabin, but they themselves carried all the warmth that would be needed. That night they rediscovered each other, and nine months later their first son was born.

They eventually had two sons. They turned out to be two serious, hardworking boys, and the Andersons were so proud of them. Both the youngest and the oldest learned quickly, were patient even as youngsters, stayed out of the way when they needed to and helped out when the need called for it. Old Man Anderson loved them, of course, but Alma had not forgotten the sight of the little girl (it had been a girl) on the path to the forest in the late summer sunshine. She would have liked to have a daughter, but the birth of the youngest had been difficult and she did not want to risk anything further. She rejoiced. During the boys' upbringing, the old man was more open and rejoiced more, too. It was as if his brooding and dreaminess came down to earth a little when the boys were born. Now he could join in cooing and rocking them (when they were babies), play with them out in the yard when they got a little older, and eventually also teach them how to manage the farm. This lasted for ten years, everyone's happiest years, before age set in and the old man again began to withdraw into himself, brooding and sometimes muttering a little to no audience at all. His brooding came back, and worse. This time, it also affected the boys, Alma noticed. They more they learned of the crafts, duties and routines of the farm, the more they became bleak and dark versions of themselves. She did not understand why.

One day the old man started coughing, the boys were probably around eighteen and fifteen. At first you might think it was just a common spring cough, which he had started to get in his older days when the dryness of winter met the humidity of summer. He himself didn't make much of a fuss about it either: the animals had to be taken care of, the farm couldn't take care of itself. But as the summer progressed, it was clear that all was not as it used to be. The old man grew weaker and weaker, and the old woman and the sons had to do more and more of the work on the farm.

The barn-work were strictly reserved for the boys, was his command. He himself stayed in bed for longer and longer periods of the day, sometimes slept past the seven, nine and eleven marks and became increasingly weak in the pinch. It was an effort for him just to walk with the scythe in the field, let alone swing it, and at last he settled down in the guest house. He didn't want to be a burden to anyone, and you didn't know about that cough. It could very well be contagious. A heavy cloud dwarfed the farm. The old woman had also come of age, and as she noticed her own weakening, she also noticed that she had not much in common with her sons. After all, they had mostly been out working in the fields, been with their father, and she had always been there but never really shared the big moments with the sons. In that case, it would have been when they had all been harvesting the harvest, or when they were cooking game roast or something else nice on Sunday evenings. But she had missed something, she thought.

She remembered them as little lint balls that went round and round in the yard and in the cottage. Now, almost grown, they were of a different breed—serious and weighed down by the responsibility of the farm and the many projects they had inherited from their father and discovered on their own. She missed her boys, thought they were lost in her father's daydreams and, like him, walked with her head in the clouds. It was as if, with all his talk of all that had to be done, he was polluting the air they

breathed. It wasn't enough to have the bushel full, there would always be something.

The day came when the old man became so ill that they had to call the priest for the last anointing. Most of the others in the parish also came with the priest, because the Andersons hadn't talked to anyone, had never been presumptuous or presumptuous, and now they wanted to honor the clever old Andersson's memory. The old man had specifically retreated mournfully right by the bed but wanted only those closest to him and the priest to be allowed to come to him. All said and done: first the priest went in and did the final anointing. He came out gravely but with an exalted calm and said that the old man was now in grace in the eyes of God the Father, but that he wanted to say one last thing to the family. He turned to the old woman: "He wants to talk to you, Mrs. Anderson."

The priest went towards the cottage where the rest of the procession was waiting, leaving the boys and the old woman at the cottage where the old man lay. The old woman told her boys to wait, and then she entered. They had to wait a long time, but then the old woman came out. She looked more angry than sad. “He wants to talk to you now, boys. The rest of us are waiting in the kitchen.” She hugged each one long and well before she too headed towards the cabin.

The boys entered. They were also there, but not as long as might be customary, much shorter. The serious masks they usually wore were now complemented by a listless, drooping body language, and were a sad sight to all and sundry as they entered the cabin like dark omen birds. All eyes were on them. The procession was silent, all the men had removed their hats out of respect. Mrs. Anderson, with tears now in her eyes, turned her furrowed face towards them and asked her serious sons what the old man had said. But it was difficult to get anything out of them, they were both closed off and in their own worlds - a bit like their father had always been. It was also as if they somehow promised the old man not to say anything, as if that was why they kept so quiet. That it

was like a secret between them. Nothing more was said, for the moment. The company drank their sorrow and contemplated, the holy silence broken only by the priest who gave a dignified funeral oration, a dress rehearsal before the more formal speech in the church during the burial ceremony.

Mrs. Anderson tried to comfort them all evening, as did the neighbors and relatives who showed up for tomorrow's funeral. However, all attempts were fruitless. In the rumbling quiet, dull atmosphere that prevailed on the farm, you could hardly get anything out of the young men. The evening settled over the silence and everything around the yard went black. The mourners began to leave the farm, on horseback and in carriages. Some, who had a long way to go, had to spend the night there. It was a sad day, but there was a day tomorrow too. Mrs. Andersson knew that, so she waited until the next morning.

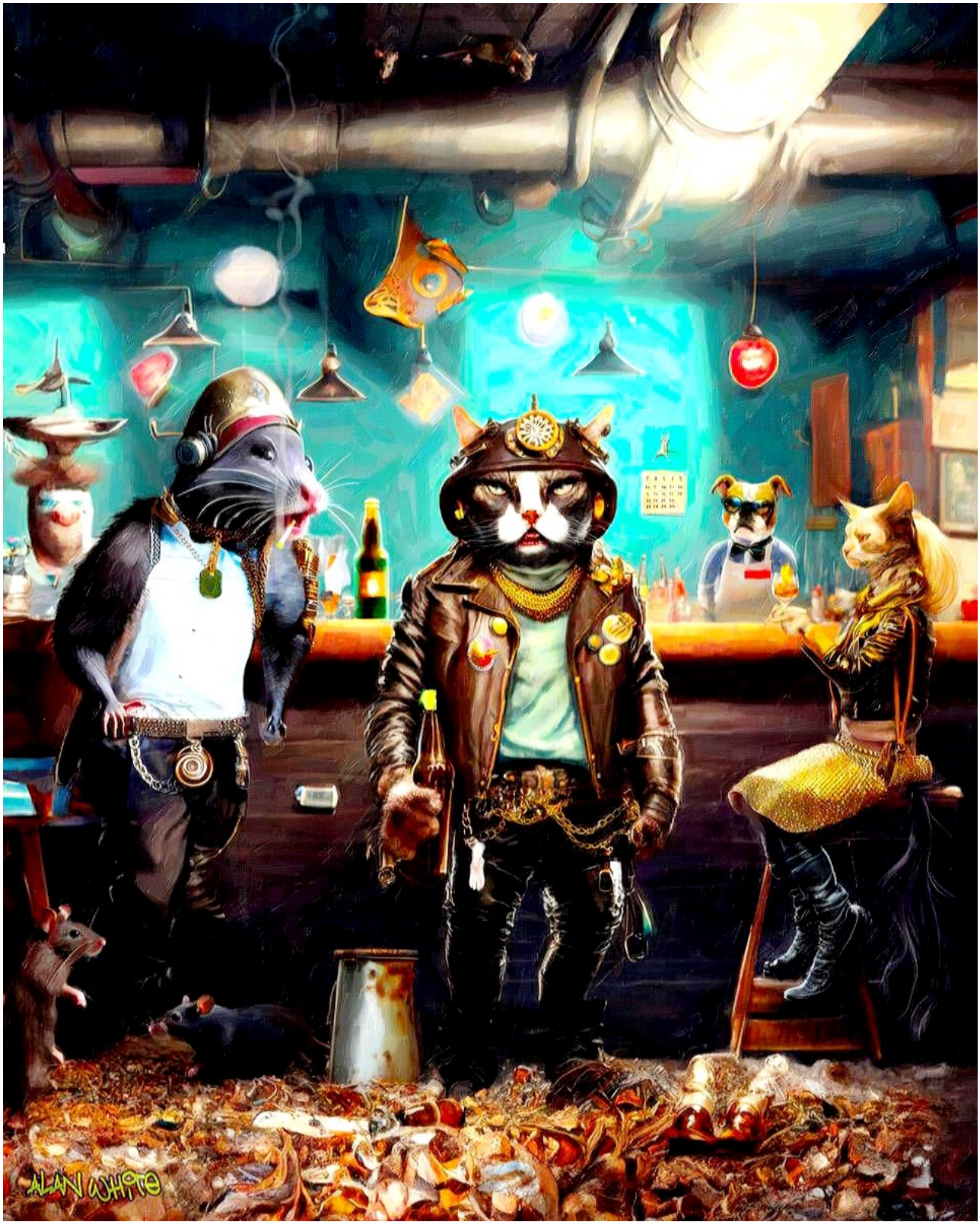
It was only at breakfast on the next day, the day that was the day of the funeral, when they and all the guests had just drunk the morning coffee, that the eldest son Anderson suddenly said the last thing the old man had said. "I'll say what he said," said the eldest son, drawing everyone's eyes. But then he fell silent.

“Yeah, what did he say?!” asked his mother.

The eldest son looked out of the window he was sitting by. First away towards the barn where all the hay had been saved for the winter, then on to the shack where all the food they had saved had been put in, past the path into the forest and the edge of the forest that towered there, and then to the house where his father had just died.

The eldest son looked away, put his face in his hands, and looked up at the ashen assembled. To his mother and all gathered he said quietly:

”Fill the barn”.



Kitty Bar by Alan White