

# SPACE SQUID

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## ANIMALS

YOUR PUNY PLANET'S FINEST SCI-FI STORIES & HIJINX - CHILDISH YET NOT FOR CHILDREN

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**A Brief Note from Our Corporate Mascot**

Once upon a time, there lived a happy squad of squid, deep in the interstellar ocean, an ocean of such depthiness that it has no name.

This squad was so abundant in happiness that it published really cool, edgy, funky-butt stories for free on its website, and even printed annual full-color best-of editions for Armadillocon even though they lost money on every edition because most readers didn't bother to toss in a few sawbucks.

The squad slowly developed a small and dedicated parallel squad of ultradimensional squid that supported the prime squad with cool story submissions and readership. The two squads would swim along in concert and harmony on either side of the dimensional barrier, two halves of a greater whole. But of course, such synchronous elegance could not last.

A dark beast arose called the Great Damned Prosaic Reprimand to impede the communications between the two squads, demanding that the prime squad prove that the interdimensional squad really wanted to swim along, and if so, like, when they had signed up for swimming, and what their favorite swim strokes are, and what kind of cookies they eat, but only at least 30 minutes before or 30 minutes after any aquatic exertion.

The penalties for defying the Reprimand were legion and dire. And the prime squad did quaver and quiver in fear of its ire. How indeed could the squid respire?

And so the squad turned to the Reprimand and said, like, "WTF, yo? We make no money on this gig anyhow. So all this talk of penalties only sticks in our beaks.

"We'll do our best to reconfirm our list. We'll unsubscribe people until they're blue in the face. But if you wanna take us over, just make sure you keep printing the annual Armadillocon issue. 'Cuz it's a goddamned money loser.

"COME AT ME BRO!"

-- Squishy the Squid

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**BLAME WHERE BLAME IS DUE**

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**BUDGET CUTS**  
ANY TYPOS OR GOOFUPS

# BOB AND BEASTMAN'S HONEYMOON

by Jessica Johnson



Tagging along on the honeymoon of your two best friends makes you feel a little like the squeaky extra wheel on your nephew's tricycle. Your two best friends in the whole world are a sentient monkey named Bob and a beastman cleverly named Beastman.

So far you've been having the time of your life on a deserted island with disappointingly few desserts.

Yet in your drunken revelry you forgot to secure the rowboat you had arrived in. Your friends have just realized this after waking up from a hangover so strong that they could kill mosquitoes with their blood.

And now they so very much want to tie you to a stake and pelt you with rotten coconuts. But there is one small hang-up in their plan. The three of you are currently surrounded by a band of rather angry-looking skeletons dressed as pirates. How can skeletons look angry? Don't ask me. Use your imagination for once.

The leader, a bright red skeleton, raises a bone sword in the air that glints in the sunlight. All the other skeletons begin marching toward you and your bros. Why are these skeletons attacking you? You have no idea. Maybe they want to kill you and take your stuff. Maybe they just want to let off a little steam.

Yet the important thing to keep in mind here is that there is absolutely nothing that you or your friends can do about this. You're weaponless, hung-over and completely out of bananas.

One of the skeletons grabs you by the shoulder and points a dagger into your neck. But then you remember the one thing that you still have: your wits.

All those times your mother told you to "keep all your wits about you" have finally come in handy, because at this moment you currently have seven different wits about you. But you only need one.

"Um, excuse me," you say politely, to the rather slender fellow with his blade in your neck. "Is it just me, or are you guys too dead to be doing things?"

The skeleton scratches his chin pensively. "I guess you got us there." With that said, all the skeletons collapse.

Beyond the newly-formed pile of bones, in the distance, you see that the skeletons have conveniently parked their ship on the shore. And what assholes! They double-

parked. Didn't they see the line in the sand?

When you and your buddies stumble on to the ship, you notice that the most beautiful monkey woman you have ever seen — and probably the only monkey woman you have ever seen — is currently tied to the mast.

"Untie me!" she cries. "Those evil brutes kidnapped me!"

After you release the voluptuous and gloriously hairy woman from her bonds, she introduces herself.

She is Tonga, magical priestess of the monkey-folk. She has some terrible news. A demon named "Banana Hammock III" is feasting on the blood of virgins daily in order to amplify his powers over the dead. By the end of this day — this special day of all days — the blood moon will rise into the apex of the sky, and he'll have enough power to raise an army of the undead. With which he will obviously take over the world.

At this point, you're just glad that you've never had the misfortune of knowing the first two Banana Hammocks.

When Tonga finishes her tale, you see that the pile of bones on the shore is beginning to take on a shape. The red skeleton starts shouting something about Descartes: "And I was... therefore... I could possibly be!"

You try to shout back to him that this doesn't make any sense, but he ignores you.

"We'll be coming back for our ship now, ya scurvy infested bilge drinkers!" he yells, rallying all the other skeletons. They start marching toward the ship.

"Cut the ropes!" Tonga cries.

Beastman is way ahead of her. With a knife between his teeth, he is leaning over the side of the boat snapping the rope like twine.

Meanwhile, you and Bob are content to stand around doing nothing of particular importance. You decide to use this opportune moment to scratch an itch on your left butt cheek that has been irritating the Jesus, Mary and Gandhi out of you.

Soon the ship is on its way, speeding away from the shore like a track star with ants in their jock strap.

"So, where should we go?" you ask.

"Where else?" says Tonga. "We must stop Banana Hammock III. I know where his temple is from here. We must head west."

"Uh, Tonga," you say, "how exactly are we going to defeat a demon?"

"Have a little faith." She grins, flashing you a smile of banana-yellow teeth.

...

After cutting through dense jungles and watching Beastman fight off ravenous demon-tigers, you and your party sneak into the secret entrance of Banana Hammock III's unholy temple.

You see many statues of monkey heroes from ancient times along with stained glass windows depicting bananas.

In the middle of the temple is a giant gorilla with two horns sticking out of his head. He's five times larger than an elephant and just as fat as your mother. He glows with an almost radioactive red hue.

"Wait," you say. "Why is the demon bound?"

"You fools!" Tonga laughs, suddenly glowing red herself. "Banana Hammock III is my prisoner. With this brute tied in place, there is now no one strong enough to stop me in my quest for world domination!"

"But what could you possibly want with a group of hung-over idiots like us?" you gasp.

"Blood has powerful magic," says the Priestess. "And there is only one kind of blood more powerful than that of a virgin. That of a monkey and his bestial lover!"

With her hands lifted into the air, her eyes glow red. Her body hair stands up straight as if conducting static electricity.

She points at Bob and shoots a beam of magical energy at him that explodes from her fingertip like lightning. Beastman jumps in front of the beam in an attempt to save his paramour, but instead both of them are sent floating into the air.

As Tonga balls her fists together, a crimson aura surrounds Bob and Beastman. Blood begins to drip from their orifices, showering down upon the Priestess.

"Yes, yes, my power is growing," she cries in ecstasy. "I can feel it increase with every drop!"

"Do something!" your friends cry out.

Fortunately for you, you still have six wits about you, out of the seven you had earlier.

Squeezing all six of your wits together as hard as you can, your puny, hangover-glazed brain has an idea.

You run straight forward, headbutting Tonga into the gaping mouth of Banana Hammock III. In one quick bite, the demon swallows her whole. Bob and Beastman fall promptly from the air and give you a round of high fives.

They thank you and realize that you're not such a bad third wheel after all.

"What should we do now?" asks Bob.

"I could go for more rum," Beastman replies.

In a deep voice that shakes the room and sends pebbles falling from the ceiling, Banana Hammock III chips in, "I know where we can find some."

"Aw man." Bob rolls his eyes. "Does our group really need a fourth wheel?" •

# THE PANDA EXPRESS

by E. M. Eastick

While Jillian, gorgeous in a Wonder Woman costume, flirted with some fit dude annoyingly dressed as Conan the Barbarian and smelling like Old Spice, I tried to act cool by the snack table. The cracker spiders looked bland, the oyster brains smelled nasty, so I tried an egg and black-olive eyeball.

The olive caught at the back of my throat and made me gag. With watery eyes, I pushed through the patio doors, past Cleopatra and Papa Smurf deep in conversation, and staggered into the kitchen for a glass of water.

A portly panda stood with his butt against the island and sipped a red-colored drink through a straw set in a tall glass. His costume covered everything but his face. The whites of his eyes were startling in the black makeup, which I guessed he'd applied himself without a mirror. As the only other person in the kitchen, he greeted me with a



weird, black-lipped smile. "What's up?"

I steadied my breathing, wiped my eyes, and took another gulp of water. My face must have been red, but the panda seemed unfazed by my near-death condition. "Well, I almost just choked on an olive made to look like an eyeball, but otherwise, it's a pretty good party, don't you think?"

The panda nodded. "Guess so." He slurped his drink loudly as the red-colored liquid gave way to a jumble of ice cubes.

I wasn't in a hurry to rejoin the others. My Indiana Jones outfit, the whip sadly imitated by a bright yellow nylon rope, was sexy, Jillian had said, but who could compete with the sword and bare chest of a recreational body-builder?

The panda watched me process my jealousy. I expected he would go searching for another drink, but instead, he belched, which for some reason, made me chuckle. I was beginning to like this guy.

"I'm Todd," I said reaching out a hand. The panda accepted it in a furry paw, releasing a whiff of stale sweat as he lifted his arm.

Instead of offering his own name, the panda had another go at extracting his beverage from his empty glass, this time by upending it to his lips while holding aside the straw and blocking the deluge of ice cubes with his paw.

"And you are—?"

He set his glass on the countertop. His mouth clicked as if he were sucking something out of his teeth. I guessed he must've tried the beef jerky bats, which I reluctantly avoided because of too much salt. "Death," he said nonchalantly.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm Death," he said.

In the pause, I tried to reason with the strange response. "Like, Megadeth or something, except without the Mega?"

The panda shrugged. "Guess so."

I wished I had my drink with me, but I'd left my bourbon on the snack table out on the back deck. "I might go and see what the others are up to." I nodded to the patio doors. "Nice meeting you, um, Death."

The panda crossed his furry arms and watched me, disinterested, as I turned away.

The scene on the deck wasn't quite what I was expecting. Costumes crowded the snack table, as if the frozen banana ghosts were the most original thing ever, but instead of chatter and laughter, the guests cried and mumbled. Jillian hunched over what looked like a sleeping person, a man judging by the trousers and boots. I couldn't see his face, but the bright yellow nylon rope that hung from his hip was unmistakable.

"You ready, then?"

The panda laid a paw on my shoulder.

"This is a joke, isn't it?"

The panda sighed as I pulled away from him and strode to Jillian. When I reached her, she felt like nothing to my touch. She smelled like nothing. When I said her name in her ear, she heard nothing.

Death was beside me, looking over Jillian's shoulder at my body.

When Jillian turned with red eyes and a tragic expression, I knew it was true. She loved pandas more than anything, but she didn't see Death at all. •





# KING OF ASHES

by Lee Anderson

Pulling her Ralph Lauren Black Label leather coat closed against the freezing air, Claire knocks on the first level door of a sprawling, fully above-ground Upper West Side townhouse. The home features 1,000 square feet of entertaining space with a sizeable open kitchen and 30 foot living room. Claire coughs.

The real estate agent, Will, answers the door. He wears a Gray Calvin Klein two-button notch lapel suit. "Oh my god, you look more beautiful every time I see you," he says to Claire. "How is that possible?"

He turns into the apartment without touching her.

"You look good, too," she offers quietly to his back.

"Welcome to the most *a-maz-ing* townhouse you have ever seen!"

He leads her further inside. Walls of sun-flooded windows on three sides adjoin with a private backyard (approx. 400 sq. ft.) There are also three full windowed bathrooms and two stackable washer/dryers. Will leads her to a kitchen with Norland SK6oSSG stainless appliances and dark granite countertops. Will holds his arms out, beckons her to behold the majesty of this optimum-designed kitchen.

"One of the main reasons that *anyone* buys a townhouse," Will says to her, "is the kitchen."

Claire collapses to the Pietra-Firma white-tiled floor and convulses until pockets of foam fill the corners of her mouth. Her eyes roll back, and she gags. With one hand, Will manages to lift her to her feet again. Using the Marazzi kitchen island as a brace, Claire wobbles on her feet, though still bent over.

"Sweetheart, you have to look at this," says Will. "This isn't just *any* kitchen. It's a mega full floor kitchen. It goes on and on. It's huge!"

She stumbles to the Franke sink and attempts to vomit but nothing comes up. She turns on the Toto Neorest II faucet and splashes her face.

"Look at the size of this stove. Claire, you're not looking. See it? I want to cook on it myself. I want to sleep on it!"

She takes her pink-shelled iPhone6 from her purse and dials. Places the phone to her ear. "Hello?" she asks.

"Do you hear that?" Will asks her. "Listen, sweetie. Hear it?"

Claire drops the phone, and it hits the floor. She gasps. She looks around them, her

view half-hidden by a large tuft of her own hair.

"I don't hear anything," she says in a whisper that cracks.

"That's right! Quiet... this townhouse is *super* soundproof!"

"I have to call people." Claire moves to retrieve her phone from the floor, but the distance feels impossible. She freezes and stares at the phone instead. "I don't know where anyone is."

"First things first," Will says. "We have three more floors, two fireplaces, five bathrooms, and four bedrooms still to view. And the balcony!"

Will leads her through sliding crystal doors and onto the 600-square-foot balcony with double-paned glass railings. Without hesitation, Claire races for the edge. Will catches her after only a few bounding steps, hooks his arm around her waist. He lifts her away and balances her on his hip, then sets her on her feet, once they're back inside.

Claire, still breathless: "Okay, okay... I'll take it. I want it."

"Verrrrry smart move," Will says. "A lot of value in a place like this. For this neighborhood? Forget it!"

She reaches into her black Hermes Graphite purse and carefully removes an albino boa constrictor. Its scaly skin shines smooth like slime. Before even half of the reptile is exposed, Claire holds it towards Will. "This is all I can afford," she says.

Will takes the entire snake from her with deliberation, careful to keep his balance with the reptile's girth. He then lays it gingerly around his own neck, a stiff sash. "I'll talk to the owner," he says. He pets the snake, nuzzles it like a newborn.

The snake blinks its pink, pebble-sized eyes, stretches its body as if to get a better look at Will's face. "I gave your first breath to you," the reptile says to him in perfect English. "I shall accept your last sigh...." •



# TURTLED DOVE

by Stephen C. Evans

"I do not mean to suggest it is a bad thing, Metzie."

Despite the thick Swahili accent, Hugh Metz had no trouble hearing the hidden



chuckle in his friend's words. "Oh no?" he asked. "Please tell me how your disparaging remarks regarding my physical appearance were meant as a compliment."

"I am just thinking about the perks," Samu Eboh answered. "A man like you, you will never have to face the horrible temptation of cheating on your wife and destroying your family."

"Because all the women are throwing themselves at you out here," Metz countered, waving an indiscriminate hand at the main view bay.

"Metzie, my friend. I come out here to escape the burden of this face. And to make it more fair for all the men not blessed as I am. I only chase the simple life." Samu sat back, the white of his smile filling the Command Bubble, outshining the stars beyond.

"Must be so hard being you," Hugh offered with a sardonic smile of his own. It was their strong friendship that made these jobs bearable in the barren desert of this new frontier.

"You have no idea. All women love African dark chocolate, Metzie. Just one of many curses I bear being born so perfect."

"I can only--"

Samu cut him off. "Do you...?"

"Yeah, I feel it too."

The explosion rocked the *Dove* before the two men could consult on the change in their ship any further. With a knowing look, they immediately shifted to the seriousness called for in a situation like this.

"Engines," Hugh called.

"Then I shall see to Life Support."

They scattered, a tickle of preemptive panic over their off-ecliptic shortcut fluttering in Hugh's gut as he triggered an automated diagnostic.

Scuttling aft, Hugh tried to temper his panic with the knowledge that whatever the source of the explosion, it hadn't killed them.

Yet.

"Life Support appears intact," Samu called from the upper deck a few minutes later. "The computers appear to be uncompromised as well."

Giving the engines a once-over, Hugh couldn't see any obvious continuity interruptions or damage. "Propulsion systems seem fine, too. It's likely the damage was external."

"Agreed. We should, however, inspect the hull interior for compromise nonetheless. I will see to the upper deck," Samu offered.

"I've got the Bowel."

"Your rightful place in the universe..." Samu's voice trailed off, and Hugh saw his Cheshire grin vanish over the upper-deck balustrade. He couldn't suppress his own nervous smile with a shake of his head at his friend's pervasive good spirits. Pulling a "pudding pack" from the wall, he moved to the center of the space, tearing open the package and squeezing out a measured portion of the gel. Staring at it floating before his eyes, he watched tensely for movement towards any of the bulkhead surfaces.

Nothing.

With a sigh of hopeful relief, he moved first aft and then fore, repeating the process, watching to see if a micro-leak to the vacuum of space would draw the substance towards the hull. If indeed there was such a leak, the gel would serve as a temporary adhesive stop. If not, it was cohesive enough to be recaptured, so as not to run free-floating havoc with any of the ship's systems. A firmer relief took hold when the gel remained relatively stationary, reacting to nothing more than the inertia he'd provided while squeezing it from its pack. Anxiety still had the largest hold on him, however.

"My pudding's good down here," he called up to Samu. "Recovering it now." The silence from his friend immediately dissipated his struggling optimism. He waited painfully, until a few seconds later Samu's finally appeared over the balustrade.

"As it is here. No leaks or ruptures. Today must be our lucky day, Metzle."

"Sure. Everyday something blows up on the *Dove* is one of my favorites. Especially when we don't know the extent or the cause."

"Then let the joy of the hunt continue, my friend. Do not worry," Samu offered, displaying his knack for always knowing the workings of Hugh's mind. "We will get you home to Karen. I would hate to deprive her of the comfort of her second-favorite individual." He winked. "Besides, I cannot die before I learn if that bump in her belly will be blessed with her likeness, or cursed with yours. To the diagnostic, no?" That ceaseless smile launched itself from the upper-level bracings. Hugh followed, his anxiety somehow rising despite the elimination of the most dangerous potential threats.



Samu and Metz huddled together, their heads close enough to touch as they read the diagnostic report on the screen.

"The Honeycomb has been violated," Samu said. "Something made it all the way through."

"*Shit.*" Hugh's brow was damp with cold sweat, despite the regulated atmospherics of the *Dove*. He fought to keep his emotions in check, to mirror his friend's cool demeanor. "Seal all the active flows. Isolate propulsion and water tanks."

"One step ahead of you." Samu's hands flew across the touchscreen controls.

The Honeycomb was a series of layered, polycarbonate cavities filled with gaseous compound designed to absorb incoming micrometeorites before they could breach the pockets all the way through to the most vital of the ship's systems and supplies. In deep space, there was no way to prevent impact from the microscopic dust storms, and at intra-solar velocities, micrometeorites the size of sand could rip through ships like tin foil under the right circumstances. The risks were usually light among the well-travel spaceways, but out here.... Hugh shut down that unproductive line of thought as quick as it came on.

"I have shut down circulation of water and propulsion for now," Samu reported. They didn't want their fuel or water passing from an uncompromised tank into one that had been breached... or was no longer there altogether. "All storage sealed and isolated. I am running a remaining supply check now."

Hugh stared out the generous cockpit bay, wishing instead he had a view of the rear of their ship. Despite knowing his eyes would be a vastly inferior source of information compared to the diagnostic software, he still wanted to see it for himself.

Samu's face flinched uncharacteristically sour, and Hugh could tell it was a visible effort to reassert his trademark grin. "It got five of the eight propulsion tanks. And one of the tanks left intact was active access. It's down to only forty-three percent. A hell of a storm."

"Less than two-and-half tanks of fuel." Hugh started to pace in the limited space, pushing off the hulls, trying to think through the problem. "Could we rig a conversion factory? We could break into what we mined out there; find a way to strip our excess water for its hydrogen. We'd have to vent all the excess oxygen--no way to store it. But if we could somehow rig the engines to run on pure hydrogen, it might at least get us

enough fuel to make it back home. It only has to work for a one-way trip.”

Hugh once again kicked himself for allowing this shortcut in the first place. Leaving the elliptic to make a beeline against the gravimetrics of the solar system had been pure idiocy. Especially in the face of all the other risks: the increased micrometeorite density, no comms traffic, the excessive fuel cost; the experiment had been an ill-considered failure. Their current predicament was proof of that.

Samu’s face softened, which was infinitely worse than all the man’s good-natured jibes. “It got the water too. Both of the whales.” The whales were the large holding tanks used to store captured water mined from whatever asteroid they found to suck dry. Hugh tried to picture all that water flash-evaporated into the vacuum of space while Samu continued. “And we are down to only two of the remaining internal-use tanks left intact.”

“That’s only a quarter of our water...” Hugh’s voice trailed off as he pulled himself into his captain’s chair, his brain whirling but seeming to accomplish no actual thinking. Their entire haul of mined H<sub>2</sub>O gone, and just a fraction of what they needed to survive left remaining.

“Indeed,” Samu confirmed. “We shall need all of that water for ourselves. We could probably rig a conversion factory, and the engines, but there is not enough superfluous supply to allow for anything to convert, even if we could. I would recommend we sacrifice our bathing privileges, but it still will not be enough. And I am afraid I like myself too much to allow you to make that sacrifice anyway, my friend.”

Hugh took a deep breath, perhaps subconsciously embracing the only resource that wasn’t in short supply, trying to put his thoughts together. “So... options?”

“It is grim. The fact that we do not follow an ecliptic route places us in a position where help is an impossibility.”

“Which is *your* damn fault, Samu.” The anger that leaked into his voice surprised even Hugh. Samu flinched as if visibly slapped, a look of hurt and confusion invading the man’s face, fully evicting his trademark smile. Hugh didn’t care. That stupid, face-eating grin had talked him into too many bad decisions over their long friendship, and this time it had very likely killed them. “We’re out here, completely alone, for what? So that now, not only will we die, but when we do Karen won’t even be able to mourn my death. She’ll just be stuck wondering forever what the hell happened to us. To *me*. And I’ll never get to meet my baby girl.” Tears pooled in his eyes, and he dabbed them angrily away before they floated off and made things even worse. He knew he was ranting, but couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to. “All just because I didn’t have the sense not to listen to you when you proposed this idiotic gamble in the first place!”

Metz could see Samu playing with the idea of trying to lighten the mood, employ some deprecating banter to get them back to themselves. And could equally see the moment he decided against it.

“I am sorry, Hugh. It was a gamble, but a gamble we both committed to. If it had worked, it could have made us the most successful runners in the belt. But we can argue merits and blame later, when we have the luxury for it. Now, we must answer the question as to how to survive. And I believe there is only one practical option.

“We must reorient and burn the last of our fuel to push back into range of the ecliptic. It is a small chance, yes, but I think our only one. Once we are back in range of the primary spaceways, we can transmit an SOS and hope to providence that someone is close enough to receive before we drift out of range again.” The sides of Samu’s mouth twitched up, and Hugh couldn’t tell if that half smile was an attempt to conjure a fuller one, or repress it.

Hugh usually went along with his friend, but not this time. Not when it would

likely cost him--cost them both--their last chance at life.

"Samu, that's insane. Without a laser-line and a set receiving point, that would be like cupping our hands to our mouths and calling to the mainland from the middle of the ocean. The signal would dissipate before it even makes it a few AU's! The background solar radiation would tear it up even further. And, even if someone miraculously did pick it up, they'd never be able to pinpoint the source back to our location. Especially if we've drifted through an elliptical point and out the other side by then. It's madness!"

"We must try something." Samu's expression was flat, something Hugh could not remember ever having seen before. It didn't matter. He had his own idea. Something that would work.

"We reorient... the other way. We burn the last of our fuel and head *back* out to the belt. We find a nice pregnant rock, find a way to rig a conversion factory, and at least then we won't run out of air or water. Without the tanks we can't store enough fuel to get back home, but we can at least cry for help from there. We'll have a better chance other runners will catch and track the signal from within the belt before it dissipates."

"Hugh, you do not need me to tell you how expansive the belt is, and how irregularly frequented. That is what makes our jobs so lucrative in the first place: how dependent the spaceways are on us, and how few take the risks. It could be months... or *longer*, before anyone would come sniffing after whichever rock we choose. We likely would not be alive when they did. We are much better off trusting to the frequency of travel along the ecliptic lanes. It is the lesser roll of the dice."

"I disagree." Without his smile, Hugh thought Samu's face was one of blatant condescension. To be fair, it was an expression he had never seen in all the years the two had been friends, but Hugh just couldn't bring himself to embrace a benefit-of-the-doubt kind of mindset at the moment.

"Then have we reached an impasse? Do we sit and let the gods of indecision take us?"

"No." Hugh took a deep breath. "We cool off. We've never had something like this thrown at us, and we need to take a breather. Calm down and figure it out the right way."

Samu visibly relaxed, finding a semblance of his old equilibrium in even the slight lessening of tensions. "Yes, my friend. There is great wisdom in this."

"I'll go take a look at the water systems--see if it's even possible to rig a converter to purify a greater take and strip enough oxygen to buy us extra time on a rock," Hugh offered. "You see if anything can be done for communications. If we're going to slingshot across the ecliptic and scream like hell, let's at least figure out if we can make ourselves a little louder. We'll compare notes and then see which plan makes the most sense to us from there."

"It is a deal." Samu turned to go, heading off to the Communications Bubble. At the last minute he turned back, flashing his smile. "I love you, brother. We *will* get out of this, I promise you. Your ugly face shall be the first thing your daughter ever sees." And then he was gone.

Hugh waited a minute, ensuring that Samu was out of sight, and then left the Command Bubble, turning away from the H2O systems. He knew his friend, knew that his exaggerated optimism had no place in this crisis... would in fact very likely get them killed. What they needed was *realism*. The only problem was that Samu would never face the true, gritty reality of this situation unless he had no choice. Hugh had to take steps to give him that one and only choice; to save them both. It was the only way.

He slipped into the Core Bubble, briefly studying the electronics schematics. When

he found what he was looking for, he paused only briefly before going to work. Reaching in, he severed connections required to operate the longer-range communications equipment. He made sure to circle back, destroying the components that could be used to rig a patchwork fix. Without long-range communications, there was no way Samu's plan would be viable. It wasn't viable anyway; Samu just couldn't see that. In the belt, their short-range systems would be enough to call out to other miners, and they'd have all the extra time a rigged converter would buy them to keep trying. Not just a ridiculous skip across the travel lanes and a prayer. This was the only way to save them both, the only way to get back to his family.

It took the better part of half an hour to make sure his work was thorough and accurate; to be sure he had left no workarounds Samu could use for his ridiculous plan. Samu would be pissed, but with only Hugh's option he would have no choice but to embrace it. And in the end, his friend would thank him. Samu was right about one thing: they had been as close as brothers for too long. It wasn't in the man's nature to hold a grudge, especially a grudge over an act that had saved his life.

When Hugh floated back to the Command Bubble, Samu was already waiting for him. "News, my friend?"

Hugh knew better than to hold off. This was a rip-off-the-band-aid-moment if ever there was one. He told his friend what he had done, with minimal justification. He expected Samu to be angry, resentful, potentially bordering on rage. But his friend's expression baffled him. Samu looked to be in almost physical pain, an expression that grew in anguish exponentially as Hugh spoke. After only a few moments, he could no longer take seeing that look on his friend's face.

"This isn't a betrayal, Samu. I know you must be furious, but you'll see. This will save us. The pumps will keep us alive for however long they need to on a plush rock. We'll rig a converter, suck it dry, and do what we need to do. I promise: My way is going to save us."

Samu still did not speak, but his face was drawn and the rich darkness of his face had paled dramatically. Silent, Samu reached out and called up a menu board on a command screen. Drifting out of the way, he presented it to Hugh.

An action history index filled the screen, displaying in clear detail how fifteen minutes earlier, Samu had ordered that each and every one of the water pumps be jet-tisoned into deep space. •

# HOW THE STATIC MEN SAVED OUR MARRIAGE

by Megan Neumann

At night they come prancing into the bedroom like they own the place. The static men have no concept of ownership or privacy. To them we're some kind of prop— the parquet floor beneath their dancing shoes.

Carl and I are holding hands beneath the covers, our bodies already rigid. Then the creatures get started, dancing above us with their static bodies, almost transparent, the edges of their forms nebulous. Only their smiles are real. Their big, white teeth

shine down in wide grins. They wiggle their long static hands in our faces. Carl and I lie transfixed.

...

For weeks, Carl and I thought we were dreaming. Neither of us spoke to the other about what was happening. But then again, Carl and I didn't talk to each other about much anymore.

That's what happens when you've been married for fifteen years and your life is basically the same day in and day out. What's there to talk about? We had gone so long without talking I didn't feel I *could* talk to him about anything. That's probably why I never mentioned the static men.

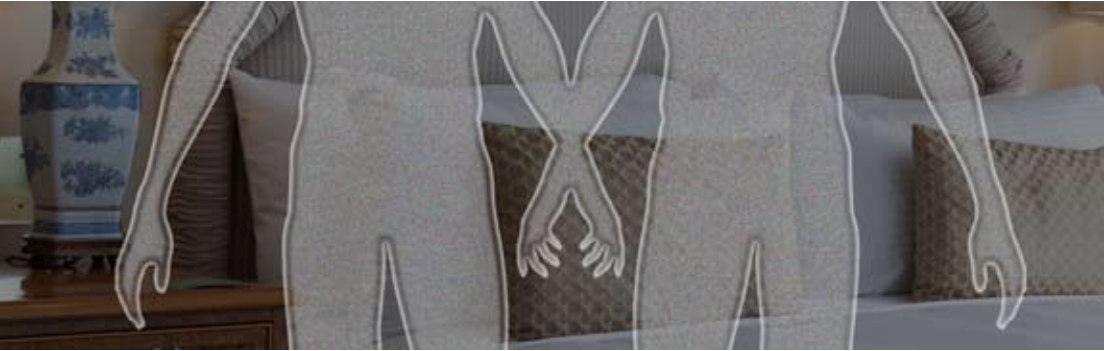
One day he must have been bothered by the silence because he said, "You know, I had the craziest dream last night."

I said, "You know, so did I. In fact, I've had this crazy recurring dream for weeks now."

"Me too!"

That's how we found out we weren't dreaming after all.

Every night these static beings visited our bedroom. These men— or whatever they were— paralyzed Carl and me. We couldn't move as they gyrated, thrusting their humanoid but indefinite forms in our sleeping faces.



Tonight they're doing their best dance, the best one I've ever seen. I bet it's the best one Carl has seen too. I can't ask him. My body is frozen, my voice gone. Same goes for Carl. If he could speak, I bet he'd say, "Oh yeah, it's the best we've ever seen. Look at them go. The extra tall one sure is getting down."

Carl and I have wondered what the beings want. After we realized we shared this nightly ritual, we sat together at our breakfast table brainstorming what could cause it. We bounced ideas off each other. We hadn't talked like this in ages. Were we sharing a hallucination? We didn't think so. Neither of us had hallucinated before. The rest of our lives were hallucination-free.

We Googled "static men dancing over your sleeping body." Nothing relevant came back.

We went to the library, something we hadn't done in years. Carl and I used the reference section. We perused shelves. Together we carried piles and piles of books on the occult and aliens and parallel dimensions. But there were no answers at the library.

Eventually, we decided we were the only ones this had ever happened to. Or if there were others, they too thought they were the only ones and had never bothered sharing it with the rest of the world. But Carl and I didn't like to think that was the case.

We liked being the only ones.

"You know," Carl said to me after a few days of pointless research, "I really don't mind it."

"I was going to say the exact same thing," I said. "It's not the worst thing I've ever seen. If anything, it's kind of nice. Our own private show."

"Yeah," Carl said, "exactly. Our own private show."

We didn't care if there was no meaning. Must everything have a meaning? We didn't think so. Carl and I decided we'd sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.

Each night we take each other's hands beneath the covers, turn our heads slightly, and smile. The static men visit us with their exotic dance, and then we sleep, wrapped in each other's arms, sharing our little secret.

Tonight, after they do their magnificent dance, one of the static men reaches out and touches my face and Carl's face with each of its hands. He pats us lightly as if we're his pets. His touch feels warm, and the warmth spreads throughout my body. I feel loved. Then he and the other static men fade into nothingness.

When they're gone, Carl and I are free to move. I look at him. He looks at me. We're both smiling. Here is something else we'll share, a secret to keep us going a little longer. •

# JARS

by DJ Tyrer

Jim's crocodile hand clacked its jaws in frustration. It had absolutely no patience. With it, everything was 'now, now, now'. Having a crocodile hand could, sometimes, come in useful – as Jim always liked to say, *come in handy* – for example, when removing the lids of jars, popping corks from bottles and dealing with bra clasps. It also allowed him to play a small but vital role in his uncle's Punch and Judy show, although he would never be able to put on his own show single-handed. However, it was more often a hindrance: it couldn't hold a pen or turn the pages of a book, nor could he use it for more intimate purposes.

Right now, with some difficulty, Jim was one-handedly reading the newspaper. He only ever read tabloids: a folded broadside was just impossible. There was a stack of jars in the garage waiting to be opened; everyone in the neighbourhood would bring their tough jars over to him to open for them. His crocodile hand had no interest in the news; but opening jars gave it something to do and made it feel useful.

It clacked again.

Jim sighed and dropped the paper onto the table.

"Fine," he said. "We'll go open some jars."

His crocodile hand clacked once more, but this time it was a clack of delight that seemed to say "About time," or perhaps, "I'm so glad." It might be his hand, but Jim would be the first to admit he didn't always understand it. Sometimes, it was as if it had a mind of its own. Jim didn't like to think about that possibility. Nobody likes to think any part of their anatomy has an agenda of its own. We all like to think every part of ourselves is pulling as one.



Jim went to the garage where the jars were stacked up and took one off the top. It was a jar full of jam and the lid was certainly jammed on tightly. Many others also contained preserves of one sort or another; Jim's neighbours had quite a love of preserves. Some had even preserved deceased relatives in their attics or cellars, regarding them as highly as they esteemed strawberries.

This went on for a while, Jim picking up a jar in his usual hand and letting his crocodile hand twist the lid off, the stack growing smaller as a new stack was born and grew behind him.

Then, he picked up a jar that was completely black. Written on it was *Evil In A Jar*. "Evil in a jar?" he read, confused.

His crocodile hand looked up at him, but didn't clack. It did that, sometimes, when he was confused. He guessed it had no more idea than him.

"Evil in a jar?" he repeated, as if doing so might somehow bring belated understanding. "What would someone write that on a jar? Unless, I suppose, there really is evil in the jar. But, why would somebody seal evil in a jar? And, why would someone want it opened?"

He held it and stared at it for a while.

His crocodile hand clacked, after a while, as if prompting him to reach a decision.

He decided. "Let's open it." It made perfect sense to him. It was on his 'To Open' pile, so he was going to jolly well open it.

Jim's crocodile hand gripped the lid and twisted it free. It popped and, then, a black cloud flowed out from it and escaped through the garage door.

He looked at his crocodile hand and it looked at him.

"I wonder if we made a mistake there," he said.

His crocodile hand clacked in agreement.

Down the road, Mr. Smith murdered Mrs. Smith; then the cloud moved on and grew.

Back in the garage, Jim picked up another jar. It was marked *Hope*. He decided not to take a risk and went back in to his kitchen and had a cup of tea. •

# THE MONKEY AND THE COYOTE

by Gary Every

Bob Kitteridge came to Sedona, Arizona during the Great Depression. He and his brother Buddy left Oklahoma in a motorcycle and sidecar, fleeing the horrors of the Dust Bowl, giant sand storms, plagues of grasshoppers and jackrabbits. They had no idea where they were going; the brothers only knew what they were leaving behind – abject poverty. You know you are poor when you and your brother and everything you own fit onto a motorcycle and sidecar.

Broke and hungry, they found work with a circus for a short time, travelling from small town to small town. The job didn't pay much but at least they got fed, although sleeping near the animals was always smelly and unpleasant.

One day the ringmaster gathered everybody in the circus: clowns, acrobats, jugglers, lion tamers, bearded ladies and strong men. Everybody, including the Kitteridge brothers, stood in the center ring while the ringmaster revealed that the circus had





gone bankrupt. "I am afraid," the ringmaster announced, "that I do not have the money for your last payday. You are free to take anything you like."

Always keep an eye on the clowns. Before the ringmaster could even finish his last word, the clowns were already scurrying about and looting anything worth stealing before anybody else could get to it. They were vicious.

Bob Kitteridge sighed. "It seems like I'm always hungry. How about some food for the road?"

The ringmaster offered, "How about a popcorn machine?"

"Won't really fit on a motorcycle," Bob replied.

"I know just what you boys need," the ringmaster said with a showman's smile. The ringmaster disappeared behind a row of wagons. An elephant trumpeted. A dancing bear roared and soon the ringmaster was walking back to the two Kitteridge brothers, holding something small and furry. He was holding a monkey, a small type of ape actually, called a gibbon, with a gold collar and leash. The ringmaster extended his arms and offered up the circus monkey.

Bob exclaimed, "I don't want to eat a monkey!"

Buddy said, "It's a pet."

The ringmaster shrugged. "Whatever."

"No way," said Bob.

Buddy Kitteridge reached out towards the ringmaster and the monkey leapt from the ringmaster to him. The monkey scrambled up Buddy's outstretched arms to the shoulder before leaping from one brother to the other. The monkey settled onto Bob's head and placed a wet loud kiss on his cheek. Bob blushed.

"Glad that's settled!" the ringmaster announced, clapped his hands and was off to negotiate with his next former employee.

Then the little ape attempted to make mad passionate monkey love with Bob's ear. "Aaah!" Bob screamed as he pulled it off. He tried to give the circus monkey back but the ringmaster was already involved in a heated argument with the bearded lady and it just seemed better not to get involved.

...

The three of them, the two Kitteridge brothers and the monkey, loaded everything they owned onto the motorcycle and headed west. It was a tight fit with the sidecar loaded high but it wasn't the monkey's fault. Out of the three of them, the monkey had by far the least amount of luggage, with just the gold collar and the leash.

The monkey loved to ride the motorcycle. Whichever brother was driving, the

monkey loved sitting atop the driver's shoulders. When the monkey was really happy he would chatter constantly. The monkey especially liked it when the motorcycle went really fast. The monkey would chatter for hours, tail whipping behind him in the wind.

Bumpy gravel roads frightened the monkey. The motorcycle would begin to bounce and the monkey would shriek. If the tires fishtailed even the slightest bit the frightened monkey would screech and place both hands over the driver's goggles.

"Clear the ape," the driver would command.

The passenger would rise up from the sidecar and remove the monkey paws from the driver's goggles. The motorcycle kept rolling westward.

•••

Their first night in Sedona the three of them camped alongside Oak Creek. They had arrived in the dark of night and had no idea that it was Sedona they had been heading towards all along. In the morning, when they awoke it was to the brilliant rays of sunrise shining upon the softly sculpted red sandstone cliffs of Sedona. The red rock glistened beneath the rising sun. Orioles sang as they migrated through the fruit orchards. It was beautiful.

The monkey was the first to crawl to out from beneath his blankets. The monkey picked up sticks and stirred the embers of the fire. Both brothers had attempted to teach the monkey how to make a campfire, thinking that it would be a useful skill. Since the monkey was always the first one awake anyways, if he could learn to make fire, then it would be an easy next step to teach him how to put the coffee on. Luckily for our species, the monkey never quite got the knack of fire.

Suddenly a look of terror crossed the monkey's face. The stricken monkey shrieked, leapt back beneath the blankets, and hid between the two brothers. The brothers sat up, startled wide awake, just in time to see a hunter walk by with a rifle over one shoulder and a dead coyote slung over the other.

The two brothers noticed the dead coyote was lactating and searched for her puppies. Over the next hill they found an orphaned baby coyote. The two brothers adopted her on the spot.

The circus monkey and the coyote grew up together. They became the best of friends. The monkey was the boss, the one who came up with all the plans. The coyote tagged along, enjoying the mischief they created. For many years, through the Depression to the end of World War II, visitors to Sedona would stroll through uptown, turn a corner and discover a monkey riding on the back of a coyote. The monkey turned his golden leash into reins and with a gentle tug, the coyote would rise up on his hind legs, howl and then drop back down, racing away while the monkey held on for dear life.

In the cool of the evening during the summertime, the monkey and coyote engaged in ritual. Every night, the coyote would walk out of town with the monkey on his back. The coyote would stroll slowly, the way coyotes do – sort of sneaky, taking back roads and alleys. The coyote would gradually exit the town and gently climb the red rock slopes until they reached the forest. Then the monkey would leap off the coyote's back and begin doing what monkeys do best. The monkey would climb trees, scavenging for food. The monkey would return with fruit, nuts, lizards and eggs. With the monkey atop his back, carrying the food, the coyote would climb a peak with a tremendous view of the sunset. The monkey would dismount and they would share their dinner.

After dinner, the stars would come out. The coyote would kneel so the fat little monkey could climb back in the saddle. Perched atop the coyote's back, the monkey turned his canine steed this way and that, pointing the coyote at a specific star. The coyote would howl. Then the monkey listened for an answer. The monkey would gen-

tly steer the coyote, tugging on his ears, and like an astronomer aiming a telescope, the monkey would point the coyote at a different star, peering down the long canine snout as if it were a sniper's scope as he zeroed in on a specific constellation. The monkey would gently tap the coyote's sides with his heels and the coyote would howl – calling to the stars. Then the monkey would cup his hand to his ear and listen to the heavens for an answer to his prayers.

...

Sedona has long had a reputation among the UFO-inclined and I am here to tell you every word is true. The space aliens used to come to Sedona all the time. They were searching for intelligent life. The flying saucers searched and searched, people gasping with every UFO sighting.

Then the spaceships found the monkey. After all those years the monkey finally had gotten a response. A giant beam of light shot down from a spaceship, illuminated the monkey and sucked him up into the sky, plucking him right off the back of the coyote. The coyote looked bewildered. A second beam of light dropped from the sky and enveloped the coyote before the tractor beam pulled him into the mothership. The monkey liked what he saw of the spaceship and hitched a ride. The coyote tagged along.

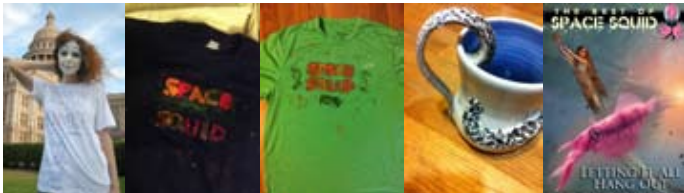
I don't think the space aliens will return. All those people paying for UFO tours are getting ripped off, chasing yesterday's news. The UFOs were here looking for intelligent life. There has not been any sign of intelligent life here since the monkey left. It is why the monkey left in the first place. It is why the UFOs are not coming back.

The monkey and the coyote still fly across the universe to this day having wonderful adventures. The coyote, because I believe canines all across the universe behave exactly the same, is probably sitting at the window, panting and smiling as he watches the marvels of the cosmos pass by.

It comforts me to know that somewhere in outer space a rocket ship is hurtling along at a hundred million light years an hour when suddenly it hits a patch of comet debris, forcing the starship pilot to cry out, "Clear the ape!"



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