

Six Impossible Things

short stories

by Renee Carter Hall

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Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

--Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

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When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

--1 Corinthians 13:11 (KJV)

When I became a man, I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.

--C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children"

David sat in the hospital cafeteria, sipping coffee that had gone cold half an hour before. It didn't matter; he wasn't thirsty, wasn't hungry. He felt rather like the corridors around him: white and blank and cold.

He twisted his wedding band around and around on his finger. It was a little loose; he supposed that meant he'd lost weight, and any other time he would have been glad. Instead, all he could think about was how this same gold ring had encircled his newborn daughter's entire arm. How her tiny red body, delicate and fragile as a butterfly's wing, bristled with needles and tubes hooked to monitors and machines he couldn't even name, let alone understand.

Some things, he thought idly, are good when they come early. Repairmen, for instance. Spring after a hard winter. A raise, a promotion. But not a child, not a baby who still needed two and a half months before she would have been ready for the world that now pressed so heavily upon her.

He wanted to be upstairs with Amy, in the NICU--neonatal intensive care unit, a name far bigger than its occupants--but she had made it clear that he needed to eat something, especially since they were going to be here all night. So he'd come down here with the idea of obeying, because she was right, of course, in the way she always was, the way that saw to the heart of things, to the heart of him--but he'd looked at plastic-wrapped turkey sandwiches and wilting Caesar salads and cups of layered Jell-O, and nothing had looked good. Nothing had even looked real. He wanted...

He wanted to be home, all three of them home where they belonged. He wanted to watch Amy nurse Caitlyn, wanted to rock his daughter in the chair he'd refinished just a few weeks before, wanted to put her to bed first in the frilly bassinet, then later, when she was bigger, in the white crib with the plush mobile of moons and stars hanging over it.

He wanted to watch her sleep, without the discordant electronic lullaby of the monitors and pumps and respirator all keeping mechanical time.

He rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. The doctor was coming by in an hour and a half, and then the longest night of their lives--all their lives--would start. They had agreed that turning off the respirator was the best thing to do, the only thing to do.

She would breathe on her own, through the night, through every night afterward.

Or...

Or, she wouldn't. It was that simple.

Hell would not be red with fire, David decided on his way back to the NICU. It would be white, and sterile, and cold. It wasn't about being tortured yourself; it was having to watch the pain of someone you loved more than your own soul. And being utterly helpless to do anything about it.

And then the elevator stopped.

He was, of course, alone. He swore and jammed the red emergency button.
Silence.

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. God, he was so tired. Tired of this place, tired of the hollow look in Amy's eyes, tired of other people's sympathy. Tired of being what he had to be: strong for Amy, supporting her, getting them through this...

Something touched his arm.

He jerked away, looking around, the metal walls casting hazy reflections around him. Nothing.

He shook his head. He'd dozed off, that was all. Understandable, given how little sleep he'd had.

Then something warm pressed against his arm, and he *knew* something was there--he could feel a tingling presence at the edge of his perception--

"Keep it together, Dave," he said out loud. "You can crack up when this is all over. Not before. All you have to do--"

A shape coalesced before him, first a color, a bright reddish purple, then a form--it was an animal, how had an animal gotten in a closed elevator?--and then it was solid and real and warm breath on his face as he sank down to the floor.

David reached out his hand and touched fur.

"Jinks," he whispered.

And the voice came back to him from thirty years before, but still the same, everything the same, the voice gentle and rich and kind.

"Hello, David. It's been a long time."

David got to his feet on the first try, which surprised him. "You're... smaller than I remember."

Jinks smiled. "You've grown a bit since you saw me last."

David tried to take it in. Standing before him was a quadrupedal big cat, with a coat of thick purple fur highlighted with white at the belly and paws. He was just as David remembered: the same short, curling white horns at his brow, the same saber teeth, the same green stripes ringing his impossibly long tail. And the same luminous green eyes, which right now held a highly amused expression.

"I'm hallucinating," David said. "Right?"

Jinks stretched. "Never fails. When kids see something they can't explain, it's magic. When adults see something they can't explain, they're cracking up. It's a pretty limiting way of looking at the world, if you ask me." He stretched his back legs, spreading his toes, then turned back to David, putting his front paws on David's shoulders and bringing his face close enough that David could smell Jinks' breath, which smelled oddly like grape Kool-Aid.

"You *do* remember, don't you?" Jinks asked.

"Um..." David tried to pull away. "A little personal space would be nice."

Jinks chuckled. "Personal space, huh? Oh, you have one--*if* you remember it."

And then, David did. "The kingdom of Davidia..."

"That's my boy," Jinks said, grinning, leaping back, chasing his tail for joy. "I knew you wouldn't forget! Other Ellusa's children forget, but not you."

"Ell... usa?"

"Imaginary friends. The technical term, anyway." Jinks padded over to the elevator panel and stood on his hind legs to press a purple button David knew hadn't been there before. The elevator hummed back to life, and he felt the car ascending.

"What happens to an Ellusa if their child forgets?" David asked.

Jinks looked puzzled. "Nothing. *You* forget *us*. We don't forget you."

The doors opened, and David breathed a sigh of relief--then froze.

This wasn't the hospital.

Before them stretched a green meadow with golden mountains beyond. A great tree stood in the center of the meadow, its branches thick and twisting, every leaf a different color. Sixty-four leaves, he knew; sixty-four colors. He'd used every single color in his box of crayons.

Jinks ambled through the doors, then looked back over his shoulder. "You coming?"

"I..." He looked at his watch, which didn't seem to be running. "I have to be..."

"Don't worry. No such thing as time here."

Looking around, David could believe that. Everything looked exactly as he'd imagined it so long ago: the soft grass, the bubbling stream--fizzing, actually, since it was orange soda instead of water--and, of course, the tree.

"The magic tree," David said, touching its smooth bark.

Jinks chuckled. "Why don't you see if it still works?"

David smiled and reached up to pluck a leaf from one of the branches. As the stem gave way, he found himself holding a peanut butter sandwich, with jelly the color of Jinks' coat--and, he noted with satisfaction, the crusts cut off.

Jinks shook his head. "I can't believe you still make Amy cut the crusts off."

David smiled sheepishly and took a bite. It tasted good; it tasted *real*. Then he frowned and looked back at Jinks. "You know about Amy?"

Jinks nudged him, purring. "I told you, we don't forget you. Ellusa don't disappear when their kids grow up. We're still there. It's just like pulling teeth to get you to *see* us, that's all."

"So you've been..."

"With you all this time," Jinks said quietly. "Yes."

David stared out across the meadow a moment, the sandwich forgotten. "Those dreams..."

"Were they?" Jinks asked.

He remembered being in that state between sleeping and waking, those nights when worry kept him from sleep--worrying over exams or dates or job interviews, or that he would do something stupid at the wedding and somehow lose the soulmate he still couldn't believe he had--and then there would be a feeling of peace, a kind of spiritual warmth stealing silently over him, easing him into sleep, into dreams of green meadows and a voice telling him everything would be all right.

And then, he remembered something else.

"Yes," Jinks said. "I was there, too."

His father's funeral. His mother stately in her grief, his sister dabbing at her eyes with a crumpled tissue, and David wondering if any of them were really feeling *anything*, wondering what they would do if he broke down the way he desperately wanted to, needed to, except that sons weren't supposed to, boys didn't cry and men weren't even supposed to have hearts as far as he could tell--

--and there had been a brushing of a breeze against his pants legs, and that sudden peace that came over him like sunlight after rain. And later he'd noticed that he must have gotten into some purple lint somewhere--

--not lint, it was hair--

"That was you," David said, his voice barely a whisper.

Jinks' green eyes held great sorrow, great love. "You needed me. So I was there."

David leaned back against the tree, looking up through the rainbow of leaves. Then he thought of something and laughed. "You know, I never imagined anything for you to hunt back then. What did you eat, anyway?"

"Your leftovers," Jinks replied, licking peanut butter from his fangs. "Not bad, but I'd rather have crunchy."

Jinks washed his paws and lay down, and David rested against the cat's flank, wondering if the Ellusa hadn't gotten bigger since they'd come back to Davidia. "You used to be big enough that I could ride on your back," David said.

"You used to be *small* enough for that," Jinks corrected him. Then the Ellusa laughed. "Remember when you slayed the dragon?"

"Water guns," David remembered. "I shot him with water guns until I put out his fire, and then he flew away..."

"And left all his treasure behind, and you paraded around in that crown, and all those jewels so heavy you could hardly stand up."

"And I put gold rings on your horns and your tail, until you got mad at me and made me take them off." David touched his wedding band, and the image of it around Caitlyn's arm came back like a shadow falling over him.

Jinks rested a heavy paw on David's knee. "You learned to be brave here."

David thought of the sick helpless feeling that he'd lived with for so long that he almost didn't even notice it anymore. "Did I?" he asked.

A breeze stirred the leaves, and a burnt sienna one broke off, swirled into his lap, and became a chocolate chip cookie, warm from the oven. David ignored it. "Did you bring me here to forget?"

Jinks shook his head. "No. I brought you here to remember."

David looked up again. Tears blurred the leaves into a kaleidoscope. "I'd rather forget. I'd rather be five again," when you didn't have to worry about anything, think about anything, when you didn't have to be strong for anyone, not even yourself...

Thoughts, feelings, memories--everything crashed over him, and he wept, and Jinks was warm comfort, thick fur to bury his face in, the Ellusa's voice deep and sweet.

"You learned to cry here, too," Jinks said. "I should have told you then that it was all right to do it out there."

At last, when he was spent, Jinks licked the tears from his face and purred, a heavy rumble that sounded in David's chest as much as his ears. David smiled. "I remember when you broke the lamp."

Jinks' eyes narrowed in mock rage. "Hey, kiddo, I had nothing to do with that. And your mother knew better, too, you little liar--"

"*I'm* a liar? Who told me I could sprout wings here if I jumped off that cliff?"

Jinks grinned. "I couldn't help myself; it was so funny the way you flailed around before you hit."

David shoved him playfully, and Jinks took a swipe at him with one paw, ruffling his hair. "That could have been your head, you know," Jinks taunted, leaping away.

"Get back here, you big furball!" David chased after him, grabbing a handful of leaves and pelting the cat with chocolate-frosted cupcakes.

"Not the sprinkles!" Jinks pretended to stagger, then flopped onto his side. "Not... the..." His eyes closed. "Sprinkles..."

David was out of breath from laughing by the time he reached Jinks. The cat knocked David off his feet with one idle swipe, then got to work licking the frosting from his fur.

David looked up. The sky was turning pink, deepening to orange at the horizon. "Sunset," he said.

Jinks glanced at the sky, gave his ruff a final pass, then got to his feet. "Come on, then. Time to go back."

David looked at his watch. Four thirty-three A.M. Amy had finally fallen asleep in the chair, the night nurse had moved on, and now he was alone in his vigil.

He watched Caitlyn's chest rise and fall, rise and fall. Every breath a little closer, a little stronger, every breath her own way of saying *I'm here. I'm here and I'm staying*. Every breath a gift and a prayer.

He felt Jinks beside him before he saw him, and spoke quietly so he wouldn't wake Amy. "Do you know what's going to happen?"

"The Ellusa aren't given that sight," Jinks replied. "We love who we're given to love, for as long as we can." He paused. "Just as you do."

He was gone then, and David turned back to the incubator. Caitlyn breathed before him, Amy breathed deeply in her sleep behind him. Moment by moment, breath by breath, the night gave way, and the sky outside the windows gentled into dawn.

He didn't see Jinks again until more than two months later. They had brought Caitlyn home, finally, and she slept now in the pink nursery just as he'd imagined all those weeks ago. Still, he found himself up several times a night, even when she wasn't crying, just to check on her, to watch her chest rise and fall. To make sure she was still all right.

Jinks appeared on the seventh night. "David," he said quietly, "it's time."

David frowned. "Time for what?"

Jinks swallowed. "You asked what happens to Ellusa when their kids grow up. Well, the whole truth is, we don't stay forever. We can't."

"You have a child of your own now, David. So you have to release me."

David stared at him. "What if I don't?"

Jinks smiled sadly. "I'll still be with you for a while, for as long as I can. But then I'll start to fade, and I'll keep fading until I'm gone. For good."

"And if I release you... what happens? Where do you go?"

"To another child, to be their Ellusa, as I was time and again long before you were born." Jinks paused. "You were a good kid, David," he said, his voice rough. "I'll miss you. But it's time."

David tried to blink back tears, then let them fall. "What do I have to do?"

"Tell me goodbye."

David nodded. He took a slow breath, then hesitated. "Will I ever see you again?"

Jinks put his paws up on the bassinet and nuzzled the baby gently. "She's beautiful, David. She's got your eyes." He turned back. "Maybe," he said at last, with a slight smile. "If you can recognize me."

David knelt and hugged Jinks around the neck. Jinks was purring again, and David wondered which one of them it was meant to soothe.

"Goodbye, Jinks," he said, and even as he spoke, even with his eyes closed, he felt the fur fading, dissolving like cotton candy under his fingers, until he held nothing, and even the silent presence was gone.

Caitlyn tipped her toy teapot over David's cup and passed him a plate of plastic cookies. He'd decided it was best to sit on the floor; he wasn't sure his knees could handle the tiny chair.

Caitlyn served her stuffed dog next, then the doll her aunt had given her. Then she turned to the empty room. "And how do you take your tea, Hopscotch?"

Caitlyn listened a moment, then came to whisper in David's ear. "He says he wants a peanut butter sandwich."

"Oh," David said. "Well, he *is* a guest... How about I go make one for him?"

"Okay."

"Would you like one, too? With jelly?"

Caitlyn conferred with Hopscotch. "Strawberry, please. And--"

"No crusts," David finished. "Okay."

David smiled as he made the sandwiches. Caitlyn had an incredibly vivid imagination, and he loved watching it at work. He'd have to ask her what this Hopscotch looked like. A rabbit, maybe?

He carried the plate out of the kitchen, grabbing the milk on the way. Imaginary tea wasn't going to do much to wash down peanut butter. He headed down the hall to her room--and stopped at her doorway.

There was something--someone?--in there with her.

Heart pounding, he took a step closer, edging forward until he could peek around the door. There, amid Caitlyn's toys and dolls and stuffed animals, stood a horse. A very small horse, to be sure, but with legs so long it was hard to think of it as a pony. Then again, no horse or pony had ever had a mint green coat and iridescent blue butterfly wings.

"Hopscotch," he said softly, wondering...

The horse looked up and caught his eye. Its eyes, David saw, were a very luminous, very familiar shade of green.

And then the horse flickered and faded and was gone, though Caitlyn could still see him, judging by the way she reached out to stroke where Hopscotch's nose would have been. David waited a moment to compose himself, then brought the sandwiches in.

"Thank you, Daddy," Caitlyn said.

"You're welcome, sweetie." David picked up a sandwich and held it out to the air. "Hopscotch, would you like a sandwich?"

"Daddy," Caitlyn scolded him in a loud whisper, "that's his *tail*."

"Oh." David smiled. "Sorry."

And from somewhere very far away, from a place where there was no time, David thought he heard a low chuckle. But it might have only been his imagination.

###

[Moon, June, Raccoon](#)

Hoping no one could see me, I placed the little package under the tree, bowed three times to the full moon, briefly pretended to be looking for something in the withered grass, just in case someone was watching, then ducked back into the house. The screen door screeched as I yanked it closed. I had three new mosquito bites on my legs.

In short, I was itchy, embarrassed, and completely desperate.

I had found the spell, complete with step-by-step color illustrations, in a book in the New Age section of the local megastore. I hated buying the book, but I was afraid I wouldn't be able to remember all the details, and who knew what would happen if you messed that sort of thing up.

So I'd followed the directions to the letter, saying the words, carving the two hearts into the apple, wrapping it up in pink paper and ribbon like a little gift. The directions said to take it to a "natural place, like a park or the woods." There weren't any woods nearby, and the closest park was a twenty-minute drive away, so I'd figured that under any tree was natural enough, and the one in my own postage-stamp backyard was going to have to do.

Try to understand, I had already been to two weddings that June, both friends from college. An engagement party was coming up, another friend just had her first baby, and another one was trying. And I was sick of being happy for everyone else, sick of blind dates and stupid matchmaking websites, sick of drinking coffee I didn't like with men I could never like, let alone love.

And anyway, they say the full moon makes people do crazy things. Of course, they say love makes people do crazy things, too, but I wouldn't know anything about that.

So I did the spell, and I tried to laugh at myself, and I geared up for another exciting evening watching stupid sitcoms and scratching my mosquito bites and eating mint chocolate chip ice cream.

And I didn't think about the spell again. At least, not until exactly twenty-four hours later.

When I heard the scratching at the screen door, I thought it was the neighbors' cat, a scruffy orange tom who sometimes forgets exactly which townhouse he belongs in.

I turned on the outside light.

It was a raccoon.

We looked at each other. I noticed it was sitting up on its haunches, holding something.

"Hi," it said.

I took a step backward. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. He, on the other hand--the voice was definitely male--kept talking.

"Nice night, huh? Not too humid. Good breeze."

I saw then what he was holding: my apple, the two carved hearts turning brown.

"Listen," he continued, "I'm, you know, flattered and everything. But... well, I just don't think it would work out in the long run. So I thought--it's really a sweet gesture, and

you're not all that bad-looking for a human, but I really can't accept this." And he held out the apple with both paws.

"Raccoons don't talk," I managed, finally.

"Actually, we do. Everything does. You just don't listen."

Slowly, his words started to sink in. I looked at the apple. "That wasn't for you."

He eyed me skeptically. "You left it under my tree."

"It was..." Why was I explaining myself to a raccoon? "Never mind. It was a mistake. You can keep it if you want."

The raccoon shrugged and took a bite. "Y'know, there's a produce stand about two miles from here where you can get apples that actually taste like something."

I stared at him while he finished the apple. Was this the first sign of some kind of nervous breakdown, seeing talking animals on your back porch? Or maybe it was an early warning sign of a stroke. Did people hallucinate with those? Should I call 911?

I considered my options. I could close the door, go back to the empty laughter on TV for another night, and try to dismiss this as some bizarre stress-induced episode.

Or...

Curiosity got the better of me, and I took a deep breath. "Would you like to come in?"

"Nice place," he said, glancing around.

"It's kind of a mess," I apologized. "I wasn't expecting... guests."

"I've seen worse." He held out a paw. "Name's Krispy Kreme, by the way."

I blinked. "Your name's *Krispy*..."

He held up his other paw to stop me. "My mother had a sweet tooth, okay? Considering that my sister is Sara Lee and my brother is Ben&Jerrys, I think I came off all right. Call me Kris."

I shook his paw. "I'm--"

"Karen Sheffield, thirty-one, bachelor's in English, works for Taylor & Bradshaw, and you write some pretty decent poetry even though you keep getting rejection slips."

He paused. "You might want to think about buying a shredder." With that, he loped off to the fridge.

I followed. "Wait a minute. How do you know how to read?"

Kris sampled three different flavors of protein shake, wrinkling his nose at each one. "The Martins down the street have a kid who watches all that educational stuff. They keep their windows open a lot. I can read, count to twenty, sing 'C is for Cookie,' and figure out which thing isn't like the others. I think my education's pretty much complete."

I couldn't argue with that.

"Speaking of education," he added, tossing the shake cans into the trash and moving on to the freezer, "we need to teach you a thing or two about eating. First off," he squinted at a frozen dinner, "disodium inosinate is not food. And neither is that third-rate Chinese takeout stuff you get twice a week."

"I'm supposed to take culinary advice from an animal who eats out of dumpsters?"

"Hey, *I* don't have much of a choice. And don't turn this around. We're talking about you here, not me." He left the kitchen and settled himself on the couch in the living room. "You don't have company over very much."

"How can you tell?"

He gestured to the couch. "Just your scent. Nothing male--or mingled," he added with a wink.

"Don't tell me you learned *that* on educational TV."

"Yeah, well, the Robinsons never close their blinds." He stretched. "So why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why aren't you out with somebody tonight instead of leaving lousy apples in your yard?"

I started to give some kind of glib answer, but then I stopped and actually tried to think of the best way to explain it. "I'm tired of being with people and still being lonely."

Kris studied me a moment. "Hm. Well, being lonely with people still seems better than being lonely by yourself. At least it has more potential."

"Maybe." I shrugged.

"So what are you looking for?"

I had used up all my energy for introspective answers. "I don't know. The same things everybody's looking for."

"Honest, caring, loyal, sensitive, good sense of humor?"

I cringed. Those were the qualities I'd written on the pink paper used to wrap the apple. "Yeah. So?"

"The perfect guy."

"I guess."

Kris shook his head. "Listen, when you spend as much time as I do going through people's garbage, you find out more about them than you really want to know. And the first thing you learn is, nobody's perfect. I can tell you, everybody's just as messed up and scared and unsure as you are, just in their own way."

"You must have watched Mister Rogers, too," I said dryly, and turned on the TV.

"I'm just saying," he replied with a shrug, then settled down to watch. "You got any popcorn?"

I sighed.

A few nights later he was at the back porch again, dragging some wrinkled bundle of paper behind him.

"This is your idea of a hostess gift?" I asked as he handed it to me.

"Just take a look."

We went inside. It was a sketchbook, the spiral kind. About half the pages had been torn out, and the rest were wavy and stained with things I didn't want to think about.

I opened it to the first page, and my jaw literally dropped. It was a portrait, precisely rendered in pencil, of a man roughly my age, with a thoughtful expression and bright, childlike eyes that defied the lines beginning to form around them. The subject

was not entirely what most people would call handsome, but he had an interesting face that welcomed closer study. The page was half torn out, but otherwise intact.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

Kris shrugged. "Ran across it. I figured, you know, you were into the arts and all, so..."

The next page was a quick sketch of a dog, probably no more than ten lines and a bit of rough shading. But it looked so alive I expected to see it breathe.

There were other drawings, some simple, some more elaborate, even a study in ink that had turned into more of a watercolor thanks to what looked like a coffee spill. All were sensitive and *real*, as if the graphite lines were trembling with life, itching to release the form into the world. Even a still life--two pears, a vase, and what looked like a dog toy--had personality.

Then the drawings became sketchier, the paper scrubbed raw from erasing. One half-completed drawing had a dark scribble of charcoal over it, as if the artist had gotten frustrated with the attempt. The next page was a ragged scrap of paper clinging to the spiral wire.

The rest of the pages were blank, but I looked at every one, pausing, as if something would appear there if I willed it. I felt disappointed, even angry. The person had incredible talent; how did this end up in the trash?

I looked for any identification, hoping for at least a name, but there was nothing. Then I looked back at the portrait and saw the tiny scribbles in the corners.

"Self-portrait," I read on the left, and on the right, "SJR."

"Not bad, huh?" Kris said when I looked up.

"Not bad? This is incredible. Why would somebody throw this away?"

Kris rummaged in the fridge for a soda. "Jeez, what d'you need diet for? You're what, a size five?" He cracked open a can, sipped, and winced.

"You didn't answer my question."

"I'm a raccoon, not a mind reader. Maybe it's the same reason why there are so many poems of yours that wind up covered in teabags and takeout cartons."

"Yeah, but... this is different. These are," I fumbled for words and couldn't find any, "*good*."

"One man's trash, I guess. So what's on TV?"

I handed him the remote and sat down on the couch. While Kris flipped from a game show to a documentary about elephants to a rap video, I sat with the sketchbook in my lap, turning the pages slowly, over and over, consumed by wonder.

The doorbell rang on my day off, in the middle of the afternoon. And, like a complete idiot, I opened the door, never mind that the guy on the other side wasn't anybody I was expecting and could very well have spent the rest of the day raping and torturing and killing me.

And then, like even more of an idiot, I stopped and stared at the guy for what felt like two days.

Because it was the guy from the sketchbook.

He was wearing a white polo shirt with "Scott" embroidered over a line of marching ants. "Hi," he said awkwardly, "um... Mrs. Sheffield? I'm Scott, from Pestbusters. Your husband called about the raccoon problem."

My husband?

Scott consulted his clipboard. "Kris?"

"Oh." I thought fast. "That's... my brother, actually. Technically he owns the house, so he... takes care of things like that."

Scott nodded. "No problem. Let's take a look and see what we can do."

He advised the usual: tight-fitting lids on the trash cans, bungee cords, closely-spaced lattice work under the porch to keep them from getting underneath. "I can try setting a trap," he finished, "but some of these guys are just way too smart for it."

What was I supposed to say? "Um... okay."

"I've got one in the truck; I'll go get it."

"Wait." He stopped. "It won't... hurt him, will it?"

Scott smiled. "Only his pride. If we can catch him, we'll give him a dose of rabies vaccine and take him down to the wooded areas by the park. There's plenty of real food to forage for there. Raccoon paradise. I'll be right back."

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed the sketchbook from its place on the coffee table and stuffed it under the couch cushions. I was dying to ask him about it, but I couldn't think of any way to bring it up without sounding psychic--or possibly psychotic. Anyway, it seemed so... so *personal*, like asking somebody about a prescription bottle you saw in their medicine cabinet.

Scott set up the trap and baited it with a handful of peanuts, then handed me his card and said to call if anything showed up. If my fingers tingled a bit when they brushed his as I took the card, and if our eyes met a bit longer than was strictly necessary... well, I told myself that was just my imagination.

The next morning, the trap was empty, the peanuts untouched. I didn't see Kris that night, either.

Scott called me at work the next day. "Nothing yet," I told him.

A pause. "Well, if it's all right, I'd like to stop by and make sure everything's still set up. Is around seven okay?"

I could feel my heart pounding. "I thought you guys closed down at five."

"Well, officially, yeah. But my apartment's just two blocks over from your place, so it's not really out of my way." He sounded almost embarrassed. I loved that.

"Oh. Well, okay. That'd be fine," I said, hurriedly. "I mean, if it's not too much trouble." I was babbling like a teenager.

I hung up and stared at the gray wall of my cubicle, then opened the manilla folder on my desk. I tried to look like I was reviewing paperwork, which was difficult, seeing as the folder held the self-portrait from the sketchbook. I'd felt a little strange bringing something so personal and true into the mundane surroundings of work, but at least I'd gotten over my first insane impulse to tack the sketch up where anyone could see it. Instead, I was sneaking glances at it like a girl with a pop-star pinup hidden in her algebra book.

Stuffing the folder back in my bag, I reminded myself that love at first sight was a ridiculous myth based on physical attraction, or concocted after the fact to give the relationship some feeling of destiny. I had always said that, and I had always believed it.

And I still did.

I thought.

I offered Scott a soda, which he accepted (at Kris' urging, I had stocked up on a wider variety of beverages). I made small talk about the weather, as well as the cleverness of raccoons in general and our suspect in particular. (If he only knew.) I laughed at his genuinely funny jokes and was flattered when he laughed at my halfhearted ones.

But I still couldn't find a way to bring up the sketchbook, or anything even close to it.

On my way home from work the next night, I bought a sketchpad, an assortment of pencils, and a few sticks of charcoal. Then I cleared off my coffee table and arranged the supplies so they looked as if they'd been casually scattered there. I tried to do a drawing or two to complete the effect, but they ended up so hopeless that I crumpled the paper into balls, and, after a moment's thought, left them on the floor. Certainly anyone who had thrown away a sketchbook would be able to relate.

And it worked. "You're an artist?" Scott asked lightly when he came by a few nights later to check the trap.

I shrugged. "Not really. I thought I'd give it a try, but I think I'd better stick to writing poems."

"Poems, huh?" His voice took on that tone of slight awe, the one people who don't write get sometimes, as if I were having my verses chiseled into polished marble instead of published on obscure websites and in photocopied literary zines that no one's ever even heard of unless they've been published in them.

"Yeah," I said finally. "I mean, it's nothing major. What about you? Do you do anything... you know, creative?"

He glanced back at the coffee table and ran his hand through his hair. "I used to draw," he said slowly. "Painted a little. Mostly watercolors and inks. I... haven't for a while."

"Why not?" My mouth was dry.

"Mostly time, I guess."

Liar. People who say they don't have time for art usually mean that it isn't enough of a priority for them to make time for. These are the same people who will then spend two hours in front of the TV every night, because that isn't as demanding--or terrifying--as facing a blank page. I know, because I've been one of them.

"And I guess I just got frustrated," he added. "Nothing ever seemed to come out right."

Good God. What had he been envisioning, that drawings so good could still fall short?

"Do you, um..." I tried to swallow. "Still have any of your stuff?"

A shadow passed over his expression. Regret? "I threw most of it away. But... maybe I'll get back into it." He smiled. "If you'll show me some of your poems."

"Uh, sure." He might as well have asked me to take my clothes off. The thought of him reading my poems made me feel about as exposed. And yet, there was also that odd little flutter of excitement somewhere between my chest and my stomach, and already I was mentally rummaging through my files, trying to decide which ones to give him.

The trap was still empty, though there were some peanut shells inside, carefully arranged in a little pile, the raccoon equivalent of an obscene gesture.

Scott chuckled and shook his head. "I think this guy's worth a limerick or two." He cleaned out the shells and added another handful, then stood and turned back to me. "So... same time tomorrow?"

I spent so much time re-reading and shuffling through my poems that I had to print out fresh copies by the time I decided which ones I was least embarrassed by. I wondered if he was sketching away furiously at home, trying to draw something worth showing me.

The next night, he came in carrying a new sketchbook. He glanced at the trap, then sat down next to me on the couch, and I handed him the six poems I'd picked out, nothing too long or complicated, nothing too simplistic or silly.

I never know what to do while someone's reading my work. Part of me wants to stare at them, so I can pounce on every little nuance of facial expression. And part wants to leave the room, or possibly the country, to get away from the suspense.

He was on the last page now. And then it came--the little intake of breath, the pause, the slight sigh. When you're at a reading and the audience pauses and sighs that way, it's better than the applause. It means they're not just being polite, not even just being appreciative. It means they got it.

"These," he said softly, "are really good."

Then he handed me the sketchbook.

The first page was a softly shaded sketch of a robin, his eyes bright and feathers glossy. He'd added a pale red-orange wash to its breast. It was, of course, perfect in every detail. I felt as if I'd never seen a robin until that moment, as if it were some fantastic creature from an ancient bestiary.

Then I turned the page, and I saw my own face looking back at me.

I must have appeared surprised, because he said hurriedly, "Some of the details might not be quite right. I usually work from photographs..."

I remembered hearing once that the point of art wasn't to portray what the artist saw, but how the artist *felt* about what he saw. And it was all here: the uncertain but thoughtful expression in my eyes, the faint lines here and there that I'd only recently begun to notice in the mirror, the hairstyle I'd had for the past eight years.

And through his eyes, it was beautiful. All of it. All of me.

I looked up. I had no idea what to say. He looked at me, and the silence warmed between us.

Snap!

A harsh metallic sound from outside. The trap had shut.

When we reluctantly went to look, I recognized Kris. And I could have sworn the raccoon winked at me as Scott loaded the cage into the truck.

I wrapped the last of the dishes carefully in newspaper and laid them in the box. My whole life sat around me, packed in cardboard, taped and labeled.

No, I corrected myself. Not my whole life. My old life. In just a few days--this with yet another admiring glance at my engagement ring--a new one would start.

I went out to the back porch, watching the summer's first fireflies winking in the grass. The moon was full and golden, and I laughed to myself, remembering the night almost a year before, when I'd tried to cast a spell, tried to summon love as if it were something I could give orders to. I had never told Scott anything about it. Maybe someday.

I almost tripped over the little package.

It was an apple, small and dusky red, wrapped in one of those lined pieces of newsprint that kids use in school when they're first learning how to write. The front side was some kid's story about his grandparents, with a gold star stuck at the top. On the back, I found a note written in wobbly crayon.

Just to prove there's more to apples than those grocery store things. Nice place your fellow took me to. Nice little stream with great seafood. And I met someone, too. I think being able to count to twenty really did it for her.

Keep a light on for me at the new place. Maybe I'll bring the kids by sometime. Braeburn, Jonagold, and Nittany. Cute little furballs.

Kris.

I polished the apple on my nightshirt and took a bite. The tangy sweetness sparkled on my tongue, familiar and new at once, and I ate the rest standing in moonlight, the June night warm and sweet around me, a poem I was living instead of writing down.

###

[Norma the Wal-Mart Greeter](#)
Meets the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

They burst through the automatic doors with their horses snorting and stamping, and the rush of hot air that came in with them smelled faintly of sulfur.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to take the horses outside," Norma said, sounding as polite as she could. "Service animals only."

They were pretty horses, she thought. So elegant. The white one was so white it almost glowed, and the black one was as glossy and sleek as her hair used to be. The red horse was kind of disappointing, though, since it was really more of a reddish-brown, and Norma preferred bright red, like her favorite Cherry Flambé lipstick.

But that pale horse was just... odd. She had always thought it might be a sort of cream color, or a pale gray. Or that pretty palomino color like Trigger. But instead, it was pale like the underside of a fish, pale like things that crawled in caves. It was not entirely solid-looking, like a ghost, and it shimmered like a scum of oil on a puddle.

She decided she liked the white one best.

They took the horses outside and came back in. It was hard to get a good look at them, with their faces kind of shadowed and blurry. She could only tell them apart by what they carried: one had a bow, and another a sword, and another an old-fashioned pair of scales like they had on the statue of Justice down at the old town courthouse. The last one didn't have anything.

She thought maybe she should ask them to leave the weapons outside too, but she hated to make them go back out again, and it wasn't like they had guns anyway. They all looked pretty tired, and she figured it must have been a long ride.

They didn't stay long. She watched them go through Leeanne's express lane with a little countertop digital food scale, some arrows from the sporting goods department, a knife sharpener, and a bag of carrots that she figured must be for the horses. Once they got in line, they added a pocket pack of Kleenex and some Juicy Fruit gum, and the rider from the black horse paid with a card that vanished like smoke after he swiped it.

They stopped at the McDonald's by the entrance on their way out. The one who had been riding the pale horse was starting to look fidgety, and he sat down on the bench next to the big plastic Ronald McDonald and crossed his arms and waited for the others. They got their food to go.

"Have a good day, now," Norma called after them. One of them waved, and she smiled and waved back.

She peered out the front windows and watched the rider feed the white horse a carrot. The rider patted the horse's neck, then got back on, and they tied the Wal-Mart bags to their saddles and rode off across the parking lot.

Really, Norma thought, they seemed like nice enough boys. She hoped they'd have a safe trip wherever they were going, and that they wouldn't run into any bad weather. The sky was getting dark out there, and it looked like a storm was coming.

###

Swear Not By the Moon

The wolf watches us from the far corner of the enclosure as the girl fumbles with her keys to let me inside. I don't bother to call to him; his hearing isn't as good as it used to be, and besides, he won't come near until we're alone.

In the brochure, they called the enclosure an "enriched personal habitat," but it's really more of a pen, a section of grass and trees fenced with chain link. They've tried to make the grounds look something like a forest, but the effect is too neatly trimmed to be convincing. Instead, it looks more like a park--or a zoo.

The only thing that's wild here is him.

In the nearest corner, a three-sided wooden shelter shades two stainless steel bowls. One holds fresh water, changed every hour--a touch I appreciate--and the other is half-filled with a pile of pink beef scraps.

I watch two flies buzz around the meat. It doesn't look like he's touched it at all.

I sigh and turn back to the girl, who has already closed the gate behind me. "Has he eaten anything today?"

She glances at his chart. "No, sir, not today. They tried giving him venison this morning like you asked, but he didn't eat any of it."

"Was it cold?"

Even with the chain link separating us, she blanches under my gaze, and I look away briefly to make her more comfortable. I know, then, that she has no *faol* blood in her. "I don't know," she says.

I try to keep my voice gentle. "He won't eat it unless it's warm."

She jerks a nod. "I'll make a note, sir."

I don't doubt that she will. They love notes at this place: charts and paperwork and orders typed in all caps. But I wonder if they ever bother to read any of them. One shift ends, another one starts, and you might as well have never said anything in the first place.

If it's frustrating for me, I can only imagine what it's like for him. At least I can still speak.

"Thank you," I tell her, though I'm not really sure what I'm thanking her for. "I'll find you if we need anything else."

She locks the gate and hurries away. I wonder how long she'll keep working here.

I double-check that the gate is closed securely, then sit down on the wooden bench under one of the trees. The wolf whines softly as he rises and comes to me. He is thinner than the last time I saw him, and his gait is stiff-legged. If he hasn't been eating, he likely hasn't gotten many pills down for his arthritis, either. He thrusts his muzzle against my hands, and I stroke his silver head lightly, respectfully.

"Hi, Dad," I whisper.

I remember the first time I saw him in wolfshape. He told me not to be afraid, but still, watching the full-body grimace of the change was terrifying to a ten-year-old. It reminded me of the horror movies where you think you're approaching a loved one from behind, until they turn around and the music shrieks and you realize you're seeing the monster instead.

But at the end of it, he wasn't a monster. He was a strong, healthy gray wolf, lean muscle, lush pelt, white teeth. As a man, he had always seemed to me somehow smaller, weaker than the other fathers I saw -- although I hated to admit that, even to myself -- but as a wolf, he was powerful, he was fierce, and I felt I was seeing his true self for the first time. It was disorienting and wonderful.

As a wolf, I turned out to mirror him in miniature, a fact that pleased me immensely.

He taught me what it meant to be *faol*, to carry a wildness within you. The wolf is always there in your mind, even in human shape, just as the human side of you still lingers in wolfshape. In form, you are one or the other. But in your mind, you are neither, and both. And it is so much simpler, and so much more complicated, than that sounds.

There were no large packs near our home, but he took me to the others within our range. I saw them bare their throats and bellies to him, saw them lick his muzzle. The wolf in me knew what that meant without being told, and the boy in me nearly burst with pride.

Two females ran with that group, both with silver coats and sweet voices, but while they fawned over my father, he never took any special notice of them that I could see. My mother had been gone almost since I could remember, and I asked my father once why I couldn't have one of these for a mother.

He smiled. "The wolf wants to make things easy," he said at last, "but the man knows it isn't that simple. As a wolf, I could. As a man..." He didn't finish, and, sensing something in his silence, I never asked him about it again.

Those were star-filled nights, summer-sweet, and like all children, I never imagined they would end.

"Dad," I say now, "you have to eat something. I know it's not what you're used to..."

He looks up, his golden eyes cloudy. I can't read his expression, can't tell if he's pleading with me or simply struggling to focus.

"For me, okay? Just a little. I'll bring some liver next time." For one crazy moment I wonder if I could smuggle something alive in here--a calf or a lamb or even a rabbit. He needs hot meat, blood meat, but I don't know if he even has the strength left to make a kill.

The wolf, in the end, is greedy. Bit by bit, year by year, it grows in the mind. Some happily take to the woods for good, as far from humans as they can get. Others hold out as long as they can, until they can no longer change back to human form. Born as men, *faol* die as wolves.

He always swore he would know when that time came. Sometimes he talked of getting to the national park a few hours' drive away. Sometimes he talked about the gun in his nightstand drawer.

That day when I went to his house, when I hadn't heard from him and he wasn't answering the phone, I didn't know what I would find. And so when I saw him lying in wolfshape in front of the old recliner, the TV still tuned to the baseball game, I was glad.

Even when his eyes met mine and I could somehow taste the sorrow and defeat that hung about him--even then, I was glad.

I glance back at the gate, but there's no sign of the girl or anyone else. I take my clothes off, carefully arranging them on the bench so they won't get dirty or wrinkled. The change comes swiftly and easily.

I tuck my tail, lower my ears, whine, and lick his muzzle. His eyes brighten, and his tail lifts a little higher.

I long to run, to play the way we used to. But I don't know if he can keep up, and I won't make him feel weak if he can't. In the end, we settle in a patch of shade, with tiny ants tickling our paw-pads. I breathe in his scent, and it makes me feel little again, safe again. He dozes, and I wonder what he dreams about. If he remembers me, is it as a wolf-pup, or his son?

My human mind whispers that I can't stay much longer. I lick his ear gently to wake him up, and as he stretches stiffly and yawns, I get an idea. Tail high, ears up, I trot to his dish. Just as I lower my head to the meat, he growls, and I look up to see him standing with his lips pulled back from yellowed teeth. Instinct has won out over stubbornness.

I back off, allowing him his place. He eats most of the meat, then steps aside, and I finish. The taste of it makes me shudder--I'm used to meat either cooked or fresh, not raw and sun-stale--but I force myself to swallow. Afterward, we wash the juices from each other's faces, just as we used to wash the blood away after a kill.

He whines as I walk back to the bench. I want to stay with him; I want to leave.

The change back to human form is a bit like pushing a wheeled cart over a threshold--a little more force, more of a jolt than the slip into wolfshape. Right now it is still as effortless as breathing, but I know it will gradually get more difficult. And then, one day...

I try not to think about it.

He lies down and rests his chin on his paws, watching as I get dressed. Does he still remember how it felt to tuck in a shirt, pull up a zipper, buckle a belt? Or has the wolf-mind carried those memories away, buried them in the scent of dead leaves and the dreams of moon-dappled deer? I don't even know how many words he still understands, but I speak anyway, if only for myself. I speak the words that I couldn't say out loud to the man, the ones I can say only now, to the wolf.

"I love you." I lift the keypad cover on the gate and enter the code to unlock it. "I'll be back soon."

As I close the gate behind me, the low, throbbing howl begins. A moment later, the others join in, the song echoing through the enclosures, and even in human form I can still pick out his voice among the chorus, rising above the others, dying away into a moan, then rising again.

I get to the car, but even with the doors and windows shut, I can still hear them. I put my hands over my ears like a child, rest my forehead against the steering wheel, and weep.

Night falls clear and cool, and I run alongside a white-furred female, our paws skimming the ground. Last night, the two of us shared linguini and red wine; tonight, if the wind is with us, we will feed from an aging doe.

Running is a joy, a song in my blood. I am a pup no longer; I am as fine and strong now as my father was when I first saw him in wolfshape. I am drunk on the night and the run and the she-wolf's scent in my lungs.

And yet.

As I leap to bring the doe to the ground, as I join the tussle of teeth tearing at the hide, as the first hot sweetness of blood tingles in my nostrils, I pray that one day the deer's hard, sharp hoof will find me, a single well-placed blow to blaze my life to its close. Before my eyes dim and my hearing dulls, before the chain-link fence and the stainless steel dish. Before I hold a pistol, or a noose, or the keys to my car, and try to decide. Before it's too late to decide at all. The wolf I am hopes it will be that easy.

But the man knows it isn't that simple.

###

Drawn From Memory

It had once been a summer cottage, a weekend getaway, a place couples might come for a tryst or fathers might bring their boys fishing. It was salt-washed gray now, the wooden stairs uneven, paint blistered around the dull windows. Beyond the house, the sound stretched calm, reflecting the late afternoon light. The driveway was paved with broken clamshells, so I was glad I'd worn flats.

It was hard to believe he was here. It seemed so far away from everything, and I wasn't sure whether to envy him the peace and quiet or wish that somehow he were still out in the middle of everything, out performing where he belonged.

Everyone in my generation had grown up being able to sing the Jungle Jam theme song. We laughed as Terrence Tiger foiled both the poachers and his nemesis, the evil but ultimately inept elephant Lord Longtusk. The show had a couple of bumbling monkeys, a few humanoid toons as the rangers of the wildlife preserve, and a handful of other secondary characters, but Terrence was the star. And the show wasn't just funny, it was *smart*. It had fans from elementary school to graduate school thanks to its skewering of pop culture, celebrities, political figures, you name it--but still with plenty of sight gags and cartoon comedy to go around. When I watched the series on DVD years later, I was amazed--and delighted--at how much had gone over my head as a child.

I had considered wearing my Terrence T-shirt for the interview, but that seemed a little too desperate-fangirl. Instead, I'd gone for professional but approachable: khaki slacks, pastel blouse, small gold hoop earrings.

There was no doorbell, so I knocked gingerly. The door opened a crack, and a bright black pupil peered out from a field of white. "Yes?"

It was his voice, no doubt of that, but it was quieter and rougher, as if he'd just woken up.

"Terrence?" I hoped I didn't seem too forward calling him by his first name, but somehow 'Mr. Tiger' just sounded silly. "I'm Lauren Mitchell, from ForeverToons.com? We'd scheduled an interview for today."

"Oh. Of course." He opened the door.

He looked... faded. Not merely his colors, though I would have sworn that his orange fur had been brighter. He just seemed smaller, lesser.

That's what the camera does, I told myself.

He did seem tired, though, and a pang of fear went through me. But--maybe I really had woken him up. Toons ate and slept like everyone else, after all.

"Please, come in."

It looked as if he'd kept the furniture from the house's rental days: wicker, glass, well worn honey-colored wood, simple and ordinary. The only signs of his acting life were several framed photographs and an old bookcase of awards. I recognized the Emmys, but none of the others. A thin layer of dust shrouded all of them.

He saw me looking around and gave me a wry smile. "Not what you expected?"

"I--I don't know what I was expecting."

"Can I get you anything to drink? Water, soda, iced tea?"

"No, thanks."

He led me into the living room, ushering me onto a faded blue couch while he sat in a white wicker chair opposite. I noticed there was a small stereo in the room but no TV.

I powered up my tablet, opened a new file, and turned on the recorder. When I asked if I had his permission to record our interview, a flicker of unease passed across his face, but he agreed.

I settled back on the couch. "You have a lovely place here. It's so quiet."

He laughed dryly. "Listen... Lauren, was it?" I nodded. "I appreciate the white lie, but let's agree to tell each other the truth today, all right? I..." That shadow across his features again. "I expect this will be the last time I'm interviewed by anyone, so I'd rather not waste it being anything but ourselves."

"All right." I glanced at my notes, then decided I'd be better off winging it and turned the display off. "I'm curious as to why you chose this place, then."

"I didn't. It chose me."

"How so?"

He turned his gaze to the sliding glass door to our right, looking out at the water. "We're all drawn somewhere near the end. A lot of us to the water for some reason. Oceans, lakes, islands--nobody knows why. So I came here. It was cheap enough, and people let me be."

"You want to be left alone?"

Another wry smile, but at least this time he looked more like the Terrence I remembered. "Not really. But if it's going to happen, I'd rather it happen quietly."

I knew what the "it" was that we were politely dancing around. Toons aren't born--at least, not in the human fashion. They call it "winking in," and it happens all at once, when they appear more or less fully formed, although their appearance and personality can still be molded to some extent by the role they play--for instance, I don't know if Terrence had that stripe across his throat that's shaped like a bow tie when he first winked in. But for all intents and purposes, toons have no childhood.

The flip side of this is what happens to toons when they wink *out*. They disappear, but no one's quite sure exactly what decides the time. The best theory at the moment has to do with not how popular or loved they are, but how relevant they are--that is, loved at the moment, not out of pure nostalgia.

As far as I knew, Jungle Jam hadn't been shown on TV in years. Boxer shorts and T-shirts with Terrence's image were still sold, and collectibles went for respectable amounts on the auction sites, but there was no mistaking it for anything but thirtysomethings like me getting suddenly nostalgic for their childhoods.

Well, he wanted honesty, so I went for it. "How long do you think you have?"

He didn't flinch. "I don't know." I was surprised at how matter-of-fact he was being, but I supposed he'd had time to resign himself to fate.

"I think it'll be soon," he added after a moment. "It's just a feeling, but..." He shrugged.

"What about the others from the show? Do you ever see them?"

"They've all been gone for years. Longtusk held out the longest. But I was the star, and the stars are always the last ones left."

This was getting depressing--even though it felt selfish to think that. Where was the wisecracking character I remembered, or even a glimmer of him? I hated myself for it, but I was starting to feel almost cheated.

He studied me for a moment. "Did you watch the show? Or--no, it was probably before your time--"

"Now who's telling white lies?"

He smiled. "It's just--you don't look that old."

"Old enough. Of course I watched it. All the time. I loved you." I felt myself blushing, not only at what I'd said, but at saying it in the past tense. "Jungle Jam was my favorite show. I watched a couple of episodes last week and felt like I was eight years old again. It was great. I'd forgotten how good it was."

"We had good writers."

"*And* good actors," I pressed. "I wouldn't have thought I'd ever see you this modest."

A familiar impish spark came into his eyes. "Better be careful. I haven't had this much praise in so long, I can get drunk on a thimbleful."

"Maybe that's what I want."

"More interesting reading, you mean?"

"For the five people who read the blog, sure."

"I can see the headline now--'Famous Cartoon Star Tells Lurid Tiger Tales.'"

"I'm listening."

"Hm. Well, Mort and Morey Monkey weren't really twins."

"Do tell."

"I know, it's scandalous." He paused. "Are you sure I can't get you something to drink? I've got a nice Riesling, if you like wine."

"I'm driving, but one glass wouldn't hurt."

While he slipped into the kitchen, I went back to take a closer look at the photographs. One was a shot of the entire cast with everyone grinning at the camera--except the villains, who were scowling appropriately. It was hard to believe the rest of them were all gone.

The other pictures were of Terrence with a variety of cartoon stars; it looked like they'd been taken at parties. I lingered in front of one that showed Terrence with Bugs Bunny, both of them wearing leis, coconut bras, and grass skirts, each toasting the camera with a mai tai.

"He's starting to fade, you know." Terrence spoke quietly behind me. "He doesn't go out much anymore so no one will see. If they don't find something good enough for him soon... I've heard rumors he's looking for a place in Pismo Beach. I hope they're wrong." He held the wine glass out to me, and I took it and sipped, not knowing what to say.

I'd had so many questions ready to ask--what his favorite episode was, what his relationship with Longtusk was really like, what he thought of the cartoons on TV today. But now that I was here with him, those all seemed petty, just trivia to dole out for the fans. All at once, I realized that what I really wanted was to know him as a person instead of the icon I'd watched every day after school. I didn't know if that was even possible. I wanted to help him, to bring him back somehow--but that felt even more farfetched.

Instead, I went back to the couch, and we sipped our wine, and he talked. He told me stories from the show, the practical jokes that went on behind the scenes. He did impressions of the other characters that left me howling with laughter.

A soft beep came from my tablet. Low battery. I'd forgotten about the recording. I couldn't believe the time when I checked it: I'd been there five hours. It had felt like two at most. As Terrence took our wine glasses into the kitchen, I realized sheepishly that it really hadn't been much of an interview. It had been fun, but I had no idea how I was going to get something out of it for the blog.

"I should get going," I said when he returned. "But... I was wondering if I could come back tomorrow. Just... to kind of follow up."

His smile then was the most genuine I'd seen from him all night. "I'd like that."

I wanted to hug him, but that felt too awkward--as did the thought of just leaving. Finally I held out my hand. He clasped it gently in both of his, and I saw something in his expression that I couldn't quite place. It wasn't until I was halfway to the motel, my hand still tingling with the warmth of his touch, that I realized it was gratitude.

I glanced over my notes again the next morning while I ate breakfast at a local diner. The tablet's voice recognition software was a joke, so most of the transcription was garbled, but it was enough to refresh my memory. I sipped my coffee (bitter), nibbled a slice of toast (burned), and finally ditched the runny eggs in favor of a piece of apple pie that was just coming out of the oven. Not exactly the complete breakfast they talked about in the cereal commercials, but close enough.

I guess this is how you know you're an adult--when no one can tell you that you can't have dessert for breakfast. I felt oddly giddy and reckless, and though I tried to chalk it up to being nervous about seeing Terrence again, I finally had to admit that it wasn't anxiety. It was excitement. I hadn't looked forward to seeing someone this much since I'd been in--

No. No way was I going there. This was hero worship for a guy I felt like I knew. Emphasis, I told myself sternly, on *felt like*. For all I knew, most of that personality I loved so well truly *was* the product of the writers--or merely the persona of the actor.

You are not going to be an idiot fangirl.

I held tight to that mantra, paid the check, and headed down the road.

Terrence looked brighter this morning--and not just his color. "Coffee?"

"God, yes. Does the health department know that diner in town is serving battery acid?"

He chuckled. "Ah, the Silver Strand; serving cheap food at cheaper prices for over twenty years. But nobody beats their desserts."

I took the thick pottery mug and held it with both hands, savoring the aroma.

"That's more like it."

I took my seat on the couch again. For one wild moment I hoped he might sit beside me, but instead he took the same chair as before. "So," he said, "where were we?"

I quickly powered up the tablet and turned the recorder on. "We were talking about the second season, and how they experimented with the format."

"Mm." He nodded. "Well, some of those shows worked, and some didn't." He flashed a quirky grin.

I smiled, too. "'Broomsticks and Butterflies'?"

"By popular agreement--fans *and* crew--our single worst episode." He looked heavenward and shook his head. "It was all I could do to get through the dialogue. If the whole season had been done that way, we would have been canceled for sure."

"Okay, so I know your least favorite. Which one was your favorite?"

He glanced at his coffee, then back up to me. "'Purr-fect Harmony.'"

"The one with... oh, no wonder." I grinned. That was the episode where the poachers had used a girl tiger from a zoo to lure Terrence out of the preserve.

Terrence's orange cheeks went redder. "Hey, it was a fun show. I liked getting tricked for once and being out of my element for a little while."

That was the only episode she'd been in. "Did you ever see her again, after the show?"

He studied the coffee mug again. "We went out a few times, but it didn't work out. Too complicated."

"Why?" The question was out before I realized I'd said it. "Never mind--you don't have to--"

"It's all right. It's just that... toon relationships are always complicated." He gestured to the framed photos. "Bugs tried it a couple of times. But they just weren't as big as he was, and they didn't last. We just... never know how long the other person will be around."

"Neither do humans," I pointed out gently.

"True. But that shadow's just a bit sharper for us." He switched to a lighter tone.

"Besides, Tina looked just like me except for eyelashes and a blue bow over one ear. Not exactly the most attractive of women, when you get right down to it."

There was more there than he was saying, but going any further would have really been prying. Any other time, I would have pushed to get something good for the blog, but this time... I just couldn't. It was more than wanting to respect his privacy. There was pain beneath his words, and I didn't want him to be hurt.

I moved on to another set of questions about what it was like to win the awards, and which ones meant the most to him.

He shrugged. "None of them, really. Oh, it was great at the time, but now look at them. Gathering dust, and here I am, and none of them doing any good when it matters." A bitter note crept into his voice at the end, and I saw a flash of something like anger in his eyes. He paused and took a breath. "I shouldn't complain, though. I've done better than most."

Once again, I wished he were sitting beside me. I wanted to take his hand in mine, to tell him how much joy he'd given me over the years, how much happiness he deserved in return. Instead, the moment passed in awkward silence, and I made a big show of checking the tablet's battery display.

"So what was your favorite episode?" Terrence asked.

"Oh, man, I don't know. Can I give you a top five? Um... maybe the one where you lost your memory and thought you were British royalty."

He held up his coffee mug with pinky extended. "Quite right. Excellent choice."

"I took my stuffed animal and made a monocle for it."

He laughed. "Really? Do you still have it?"

"I wish I did. It got so ratty my mom finally threw it out one day when I was at school."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, I'm still working through that in therapy." My coffee had gone cold, but I sipped at it anyway. "I used to have all the playsets. The treehouse, the secret lair, the hot air balloon--everything. I wish I still had them, but..."

A moment passed. "But what?" he asked softly.

I tried to figure out how to explain it. "It's not just wishing I had the toys again. If I had them now, they'd all just be sitting on a shelf. And okay, yeah, I'd look at them and remember, and that'd be nice." I paused. "But what I really wish is that I could play with them like I used to. Just... sit there for hours and make up stories and move them around. Just get lost in it. And that's what I can't do anymore. That's what I can't get back."

I laughed nervously. "I guess that doesn't make much sense if you've never been little, but--"

"Actually," he said slowly, "it does."

His gaze met mine, and I believed him. All at once I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time: the sensation of being understood, of utter comfort paired with complete freedom. It was only a moment, but there was no mistaking it.

I fumbled for the tablet and had to tap the screen twice to shut off the recorder. "I've taken enough of your time. I'd better get going."

"Are you sure? You're welcome to stay if--"

"No, really. It's all right. I'll send you the link when the article gets posted. Sometime next week. Probably." I powered down the tablet and shoved it clumsily into my bag. My face burned. I'd promised myself I wouldn't be a fangirl, and what was I doing now? Imagining some silly chemistry, some connection I only wished were there.

I picked up my coffee mug with the idea of carrying it to the kitchen, but he reached for it instead, his hands closing over mine, and there it was again: warmth, safety, and an ember of something I hadn't felt in a long time. Or, if I was being honest, something I had never felt.

I tried to remember what I'd planned to say. "It's... it's really been an honor. To talk with you. It's been like a dream, so... thank you."

His voice had a quiet tone I hadn't heard before. "It's been... more than I hoped for." He set the mug gently back on the table, and when he turned back to me, the Terrence I remembered was suddenly there, with his signature blend of mischief and charm. "Let me thank you, then. How about dinner tonight? My treat."

"Well, I--"

"I promise we won't go to the Silver Strand."

I told myself to be polite. Quick. Simple. A brief apology, an explanation that I had to be back at work the next day, that I really hadn't planned on being in town another night, and--

"Sure," I said. "That'd be... that'd be great."

His eyes lit up. "Wonderful. Just meet me here. Seven o'clock?"

I nodded. "Seven. I'll see you then." I reminded myself to breathe, picked up my bag, crunched my way across the shell driveway, and managed to get into the car before I started grinning like an idiot.

He was just lonely, I told myself as I drove back to the motel. That was all. It didn't really mean anything. He wanted someone to talk to, and I could do that. I understood that.

Because you're lonely, too.

I told myself to shut up.

I spent a couple of hours staring at a blank screen, trying to come up with something for the blog. Every fifteen minutes or so, I would scribble an opening line with the stylus, watch my handwriting fade into text, stare at it for several minutes, and then scrub the stylus over it to erase the whole thing.

Finally, feeling suffocated by the tired little room, I went out for a walk. The tourist season had come and gone, and most of the quaint shops nearby were already closed, with signs in the windows saying things like "See you next Memorial Day!" The emptiness didn't improve my mood, but at least I wasn't forced to make small talk with anyone.

It wasn't fair. That was the stupid, childish thought that kept playing over and over in my mind. It just wasn't fair. At first, I thought I meant it wasn't fair for Terrence, for his very existence to be linked to what other people thought or felt about him. I could be completely alone in the world, no family, no friends, no one to even know I existed, let alone care--and still I would exist.

The farther I walked, though, the more I realized the truth. It wasn't just unfair to him. I was also feeling sorry for myself. After all the years of dating and breaking up, I'd finally met someone wonderful, someone I really cared about, and odds were he wouldn't last out the month.

I checked my watch and headed back toward the motel. The sun was starting to set over the water, sinking slowly into a pool of orange and red. The sight stopped me, held me there. I stood for several minutes just watching it, taking it in.

Appreciating a sunset couldn't keep it from fading. But I couldn't turn away from something beautiful just because it wouldn't last.

At the motel, I unpacked the one dress I'd brought--one of those "just in case, what the hell, it doesn't take up that much room anyway" items. Thankfully, the fabric hadn't wrinkled, so I didn't have to risk the rust-edged iron that was pushed to the back of the closet shelf. The dress was sleeveless, sheer and summery, though the deep crimson color was pure autumn. I hoped the evening wouldn't get too cold, since the only jacket I'd brought was too casual to match.

When he opened his door and saw me, there was a delightful heart-skipping instant as he took in the sight. Did I look that way when I saw him?

"I feel so... underdressed." He thought a moment, then hooked an invisible zipper beneath his chin, unzipped his striped pelt, and stepped out of it wearing a tux.

"Oh, thanks. Now *I'm* underdressed."

He took my hand. "No, you're beautiful. Ready to go?"

I offered to drive, but he said it wasn't far. We walked along the water, sometimes on boardwalks and along docks, sometimes on a winding trail through sandy grass. Finally we came to a structure that looked like it had once been another vacation cottage, but now it could only be called a shack. It leaned to one side, the lit windows looking more diamond-shaped than square.

Terrence chuckled when he saw my expression. "Don't worry, it's safe. And a lot nicer on the inside, trust me."

He held the door open for me. Inside, it was still plain and a little run down, but at least the walls were straight.

A portly toon alligator in a white apron greeted us. "Evening, Terrence."

"Hey, Al. That table ready?"

"Ready and waiting. Special'll be out in a few."

It wasn't a big dining room, just a half-dozen round tables with plain white tablecloths. But in the back corner, one table was set with bone china and silver, and a bottle of chilled white wine stood beside crystal goblets. Candles shone in silver candlesticks, and a single red rose in a crystal bud vase completed the picture.

From somewhere unseen, Al dimmed the lights as we sat down. Everything caught the candlelight, reflecting it back in a thousand chasing glimmers.

Terrence smiled. "Al's angling for a big tip tonight."

"Is it always this... private?"

"You mean empty? We're being honest, remember." He glanced around the room. "In season, you can wait two hours for a table on a Friday night. This time of year, it's pretty quiet."

"The way you like it?"

He spread the linen napkin in his lap. "The way it suits me."

Al brought out shrimp cocktail for us to share. "I hope seafood's all right," Terrence said.

"Fantastic." I reached for the shrimp. "But what are you going to eat?"

The special turned out to be linguini and broiled scallops in a white wine sauce. "He's outdone himself," Terrence remarked, pouring another glass of wine. "For all I knew, we were going to wind up eating fish and chips off china plates."

The silences were comfortable. I realized neither of us needed, anymore, to fill every space with chatter. I was warm from more than just the wine. Before this evening, all I'd have been able to think about was how I was out on a date that hordes of fangirls--and boys--would have killed for. But now, when I looked at him, he wasn't *the* Terrence Tiger, star of Jungle Jam. He was just Terrence, himself. It was hard to separate out which one I was falling in love with--but the truth was, I loved them both.

Dessert was raspberry cheesecake drizzled with chocolate.

"Okay, no way Al made *this*," Terrence said.

Al came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. "You doubt my wide range of talents?"

"Many things about you are wide, Al. Talents, not so much." Terrence took another bite of the cheesecake. "Besides, I know the Silver Strand's hot fudge when I taste it."

"Busted." Al laughed. "Anything else for you?"

"Just the check."

"Eh, it's on the house." Al winked at me.

Terrence smiled. "I owe you one."

"I'll add it to your tab." He headed back to the kitchen. "Have a good night, kids."

It was dark when we left, but Terrence whipped out a lantern to light our way back to his house. He also slipped off his jacket and put it around my shoulders. It was warm and smelled faintly of spice and musk.

I smiled at him. "We're just a romantic cliché, aren't we?"

"Maybe. But things only get to be clichés because they work."

At the house, he made coffee. We sat on the couch, set our cups on the table, and ignored them.

On the show, Terrence had been suave and cool and had always found the right thing to say. Now he looked almost nervous, and I loved that. "Remember... we're still being honest," he said.

"Of course."

"I know this is all--kind of sudden. It's just that..." He paused. "I came here not knowing how much time I had left. And I realize now that ever since I've been here, I've just been... waiting for it to happen. That's all. Not living, just waiting."

"But you're not gone yet."

"No. And I'm glad of that now."

"So am I."

He leaned closer. The kiss seemed to happen on its own, inevitable and perfect, deepening slowly, pulling us against each other.

Several long moments later, we broke apart, and I glanced down, then back into his eyes. "So where were you hiding *that* all this time?"

He gave me a playful smile. "Trade secret." And we kissed again.

When I woke, sunlight was filtering through the gauzy bedroom curtains. The bed was empty beside me, and for an instant I feared the worst, until I heard him in the kitchen.

I called my boss and told her I had a family emergency and would have to be out for the rest of the week. I figured it was close enough to the truth, and she would never have believed the truth anyway. I hardly believed it myself.

Each day blended into the next. We played miniature golf at the boardwalk, with Terrence taking on a new celebrity persona at each hole. He'd sweet-talked the owner, a toon poodle whose pink fur was going gray, into opening up just for us.

I was surprised by how many toons lived and worked close by. Terrence just shrugged when I mentioned it. "I told you; we're all drawn to water eventually."

A purple hippo in a zoot suit ran the single-screen theater downtown. He basically gave Terrence the key to the place, and we sat in the cool darkness for hours, watching Jungle Jam, Tom and Jerry, Top Cat, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck. Most of the time we watched the screen. Sometimes we didn't.

Dinner was always at Al's. (I had learned that his middle initial was, as I'd suspected, "E.") Once, when Al and I were briefly alone, the gator said suddenly, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For what you're doing for him. He's a good guy. Always has been. It's good to see him happy again. He deserves that." And he took my empty plate and waddled back to the kitchen.

After dinner one night, back at the house, Terrence presented me with a big red box tied with a white bow.

"What's the occasion?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Just something I thought you'd like."

"This... doesn't explode or anything, does it?"

"Hey, I already learned the hard way not to let Jokey Smurf do my gift-wrapping."

I lifted the lid off gingerly, and there, on a bed of tissue paper, was a new plush Terrence, the tags still on it, the same kind I'd had when I was little.

"It's perfect--where did you *get* this?"

"I've had some stuff in storage." He smiled. "Talk about needing therapy. I'm the one giving out stuffed animals of myself."

I hugged the toy. "He's adorable." Then I kissed Terrence, slipping my arms around him. "I like the real thing even better, though," I whispered, and drew him down to me.

All these days, I had been trying not to see it. I had hoped that somehow one person's love could take the place of a thousand fans' admiration. But the next morning, as he stood by the window looking out, I saw the morning sunlight slant through him, and I saw how his orange fur had faded to peach.

No.

Terrence glanced at me, and I was afraid I'd spoken the word aloud. Then he smiled, and I managed to smile back. I tried to hold on to that smile for the rest of the day.

Later that evening, we sat on the small deck out back overlooking the water, watching the terns dive into the smooth, sunset-gold surface, watching the ripples wash all the way to the shore.

"It's going to happen soon," he said.

I swallowed. "How do you know?"

"I know." His voice was strained. "Thank Al for me, will you? I never wanted to embarrass him, but he's been a good friend, and I want him to know that. I want him to know I appreciated it." He was silent for several moments, staring out at the water. "One more thing."

"Anything," I said, and meant it.

He turned back to me, his eyes shining. "Remember me."

I held him as if I could keep him with me by sheer determination. I forced my voice past tears, my jaw clenched against the sob that wanted to rise from my chest.

"Always."

He lowered his face to mine, and I closed my eyes. In the kiss, I felt him dissolving, like sand slipping through my fingers. His warmth lingered on my lips, but when I opened my eyes, he was gone.

I never did write that blog post. I couldn't. Sometimes things are cliché because they work, and sometimes words are too small, too weak, to carry what needs to be said.

The plush version of Terrence sits on a shelf in my library, next to the DVDs of the show. Someday I'll watch them again. I'll smile at the jokes I know by heart, and hold the stuffed animal close, and feel as safe as I did when I was a child, as loved as I felt when he held me in that cottage by the sea. For now, the toy sits there, and I look at it, and I remember.

The child I was carried Terrence with her wherever she went. The woman I am now carries him with her still.

###

[The Garden](#)

"What're you doing?"

"Making a garden."

"You're gonna get in trouble, digging up the yard."

"Mom said I could."

"What're you planting, anyway?"

"Seeds."

"Stupid. That's just birdseed."

"Go away! You're messing it up."

She carries the heavy watering can with both hands, careful not to spill. She gives them a drink and whispers nice things to them, telling them how warm the sun is, how blue the sky is, how everything is waiting for them to grow. Every morning, she runs outside first thing, bare feet and pajamas in dew-slick grass. Every morning, the same stark patch of earth.

"Watering your dirt again?"

"It's not dirt."

"I told you it wasn't gonna grow."

"They will too. Just wait. Any day now."

"Right."

So many days pass. Excitement gives way to stubborn habit. She bites her lip and fills the watering can again.

"You can play my new game if you want."

"Don't want your game."

"Come on. It's boring out here. The seeds were probably old anyway. Hey--let's dig it up and see what it looks like. Maybe there's worms."

"No!"

"Cut it out! I was just kidding. Jeez."

The next morning, she does not run. She closes the screen door quietly behind her, slowly, putting it off a few moments longer, letting hope whisper *maybe, maybe*.

The soil stirs and shudders. She watches, chewing on one knuckle, eyes wide.

A flash of red--a scattering of dirt--a flap of new wings. The cardinal cocks its head, looks around a moment, and flies up to perch on the watering can.

Another, and another, and a dozen, and more: blue jays, sparrows, purple martins, goldfinches, bursting out in soft puffs of earth. A row of indigo buntings turns the clothesline into a sapphire necklace. The air bubbles with birdsong, each note clear as water, silver-bright.

She laughs and claps her hands, and at once they take flight, not startled but as if waiting for her command. For a moment, she stands within a swirling rainbow before they all break away toward the sky, leaving her staring into a blue so pure it makes her eyes ache, so wide it makes her feel tiny and huge at once. Her heart has broken into a hundred feathered pieces, but each one soars now, higher than she can see.

###

About the Author:

Renee Carter Hall writes fantasy and soft science fiction, with excursions into dark fantasy, literary pieces, and stories for children and young adults. Talking animals slip into her stories whenever they get an opportunity, and her work has been influenced by

storytellers from a range of media, including Beatrix Potter, Steven Spielberg, Ray Bradbury, Jim Henson, Chuck Jones, Brian Jacques, Gene Roddenberry, and Stephen King. Her short stories have appeared in various publications, including *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *The Summerset Review*, *Allasso*, the Anthro Dreams podcast, and the anthology *Beware the Night*. Her first novel, *By Sword and Star*, was published in 2012 by Anthropomorphic Dreams Publishing.

Renee lives in West Virginia with her husband Jeff and their cat Bijoux, where she works by day as a medical transcriptionist, a career that allows her to put her perfectionism to good use. She welcomes correspondence from readers and can be found online at:

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Also available from this author at Smashwords:

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All Dinkums wants is to be a real dragon, a fierce crimson-scaled firebreather like the ones living in the northern caves. Instead, Dinkums is pink, fuzzy, and cute--until Skye, a teen witch bored by school and ready for a challenge, finds a way to transform him. But Dinkums and Skye are both about to learn that being real is more complicated than they bargained for.

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