

Storylandia

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Storylandia is always seeking quality original short stories, novelettes, and novellas. Please have a look at our submission guidelines at www.Storylandia.WapshottPress.com or email the editor at editor@wapshottpress.com

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Julie Travis

The Falling Man

How many souls are there in Heaven?

Perhaps it is not our place to know or even ask such a thing. But if we did, would the real question be how many truly deserve to be there? If anyone had asked Joseph Gray he would have laughed, a bitter and angry sound. He was the one person who could at least estimate how many souls had passed through Heaven's gates and, more importantly, he knew for certain how many had done so on merit. *The numbers, he'd smirk, don't add up, do they?*

But no one would ask Joseph Gray. Most people avoided him, although they would find it difficult to say why. There was something unsettling in the way he carried himself, the way he looked at others. Politeness stopped them from commenting on his foul breath, his disfigured neck and arms and no one got close enough to him, physically or otherwise, to be genuinely concerned about his health.

Joseph Gray thought about Heaven a lot. After all he had done in his twenty-eight years on Earth he deserved more than anyone to be allowed in, even to be given the keys to the place. He'd earned it. But he doubted that he'd get his reward. God appeared to have abandoned him of late. A sudden flash of pain made him clutch his stomach. His condition, if one could call it a condition, shifted with each day and the suffering—the martyrdom—he

experienced soared to dizzying new heights.

It had first shown itself at his grandfather's funeral. Joseph had been five years old, confused at the adults around him that were usually so strong, now red eyed, holding onto one another as if they couldn't stand on their own two feet. When his father had lifted him up and shown him the open coffin with his grandfather lying inside, he had understood little of what he was seeing but he felt sad because everyone else was sad. Sad and then frightened. Because while he was being held over the coffin, an invisible hand had pushed at his chest. There it was again. This time it went deeper and he felt anger but it was not his own. It was as if the invisible hand had placed the anger inside him. He yelled, felt another push and then two of his aunts were at his side, gasping and pointing at the body inside the coffin.

“Did you see that? It was like a cloud of dust...”

“There's another one! It's going to the boy. Thank the Lord, Frank's sins are going to the boy...”

When the funeral was over Joseph's mother and father had told him what an amazing, lucky boy he was. There had been someone at the funeral, a woman who wasn't a friend or a relative. She, said Joseph's father, was a sin-eater. She went to funerals and ate the sins of the deceased so the dead person was free to enter Heaven. When the woman eventually died, a sin-eater would need to be at *her* funeral, as she would have all the sins she had taken on, as well as her own, stopping her from going to Heaven.

“But we didn't need her, Joseph,” said his father. “Because my boy had been chosen by God to help

Rohan Roberts

A New Awakening

Part 1: The Beginning

It took them a surprisingly long time to figure out that they were living in a universe that was just one bubble in a vast surging cosmic ocean filled with other bubble universes. But in a few hundred years after this discovery, it became common knowledge and found its way into the textbooks of their kindergarten students. Terms such as multiverse, metaverse, megaverse rapidly gained currency among the children of their species. Parallel dimensions, doppelganger particles, holographic realities, and hyperspace became an integral part of the primary school science curriculum in schools all over their home planet.

But it all went back to the beginning. Their beginning—which, for the longest time, they thought was the only beginning. In the beginning was simplicity. In the first hundredth of a second after we engendered their universe into existence, their space, time, and matter took on properties very different from ours. Of course, little did they realise that they owed their existence to us. Without us, there would have been no beginning.

When she was 12, Tyra impressed everyone around her with her phenomenal mathematical abilities. With little formal training from her teachers, who were, in fact, half in awe of her, she wrote an algorithm to compute

Bernoulli numbers. Her teachers looked at the pages of mathematical scribbling and couldn't make heads or tails of it. One astute teacher decided that it might be worthwhile popping over to the nearby Ithaca Metropolitan University to have the thing looked at by someone in the Mathematics faculty. No one believed that those intricate calculations could have come from the brain of a child. After that, the word prodigy was bandied about loosely when they referred to her.

As she grew up in the 1950s, she had little to complain about. As part of the post-World War-Two baby boomer generation, she had had a lavish and privileged lifestyle and lacked nothing. Suffice it to say she was not just born with a silver spoon, but with a veritably royal set of argent cutlery. Her father had made it big in the banking industry. He was one of the lucky few who hadn't suffered crippling losses during the great crash of 1929 and in the period of depression that followed. He was one of those high-flying, jet-setting, quick-thinking executives who hired and fired people at the drop of a hat. He signed fat cheques and nursed plump bank accounts in Switzerland, Monaco, and the Canary islands. He owned enough shares to buy a small country and spent more time on his phone and the family jet than he did at home. His sharp suits and bouffant moustache didn't make him the best father in town; but what he lacked for in paternal affection he made up with an extravagant allowance. This he showered upon Tyra with scarce a thought. Diamond rings as birthday presents and crystal glass as Christmas gifts were commonplace—even if they were delivered by the company secretary.

David Neilsen

My Partner

My favorite part is when I rip through their flesh.

I love the way the skin gives for just a millisecond, as if by bending inward it can somehow avoid the inevitable. Then, almost immediately, the battle is over, the flesh is torn open, and I pierce into a whole new world. It's a world not of air, but of viscera. Not of sound and light, but of blood and bone.

I constantly ache for that moment of completeness when My Partner and I perform our magic once again on an empty stage before a captive and unwilling audience of one. Covered in another's life, I am satiated and whole. But it never lasts. Soon the pangs of hunger stir again and I yearn for fulfilment.

My Partner does not generally keep me waiting long between feedings. Secretly, I believe it is because he, too, has the urges. Not that he would ever admit them. God forbid he debase himself by acknowledging his inner demons.

I humor him. If it gives him peace to play the powerless victim, so be it. But when, like now, time slips away and the sweet taste fades on my teeth to a memory, then his little pity play gets on my nerves. We both know how this game is going to play out, why drag out the drama?

Eventually it all ends the same. My door opens.

I'm bathed in artificial light. My Partner is there. It never varies, and today, right now, is no different.

He looks horrible, like road kill no one has bothered to scrape off the ground. Bags under his eyes, a twitch in one cheek, stubble on his chin, and hair that's been combed by the repetitive motion of a hand running through it front-to-back for hours on end.

He's going through withdrawal.

"I hate you," he says, staring at me. As if I'm the cause of his sickness. Personally, I'm disgusted. The man staring down at me is a far cry from the Partner I've come to know and trust. The sight sends a shiver of panic coursing through me. Is he up to the task?

His trembling hand reaches down, more eager to join with me than the man attached to it. His bony fingers wrap themselves around me and I am whole. All other thoughts drift away, lost in the bliss of unity we share. My doubts fade. My Partner has come for me.

He holds me up, as if beholding me for the first time. It's a sad, lonely face mirrored in my sheen.

"Please. I can't do this again."

Yes, you can. You know you can and you know you will. I'm surprised he's able to keep up the pretense that he's being coerced. Why bother? He has me in his grasp. We are one. It's time for action!

Still My Partner hesitates, doubt etched on his features. Weary, he reaches two fingers up to stroke the gleaming silver of my side, staring at his own warped reflection.

"There has to be another way."

This is getting old. My Partner needs a reminder of the way things work. It doesn't take much. A shiver, a

Irene Turner

Dead Places

Memories are futile here. We erase the past because it works better that way. New settlers are full of Earth gossip and trip stories and don't understand why we nod politely, but don't listen. We came to Mars for space.

I dreaded ship weeks, but I needed the money, even if it meant sixteen-hour shifts. There were other doctors, but they didn't do arrivals for fear of disease or infection. Which meant I was the first face every passenger saw. Their nerves would unravel after all that confinement and they'd drag out their fears and dump them on me.

My feet ached as I hiked up the clinic stairs and punched into the sick bay and put my hair up in a bun. Grabbing a hit of the emergency O₂, I sat for a moment to breathe. Six more slots, and I could return to my pharmaceuticals and solitude. The med panels chirped and beeped, expectant. Sweat dripped off my face. The geodome's coolers couldn't keep up with the sick heat of Mars' summer, so it was pointless to call in and complain.

We'd already made it through eight days of freighters, which the mineworkers loaded with rich rock ore. Budget cuts had dropped us down to one passenger shuttle: fifty bewildered immigrants were being quarantined until their cultures came back clean. Only three more days until Mars and Earth began to separate

their orbits: the supply ships would disappear and I'd have peace for another eighteen months.

Checkmeter charged, I lined up my syringes, buzzed passenger 44 into the room.

"I've been watching them unload through the monitor," he said. "So crazy busy." *Ricky Clement*, my manifest read. Thin and cool and wan even for an Earther—thirty five and single, five-foot-eight. Anxious hands, but soft and supple. Sunken, olive eyes.

"They not feed you well on the way here?" I asked him.

"Synthesized food makes me queasy," he said. "And the vitamin drip didn't take."

I ran the scanner over his leather jacket and jeans—impractical but typical for a non-colony vet. They all wanted to pretend Mars was the same only different. His clothes hung stiffly. A man's leather jacket should groove to its owner. Become a piece of him.

He waited patiently while I checked the readout. "No radiation," I said and punched in the electronic clearance.

"What would you do if you found some?"

"Send you home."

"That's okay, I'm returning on this shuttle." Ricky didn't smile, but he had to be kidding.

"Nobody does that," I said. 6,000 people and 50 seats a shuttle. Hopeless to expect a priority return.

"I'll make it happen," he said, his voice oddly louder than it needed to be.

He was holding a steel box, sharp-edged and sterile, with the standard export seal. "Personal goods should have gone through clean check," I told him, not