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YUCATAN BUT I JUST BURN AND PEEL

"Merida," I said to Gretchen just to torment her. I referred to the capital city of Yucatan. I insisted that I wanted to visit Merida when we went to Mexico.

"Guadalajara, San Luis Potosi, San Miguel de Allende," she snarled, glaring at me. "I want to show you the *real* Mexico, damn it. How can you judge which parts of it you want to see? All you know about Mexico is Tijuana and Juarez."

"Don't forget Cuidad Acuna, Coahuila, 'down by the sleepy Rio Grande,'" I said. To agitate her further I pronounced it in the usual back-country way of "Ry-o Grand." (I also used to say "Santa Fee.") "Cuidad Acuna was called Villa Acuna, I remember, when I was there. They must have changed it to reflect a newly acquired dignity. I don't know when the transformation took place. They didn't tell me of it."

"Poor baby," she said. "I've been in those places, but they're just border towns. Remember that I lived seven years in central Mexico, the *real* Mexico."

"You ought to have seen Juarez during the war years," I said. "What a place! They used 1933 Cadillacs for taxicabs. Did you ever ride in a 1933 Cadillac? Did you ever ride in a Cadillac? A couple of G.I. buddies and I went down to Juarez in the summer of 1943 to buy a quart of Waterfill & Frazier. And I don't drink whiskey, as you know, so... Anyway, Juarez was wide open, going full blast, day and night, during World War 2. It was swarming with crazy G.I.s from Fort Bliss and Biggs Field and Alamogordo, and with not-so-crazy Mexicans out to snaffle every dollar we had in our pockets. Jaurez was a den of iniquity and corruption, a little corner of hell, but I'll tell you what, hell is a lot more fascinating than heaven. But I begin to sound like Ozymandias the Great, colleague, talking about that night in Darjeeling. Getting back to Merida, then. I do suggest we visit Merida when we go to Mexico. It's supposed to be a fascinating place."

"Hah," Gretchen snorted. "Maybe you enjoyed Juarez, liking whatever it is you like, but Merida? It's unbearably hot, they have ancient blood feuds, and the mosquitos, manito! And the cockroaches, big as sewer rats! All the Gulf coast is too hot and too full of malaria. I would like to visit Vera Cruz and retrace General Winfield Scott's march up-country to Mexico City, but I can't stand the climate, and neither could you."

I didn't really want to go to Yucatan. Although I would like to see the ancient sacrificial well that Richard Halliburton jumped down (twice) on his visit there, I'm not an amateur archaeologist eager to explore ruined Maya cities buried in the jungle. I am sure I would prefer chicken fricassee to Chichen-Itza. I have lived too long in the Bay Area to be able to tolerate the tropical heat of Yucatan, and I sunburn very easily. But I often teased Gretchen about wanting to go to Merida.

From time to time I would look up or run across some tidbit of news or information about the city and mention it to her. One sees a lot in newspapers

and magazines about Acapulco, Mazatlan, and even Cabo San Lucas, but Merida is out of the way and out of the news. I talked of it as if it were Shangri-La. "Did you know that Merida is called 'The White City' because it's so neat and clean?" I would say. "The people are mostly of Maya descent, and the city is built on the ruins of ancient Tiho. The stones of the plaza were torn from the Maya pyramid H-chun-Caan. Isn't that exciting? There's a tall cathedral on the plaza, completed in 1598..."

"Merida is Yucatan, tonto, it's not Mexico," she would grump. "Even Saltillo is preferable. I'll show you the real Mexico, where it's always springtime. You've never seen snow-capped mountains till you've seen Popocatepetl. And nowhere else is the sky so gloriously blue, down to the very horizon. A wonderful place! Mexico Lindo y Querido."

"Merida," I would reply with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. "Merida Merida Merida."

In the end, however, the only time we went to Mexico together was a trip across the border to Tijuana where in a dismal pottery yard surrounded by a chicken-wire fence and nopales cacti we bought a beautiful cazuela that cost only a few dollars American. By chance it had Gretchen's rubric, an eight-pointed star, impressed into the barro corriente side of it. Merida, and not only Merida, but San Miguel de Allende, Mazatlan, and Zacatecas, remained as distant as Chimborazo and Cotopaxi in the old poem. The wonderful clay utensil from Tijuana was never used and by accident was knocked off the shelf and broken only a year or two later. There was something symbolic in that.

SCULPTING THE DREAM

"We are all of us storytellers," William Abrahams remarks in the introduction to *Prize Stories 1982: The O. Henry Awards*. He goes on to say, "So much of our lives, day by day, is given over to the stories we tell, anecdotes of ourselves or of others, in telephone conversations, in the course of a dinner, in moments of deepest intimacy, or a moment of confidence to a stranger..." How much more apposite to point out -- as he fails to do -- that we are all storytellers because we are all of us dreamers of dreams.

But perhaps dreaming is different from telling anecdotes, which are products of our conscious minds, stories which we can revise, rearrange, point up and dramatize. We have no such opportunity to do this with our dreams, which come directly out of our subsconscious. But dreams are stories we tell ourselves at night, and perhaps we become more proficient at it as we grow older. Do professional writers have more interesting dreams than the rest of us?

At their best dreams are a way of making in the imagination something more interesting than our daily lives, something more fantastic or grotesque, sometimes more frightening. We wake with a cry, and cannot get back to sleep. Often we wake from such a marvelous or erotic dream that we try in vain to return to the dream

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world to see what happens next. (Not how it came out, for dreams seldom if ever come to an end that O. Henry would approve of.) The most dullwitted and prosaic among us dreams strange dreams, visions that we conjure up when our minds are no longer in control of our thoughts.

Or is this always the case? I began to wonder about this when I wakened this morning. Last night I had just fallen asleep, but I must have been a little uncomfortable, and a part of my conscious mind remained awake. Even so, I began to dream. I imagined that I was sauntering along a street (a street that I didn't recognize, but this is of no moment) when I started to pass a gas station where some sort of excitement was taking place. Evidently there had been an accident or a violent crime had happened nearby, but for some reason I was not at all curious about the matter. I started to walk on, when I was confronted with one of those yellow plastic lines the police put up around such scenes to keep away curious onlookers. The line stretched across the sidewalk where I was walking, but only because the cops had anchored it to a telephone pole by the curb, having no other place to fasten it, I suppose. The actual scene of the accident or crime was 20 or 30 yards away.

I paused in my walk, and stood for a moment trying to decide what to do. Should I step over the line, or walk around it? If I crossed the line I would be technically in violation of the police order, even though probably no one would even notice. As I stood there undecided, I woke up. Immediately I remembered the dream, and realized suddenly that my indecision had nothing to do with the dilemma involving the cops in my dream. I wasn't sure whether I should go across the line or around it merely because I wasn't sure which action would make a more interesting dream! Sometimes, on some occasions, we "write" our dreams instead of free-associating them, modeling them as carefully as a novelist plotting his next book.

In *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (1984) Leon Edel tells of a young woman who dreamed that "the wrapped and silent figure of a man" stood by her bed looking down at her. She was greatly alarmed and screamed, "What are you going to do to me?" -- whereupon he replied, "I don't know, lady. It's *you* who are having the dream." Edel adds, "We dream our own dreams. Everything in our dreams comes from our unconscious imagination, and likewise when a writer sits down to write, all his past sits behind his pen." Writer or not, we can't escape. Our minds tell us stories, and every night we envision stories more amazing than those in any book.

THE READER SPEAKS (1)

Sometimes you chug painfully from a muddy country road onto a well-paved freeway before you're quite prepared for the sudden change. Zing, you're traveling in the fast lane before you're even aware of it. I experienced the same sensation when, by chance, I read two Silverberg short stories back-to-back: "The Silent Colony" (1954) and "Homefaring" (1983). Since the two stories were written 29 years apart you wouldn't think they would have much in common. The first marked Silverberg's American debut (he had published an earlier story, "Gorgon Planet" in *Nebula*) and for it he received a check for $13.50 from *Future Science Fiction*. The second came when his "main line of work was the novel, but when it was pleasing to write a short story or two." Both stories, however, derive from the same basic gimmick: You take a familiar earthly phenomenon and make it science fictional by investing it with a sentient, talking personality.

In "The Silent Colony" it's snowflakes. Three little flakes whisk away from Pluto, and sail endlessly "through the dark night of space" seeking (for some reason not clear to me) their own kind. They seem to be as alike as three snowflakes,

but each has a name: Skrid, Emerak, and Ullowa. (I kept thinking one of the latter flakes was going to say, "Here's looking at you, Skrid.") They are said to be immortal, but we soon learn that they will expire quite suddenly when they visit Earth and get mixed up in a snowstorm just as the sky clears and the sun comes up. What is it like to be a snowflake? How does it feel to melt and trickle away? The Silverberg of 1954 doesn't know, or at least doesn't tell us. He sketches a slender little story about alien life that contains no life at all. It's just thirteen and a half bucks worth of (wellmade) filler material.

In "Homefaring" it's lobsters. Not your ordinary Maine lobsters of today, but instead, evolved, telepathic crustaceans of an unimaginably distant Stapledonian future. But they are lobsters all the same. The story is a dream excursion under the ocean of that world: an attempt to imagine, and describe, what it must be like to be a lobster. Silverberg knows a great deal about lobsters. What can we compare the story with? Perhaps Kipling's ".007," whose hero is an eight-wheeled steam locomotive. The fictional imagination is fecund and inexhaustible. Silverberg's story is science fictional because its hero, or its hero's primary entity, is a time traveler, but that's really only a subterfuge to get it past the editors. It's a story about lobsters, and 'Tis the voice of the Lobster that we hear throughout the story.

In his essay on William Carlos Williams, Randall Jarrell says, "When you have read *Patterson* you know for the rest of your life what it is like to be a waterfall; and what other poet has turned so many of his readers into trees?" If it weren't for science fiction Silverberg might have written his vision as poetry, by compulsion, by necessity, and who would have read it then? But as it is, his imagination swoops forward, and downward, into tomorrow's ocean, embodied in a story about a man from our immediate future who becomes a lobster. When the story opens we find him, startlingly, starting to molt. How many heroes, in or out of science fiction, have ever molted before?

By the end of the story we the readers, like Silverberg's protagonist, realize that forever afterward we are going to remember "the inaudible sound of delicate claws, scurrying over the sands of silent seas." The story is a sustained piece of dream magic. But I still wish Silverberg had turned us into snowflakes too, as he surely would have done if he had written "The Silent Colony" in 1983.

Jane Rice wrote two excellent stories in *Unknown* ("The Idol of the Flies" and "Pobby") and a few merely good ones, but in a book called *Shared Tomorrows*, a collection of collaborative efforts edited by Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg, I found a story she wrote with Ruth Allison that is truly awful. I am chagrined to learn how bad she could be -- I mean, Jane Rice? We aren't talking about Lilith Lorraine or Leslie F. Stone. "The Loolies Are Here" is an incredibly arch little story about the perversity of inanimate objects, a theme much better handled elsewhere. (Where? Quick, class!) Written in 1966, that long-ago year, the story supposes that this is the way the members of an all-woman jury would act: "They would simply continue to knit one, purl two..." But hardly like Madame Defarge, for the "modish foreman" of the jury would say, "...we find the defendant NOT THE LEAST BITTY BIT GUILTY." If Mss Allison and Rice -- supposing they still exist -- don't blush now at such sexist humbug, I blush for them. I sentence them to five years of Consciousness Raising, having found them guilty of writing nonsense, and badly crafted nonsense at that, and more than just the least bitty bit guilty.

That was now, this is then.
