

CRUEL MIRACLES

ORSON SCOTT CARD



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To Charlie Ben,
who can fly

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CRUEL MIRACLES

INTRODUCTION

I BELIEVE THAT speculative fiction—science fiction in particular—is the last American refuge of religious literature.

An odd thing to say, it might seem, particularly since science fiction openly requires that gods be either absent or explained. The moment you have a character pray and get an answer that is *not* explained through perfectly natural phenomena, the story ceases to be publishable as science fiction. In Stephen King's *The Stand*, which began as science fiction—an escaped virus destroys almost all of humanity—some characters' mystical dreams could perhaps have been acceptable as science fiction, because the Jungian collective unconscious has won a grudging place as legitimate grist for the sf mill. But when, at the end, the finger of God comes down out of heaven and blows up Walking Man's nuclear missile—well, that crossed the line, and *The Stand* was clearly either fantasy or religious literature.

It would be fantasy if the god that acted were a god that the readers were not expected to believe in their real lives. It would be religious literature if the readers were expected to believe that such divine interventions actually *do* happen in reality. But no way in hell is the story going to stand up as science fiction if gods are both supernatural and real in the world of the tale.

So why do I call science fiction the last bastion of American religious literature?

You have to understand that what passes for religious literature in the U.S. today is really *inspirational* literature. The Religious, New Age, and Occult publishing categories all contain very similar kinds of stories: Isn't it wonderful that we understand the truth and live the right way, and ain't it a shame about the poor saps who don't. Their fiction (when they have fiction at all) is self-congratulatory. It doesn't explore, it merely affirms. It gives readers an emotional high in connection with membership in their own community of faith.

Real religious literature, I think, does something entirely different. It explores the nature of the universe and discovers the purpose behind it. When we find that purpose, we have found God, because in all religions at all times, regardless of the outward descriptions of God or gods, deity serves the same role: He (or she or they) is the purposer, the planner. And human beings, either with or without their knowledge or consent (depending on one's theology), are following that plan.

I think existential literature still falls into this category, for even though, after much searching, characters always discover that there is no God and therefore no purpose, the story is nevertheless about the need and search for purpose, and the climax is the discovery of the absence of one. Stories about God's nonexistence are still about God, and therefore are still a branch of religious literature.

The need to discover purpose in our lives is a universal human hunger. Even the slimiest, most evil people alive try to find meaning in their self-gratification; and the

best of people shunt others' praise from themselves by ascribing their works to the purposes of a higher being.

There is a tendency, though, in the "true" stories available today to explain human behavior, to remove purpose—motive—from serious consideration. We tend to accept the notion that mechanical, not purposive, causation accounts for the things people do. Joe Sinister is a criminal because his parents beat him or because of a chemical imbalance in his brain or because of a genetic disorder that removed the function we call conscience. Jane Dexter, on the other hand, acts altruistically because she is compensating for feelings of inadequacy or because she has a brain disorder that causes an overactive sense of responsibility.

These explanations of human behavior may be accurate; I'm interested in the question, but the issue of accuracy is, in fact, quite irrelevant to human societies. A human community that uses mechanical causation to account for human behavior *cannot survive*, because it cannot hold its members accountable for their behavior. That is, no matter how you account for the origin of a human behavior, a community must continue to judge the perpetrator on the basis of his intent, as near as that intent can be understood (or guessed, or assumed). That is why parents inevitably ask their children the unanswerable question: Why did you do that? Terrible as that question is, it at least puts the responsibility back on the child's head and forces the child to ask himself the question that society absolutely requires him to answer: Why do I do the things I do? And how, by changing my motives, can I change my behavior? Whereas nothing is more debilitating or enervating for a child than parents who do not ask why, but rather say, You're just going through a phase, or, You can't help that, or I understand that's just the way you are. Such a child, if he believes these stories, has no hope of getting control of himself and therefore no hope of becoming an adult, responsible citizen of the community. We must believe in motives for human behavior, or we cannot maintain community life.

And once we have embarked on that course—judging each other by motive rather than explaining behavior by mechanical causation alone—the fundamental religious question of the meaning or purpose of life cannot be avoided. What *can* be avoided is the question of whether there is an ultimate purposer whose plan we all fulfill—and most American fiction does avoid it, including almost all of the stories published within the category labeled Religious Literature. Instead, purpose or lack of it is assumed.

Not, however, in science fiction. There alone we find the search for the purposer is still alive. Indeed, in story after story the question arises and is explored at depths that would be impossible in any other genre—even fantasy. For while fantasy is uniquely suited to dealing with human universals—the mythic—science fiction is uniquely suited to dealing with suprahuman universals—the metaphysical. Fantasy can hardly deal seriously with gods, because gods are common motifs, like magic swords and unicorns. Readers aren't expected to *believe* in them. (Few things are more jarring to a fantasy writer than to meet a reader who actually believes in those fantasy worlds. The dowers and seventh sons who wrote to me or telephoned me after my Alvin Maker series started appearing finally led me to stop listing my address in the phone book. I didn't want these people to know where I lived.) But because science fiction specifically excludes supernatural gods as characters in stories, it is possible for

science fiction to explore the purpose of life deeply and thoroughly without being distracted by existing theologies.

One of the best examples is in the work of Isaac Asimov. The good doctor has made it clear over the years that he has no belief in any kind of transcendent god, and his work bears this out. But his novels are almost all profoundly religious in the sense that they invariably affirm both the need for and the existence of a purposer. The original Foundation trilogy is explicitly about Hari Seldon's plan and purpose for humanity, and how it worked regardless of the conscious intent of the leaders of Terminus. And, when the plan seemed thwarted by an unplanned-for intruder, the mutant Mule, we find that there is a Second Foundation, which continues to fill Seldon's role, ongoing purposers and planners guiding the destiny of humankind. Furthermore, they realize they can't possibly do their work if humankind is aware of their presence—their scientific planning can't function unless it is not known to function. Therefore they have to fake their own destruction. The nontranscendent god of Asimov's fiction must remain invisible and ineffable—must remain, in fact, rather transcendent.

What shows up in Asimov shows up elsewhere as well. Gene Wolfe's novels are quite explicitly religious—more so than Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which is a profoundly religious (and, in fact, Catholic) work. Frank Herbert's *Dune* and its sequels are even more obvious. Lisa Goldstein's *Tourists* and *A Mask for the General* both reveal, at the end, the active role of some purposer in making things work out according to a certain pattern in spite of the weakness of the leading characters—though in her cosmology, unlike Stephen King's, the voluntary actions of human beings *do* play a vital role in their salvation, a very non-Calvinist view of the relationship between man and the universal purposer.

Certainly there are many more, equally certain is the fact that many, perhaps most, science fiction novels *don't* deal with the plan of life and its planner. Nor is this subject unheard-of in works outside of science fiction. My point is that in science fiction, the relationship between man and god can be dealt with explicitly, in depth, and with great originality, without necessarily being connected to any religious system that has ever existed on Earth. Indeed, whenever science fiction touches on actual contemporary religions, it is almost always hostile to them. Yet it deals with religious *ideas* in a way almost not seen in serious American fiction outside of sci-fi.

So far I have referred to other writers' work; my own is also religious, in exactly this fashion—and in another, which I will deal with soon. But that was not a conscious choice on my part. In fact, because my plays had all been explicitly tied to religion—to Christianity in general and Mormonism in particular—when I turned my hand to writing science fiction and fantasy I made a deliberate choice to *exclude* religious concerns from my writing. No one was going to be a member of the Mormon Church; there were going to be no tales of prophets, saviors, priests, or believers. I was going to write pure, unmixed sci-fi.

This was not because of any hostility toward religion, you understand. I have been a believing and practicing Latter-day Saint throughout my writing career, without wavering on that point. I am, in fact, quite annoyed with critics who assume that this or that bit of my writing clearly shows my “struggles with doubt,” as if the only religious issue worth writing about was whether or not one believes in a particular

religion. That, in fact, is the most elementary—dare I say childish?—religious issue, and the one least interesting to those who are actually committed to a faith. There seems to be an idea among those obsessed with their own unbelief that to write about religion means to write about doubt. They miss the point. To write about religion actually means to write about truth and faith, two matters that cannot be intelligently dealt with in the presence of doubt. They can be dealt with easily in the face of unbelief—it is doubt itself that muddies the waters. You cannot present an idea clearly if you spend all your time discussing whether it's true. You leave the issue of truth in abeyance while you discover what the idea is; only then, having understood, should the issue of doubt vs. belief arise. And, quite frankly, I'm just as happy if it arises after the story is over.

This is one of the things that has caused most damage to Mormon fiction—the obsessive concern so many writers have with people coming into or leaving the Church. It's what I call “revolving door fiction,” and I'm weary of it. It suggests that the writers themselves are not yet adults in the matter of religion, not yet committed to a path. I don't despise their personal struggle, but I do wish they'd find something else to write about. Because what's really interesting about religious people is what happens *after* the commitment is made, and that is precisely what can't be written about by people who have never made one.

My impatience with badly conceived Mormon fiction (and drama, for that matter) was part of my reason for eschewing overtly religious topics or characters in my science fiction. To my surprise, however, I discovered that my work had become more, not less, religious when I stopped dealing with religious subjects consciously. I would go to a convention and somebody would ask me, “Are you Mormon?” “Yes,” I'd say. “Oh, I knew it before I was halfway through reading *A Planet Called Treason* [or *Songmaster* or *Hot Sleep*].” Horrified, I would demand to know what it was that made my work seem so obviously Mormon. When they pointed it out, it would be just as obvious to me—but until that moment I had been completely unaware of it. It seemed that I was writing religious fiction whether I wanted to or not.

But those unconsciously religious elements were exactly the kind of religious writing I was talking about before—explorations of the relationship between human beings and the purposer or purposers of life. There was another kind of writing about religion that I gradually began to want to write. I wanted to write, not only about religious ideas, but also about religious *people*. Yet I wanted to do it without writing “inspirational literature”—the kind of stuff that gets published in the Religious Fiction category.

Rare indeed is the human society that does not have a powerful religious ritual binding it together. Pluralism such as we have in America is extremely rare, and I think it's fair to say that it exists even in America only as the result of a conscious effort that is not always happily received by the American people. The very pervasiveness of Christmas and the deep resentment felt by many—perhaps most—Americans about the seemingly absurd finickiness of the courts in their effort to keep government bodies from promoting Christian Christmas rituals show that pluralism does not come easily or naturally even to a people with a two-century history of commitment to it.

Yet if you read most science fiction you wouldn't have a clue that religion played

a part in anyone's life. Most sci-fi characters are utterly untouched by religion, by ritual, or by faith, *except* when religious rituals or faith are used to show how benighted or depraved or primitive a particular group or individual is. This is actually right in line with contemporary American literary fiction, so it isn't just because of a pro-science bias on the part of the writers. Yet this is so contrary to reality and betrays such a profound ignorance on the part of the writers that it should betray to most people a rather uncomfortable fact: American writers tend not to be in tune with America. Or, to put it another way, religious Americans and literary Americans have, consciously or not, separated themselves almost completely.

I think what happens is that religious people who are becoming writers get the idea, from their reading and from the public attitudes of most fashionable writers, that it's faintly embarrassing to present religion as a matter-of-fact part of life, rather like wearing colors that clash. Writers who would vigorously resist any attempt at censorship, or even editorial pressure to change an idea or a word or a comma, rigorously remove from their work—in fact, don't even allow themselves to conceive of putting it into their work in the first place—anything that might suggest that they harbor some sympathy for a particular religion or faith.

Even those who do deal with religious people positively take great care to distance themselves from it. Garrison Keillor, for example, keeps quite a common distance between himself and the Catholics and Lutherans of Lake Wobegon; he likes them, but he isn't *one* of them. Indeed, this sort of attitude may well arise from many authors' experience, for most religious communities don't react well to strangeness, and the kind of character traits that lead one to be a storyteller are generally classed as strange. Much of the avoidance of or hostility to religious people in American fiction may arise out of writers' painful experiences with religion in their growing-up years.

But the current American trend of almost absolute hostility toward or neglect of characters who have a religious life goes beyond anything that could be accounted for in individual lives. If people's real experiences with religion were so universally hideous, religions could not survive. I know from experience that religious people are as likely to be bright, good-hearted, and open-minded as nonreligious people. I have found proportionately as many bigots, cretins, and would-be fascists among university intellectuals as I have among practitioners of any religion I've known at all well. I've also found that religious people tend to have a much better knowledge and clearer understanding of unreligious people than the latter have of the former. The ignorance is mutual, but the nonreligious people have a bit more than their share.

So in this last decade I have turned more and more toward trying to give my characters a religious life, and to undo the skewed picture of religion that is almost completely universal in contemporary American letters. That there are abuses to be satirized cannot be doubted, and I do my share, in stories like "Saving Grace" and "Eye for Eye." But there are also graceful elements in the life of religious communities, and good people whose religion is part of their expression of their goodness, and such things also ought to be shown.

I deal with this most explicitly in my novel *Speaker for the Dead*, where I have the story's hero and title character, Andrew Wiggin, come to a small colony in which Brazilian Catholicism is the established church. I deliberately began the relationship between Wiggin and the Catholics by having the bishop of Lusitania warn his people

against the speaker for the dead; and Andrew quickly runs into great resistance from the people because of the bishop's hostility. In short, I began with the cliché relationship between Wiggins the humanist and a religious community.

Then I set out to transform that relationship—and, with luck, the attitude of the reader. First, I introduced some positive religious characters—a husband and wife from a teaching order called the Children of the Mind of Christ. They were tolerant of, even cooperative with, the speaker for the dead, and they were also the guardians of scientific knowledge and liberal education in Lusitania. Yet they were also absolutely committed to a monastic law that required them to marry but forbade them to have sex, and I labored to make this painful religious sacrifice seem, not bizarre, but beautiful to the reader. It is not something I would personally ever want to do, nor do I advocate it; but I wanted readers to realize that such a painful choice, made for the sake of religion, did not debase the characters but rather ennobled them.

Second, I carefully transformed the readers' understanding of the bishop himself. As the novel progresses, we begin to see that his hostility to Wiggins was not entirely because of closed-mindedness, but primarily because of a real concern for the welfare of his people. And as his perception of the needs of the people changed, we saw that the bishop—like all good religious leaders—was willing to do what was necessary for his people, even if it meant temporarily allying himself with a humanist minister like the speaker for the dead.

Finally, I showed that Andrew Wiggins himself, as he gradually comes to be part of one family and part of the community at large, realizes that to really belong he must also be a Catholic. He had been baptized a Catholic in his infancy—something that I had put into *Ender's Game* just for fun, but now found quite useful—and so as part of joining Novinha's family and Lusitania itself, he begins to attend mass and act out the rituals of the church. The issue of faith doesn't arise. What matters is belonging to the community and subjecting himself to the community's most basic discipline.

This is not to say that I show religion in a completely favorable light. The struggle with sin is what nearly destroys Novinha and her family. The people are every bit as intolerant of strangeness as any small town, and their intolerance is embedded within their religious life. They are also superstitious and try to use religion like magic. But in *Speaker for the Dead* I try to put these things in perspective. They are part of religious life, but not all of it; and religion brings at least as much goodness and comfort as it brings pain into the characters' lives.

My point was not to show that religion is all good—it isn't. My point was, first, to recognize what most writers seem to ignore, that most people throughout the world and throughout history are believing members of a religious community—and that usually their religion and their citizenship are indistinguishable. Then, second, I was determined to undermine the fashionably hostile stereotypes that mark American fiction whenever it *does* include religion. *Speaker for the Dead* is not a religious book, at least not in the sense that a religious book might demand that you decide whether you believe or don't believe, belong or don't belong. But it does include religion in its realistic and proper proportion in human life. In that sense it is far more realistic than most American novels.

Over the years religion has cropped up more and more in my work, until finally, with a series of short stories that became the book *The Folk of the Fringe*, I dealt

explicitly with Mormon characters and Mormon culture in a near-future setting. Oddly enough, these stories—which, because of their separate existence in that book, do not appear in this collection—are actually some of the *least* religious of my writing, in that they are *not* about the relationship between the living and the purposer of life. Rather they are almost anthropological in their treatment of Mormonism. They are about the way people connect with and abrade against each other within the tight confines of a demanding religious community.

So I write three kinds of fiction that deals with religion. First, like many, perhaps most, science fiction writers, I tell stories that deal with the purpose of life—with the relationship between man and God. Second, I tell stories that deliberately subvert the clichés about religion that are so widespread in American fiction, by showing religious characters in a full range of roles within my stories. And, third, I tell stories that include my direct experience of religious life by depicting the community I know best, Mormonism.

At no point am I trying to persuade you; I want readers, not proselytes. With *Cruel Miracles* I have drawn together my stories that most clearly deal with religious matters not often touched upon by contemporary American writers, matters like holiness, awe, faith, comfort, responsibility, and community. You don't have to be a religious person or even *like* religious people to receive these stories. I hope, though, that by the end you understand a little more about the religious aspect of human life.

MORTAL GODS

THE FIRST CONTACT was peaceful, almost uneventful: sudden landings near government buildings all over the world, brief discussions in the native languages, followed by treaties allowing the aliens to build certain buildings in certain places in exchange for certain favors—nothing spectacular. The technological improvements that the aliens brought helped make life better for everyone, but they were improvements that were already well within the reach of human engineers within the next decade or two. And the greatest gift of all was found to be a disappointment—space travel. The aliens did not have faster-than-light travel. Instead, they had conclusive proof that faster-than-light travel was utterly impossible. They had infinite patience and incredibly long lives to sustain them in their snail’s pace crawl among the stars, but humans would be dead before even the shortest space flight was fairly begun.

And after only a little while, the presence of aliens was regarded as quite the normal thing. They insisted that they had no further gifts to bring, and simply exercised their treaty rights to build and visit the buildings they had made.

The buildings were all different from each other, but had one thing in common: by the standards of the local populace, the new alien buildings were all clearly recognizable as churches.

Mosques. Cathedrals. Shrines. Synagogues. Temples. All unmistakably churches.

But no congregation was invited, though any person who came to such a place was welcomed by whatever aliens happened to be there at the time, who engaged in charming discussion totally related to the person’s own interests. Farmers conversed about farming, engineers about engineering, housewives about motherhood, dreamers about dreams, travelers about travels, astronomers about the stars. Those who came and talked went away feeling good. Feeling that someone did, indeed, attach importance to their lives—had come trillions of kilometers through incredible boredom (five hundred years in space, they said!) just to see *them*.

And gradually life settled into a peaceful routine. Scientists, it is true, kept on discovering, and engineers kept on building according to those discoveries, and so changes *did* come. But knowing now that there was no great scientific revolution just around the corner, no tremendous discovery that would open up the stars, men and women settled down, by and large, to the business of being happy.

It wasn’t as hard as people had supposed.

Willard Crane was an old man, but a content one. His wife was dead, but he did not resent the brief interregnum in his life in which he was solitary again, a thing he had not been since he came home from the Vietnam War with half a foot missing and found his girl waiting for him anyway, foot or no foot. They had lived all their married

lives in a house in the Avenues of Salt Lake City, which, when they moved there, had been a shabby, dilapidated relic of a previous century, but which now was a splendid preservation of a noble era in architecture. Willard was in that comfortable area between heavy wealth and heavier poverty; enough money to satisfy normal aspirations, but not enough money to tempt him to extravagance.

Every day he walked from 7th Avenue and L Street to the cemetery, not far away, where practically everyone had been buried. It was there, in the middle of the cemetery, that the alien building stood—an obvious mimic of old Mormon temple architecture, meaning it was a monstrosity of conflicting periods that somehow, perhaps through intense sincerity, managed to be beautiful anyway.

And there he sat among the gravestones, watching as occasional people wandered into and out of the sanctuary where the aliens came, visited, left.

Happiness is boring as hell, he decided one day. And so, to provoke a little delightful variety, he decided to pick a fight with somebody. Unfortunately, everyone he knew at all well was too nice to fight. And so he decided that he had a bone to pick with the aliens.

When you're old, you can get away with anything.

He went to the alien temple and walked inside.

On the walls were murals, paintings, maps; on the floor, pedestals with statues; it seemed more a museum than anything else. There were few places to sit, and he saw no sign of aliens. Which wouldn't be a disaster; just deciding on a good argument had been variety enough, noting with pride the fine quality of the work the aliens had chosen to display.

But there was an alien there, after all.

“Good morning, Mr. Crane,” said the alien.

“How the hell you know my name?”

“You perch on a tombstone every morning and watch as people come in and go out. We found you fascinating. We asked around.” The alien's voicebox was very well programmed—a warm, friendly, interested voice. And Willard was too old and jaded with novelty to get much excited about the way the alien slithered along the floor and slopped on the bench next to him like a large, self-moving piece of seaweed.

“We wished you would come in.”

“I'm in.”

“And why?”

Now that the question was put, his reason seemed trivial to him; but he decided to play the game all the way through. Why not, after all? “I have a bone to pick with you.”

“Heavens,” said the alien, with mock horror.

“I have some questions that have never been answered to my satisfaction.”

“Then I trust we'll have some answers.”

“All right then.” But what *were* his questions? “You'll have to forgive me if my mind gets screwed around. The brain dies first, as you know.”

“We know.”

“Why'd you build a temple here? How come you build churches?”

“Why, Mr. Crane, we've answered that a thousand times. We *like* churches. We find them the most graceful and beautiful of all human architecture.”

“I don’t believe you,” Willard said. “You’re dodging my question. So let me put it another way. How come you have the time to sit around and talk to half-assed imbeciles like me? Haven’t you got anything better to do?”

“Human beings are unusually good company. It’s a most pleasant way to pass the time which does, after many years, weigh rather heavily on our, um, hands.” And the alien tried to gesture with his pseudopodia, which was amusing, and Willard laughed.

“Slippery bastards, aren’t you?” he inquired, and the alien chuckled. “So let me put it this way, and no dodging, or I’ll know you have something to hide. You’re pretty much like us, right? You have the same gadgets, but you can travel in space because you don’t croak after a hundred years like we do; whatever, you do pretty much the same kinds of things we do. And yet—”

“There’s always an ‘and yet,’ ” the alien sighed.

“And yet. You come all the way out here, which ain’t exactly Main Street, Milky Way, and all you do is build these churches all over the place and sit around and jaw with whoever the hell comes in. Makes no sense, sir, none at all.”

The alien oozed gently toward him. “Can you keep a secret?”

“My old lady thought she was the only woman I ever slept with in my life. Some secrets I can keep.”

“Then here is one to keep. We come, Mr. Crane, to worship.”

“Worship who?”

“Worship, among others, you.”

Willard laughed long and loud, but the alien looked (as only aliens can) terribly earnest and sincere.

“Listen, you mean to tell me that you worship *people*?”

“Oh, yes. It is the dream of everyone who dares to dream on my home planet to come here and meet a human being or two and then live on the memory forever.”

And suddenly it wasn’t funny to Willard anymore. He looked around—human art in prominent display, the whole format, the choice of churches. “You aren’t joking.”

“No, Mr. Crane. We’ve wandered the galaxy for several million years, all told, meeting new races and renewing acquaintance with old. Evolution is a tedious old highway—carbon-based life always leads to certain patterns and certain forms, despite the fact that we seem hideously different to you—”

“Not too bad, Mister, a little ugly, but not too bad—”

“All the—people like us that you’ve seen—well, we don’t come from the same planet, though it has been assumed so by your scientists. Actually, we come from thousands of planets. Separate, independent evolution, leading inexorably to us. Absolutely, or nearly absolutely, uniform throughout the galaxy. We are the natural endproduct of evolution.”

“So we’re the oddballs.”

“You might say so. Because somewhere along the line, Mr. Crane, deep in your past, your planet’s evolution went astray from the normal. It created something utterly new.”

“Sex?”

“We all have sex, Mr. Crane. Without it, how in the world could the race improve? No, what was new on your planet, Mr. Crane, was death.”

The word was not an easy one for Willard to hear. His wife had, after all, meant a

great deal to him. And he meant even more to himself. Death already loomed in dizzy spells and shortened breath and weariness that refused to turn into sleep.

“Death?”

“We don’t die, Mr. Crane. We reproduce by splitting off whole sections of ourselves with identical DNA—you know about DNA?”

“I went to college.”

“And with us, of course, as with all other life in the universe, intelligence is carried on the DNA, not in the brain. One of the byproducts of death, the brain is. We don’t have it. We split, and the individual, complete with all memories, lives on in the children, who are made up of the actual flesh of my flesh, you see? I will never die.”

“Well, bully for you,” Willard said, feeling strangely cheated, and wondering why he hadn’t guessed.

“And so we came here and found people whose life had a finish; who began as unformed creatures without memory and, after an incredibly brief span, died.”

“And for that you worship us? I might as well go worshipping bugs that die a few minutes after they’re born.”

The alien chuckled, and Willard resented it.

“Is that why you come here? To gloat?”

“What else would we worship, Mr. Crane? While we don’t discount the possibility of invisible gods, we really never have invented any. We never died, so why dream of immortality? Here we found a people who knew how to worship, and for the first time we found awakened in us a desire to do homage to superior beings.”

And Willard noticed his heartbeat, realized that it would stop while the alien had no heart, had nothing that would ever end. “Superior, hell.”

“We,” said the alien, “remember everything, from the first stirrings of intellect to the present. When we are ‘born,’ so to speak, we have no need of teachers. We have never learned to write—merely to exchange RNA. We have never learned to create beauty to outlast our lives because nothing outlasts our lives. We live to see all our works crumble. Here, Mr. Crane, we have found a race that builds for the sheer joy of building, that creates beauty, that writes books, that invents the lives of never-known people to delight others who know they are being lied to, a race that devises immortal gods to worship and celebrates its own mortality with immense pomp and glory. Death is the foundation of all that is great about humanity, Mr. Crane.”

“Like hell it is,” said Willard. “I’m about to die, and there’s nothing great about it.”

“You don’t really believe that, Mr. Crane,” the alien said. “None of you do. Your lives are built around death, glorifying it. Postponing it as long as possible, to be sure, but glorifying it. In the earliest literature, the death of the hero is the moment of greatest climax. The most potent myth.”

“Those poems weren’t written by old men with flabby bodies and hearts that only beat when they feel like it.”

“Nonsense. Everything you do smacks of death. Your poems have beginnings and endings, and structures that limit the work. Your paintings have edges, marking off where the beauty begins and ends. Your sculptures isolate a moment in time. Your music starts and finishes. All that you do is mortal—it is all born. It all dies. And yet you struggle against mortality and have overcome it, building up tremendous stores of

shared knowledge through your finite books and your finite words. You put frames on everything.”

“Mass insanity, then. But it explains nothing about why you worship. You must come here to mock us.”

“Not to mock you. To envy you.”

“Then die. I assume that your protoplasm or whatever is vulnerable.”

“You don’t understand. A human being can die—*after* he has reproduced—and all that he knew and all that he has will live on after him. But if *I* die, I cannot reproduce. My knowledge dies with me. An awesome responsibility. We cannot assume it. I *am* all the paintings and writings and songs of a million generations. To die would be the death of a civilization. You have cast yourselves free of life and achieved greatness.”

“And that’s why you come here.”

“If ever there were gods. If ever there was power in the universe. You are those gods. You have that power.”

“We have no power.”

“Mr. Crane, you are beautiful.”

And the old man shook his head, stood with difficulty, and doddered out of the temple and walked away slowly among the graves.

“You tell them the truth,” said the alien to no one in particular (to future generations of himself who would need the memory of the words having been spoken), “and it only makes it worse.”

* * *

It was only seven months later, and the weather was no longer spring, but now blustered with the icy wind of late autumn. The trees in the cemetery were no longer colorful; they were stripped of all but the last few brown leaves. And into the cemetery walked Willard Crane again, his arms half enclosed by the metal crutches that gave him, in his old age, four points of balance instead of the precarious two that had served him for more than ninety years. A few snowflakes were drifting lazily down, except when the wind snatched them and spun them in crazy dances that had neither rhythm nor direction.

Willard laboriously climbed the steps of the temple.

Inside, an alien was waiting.

“I’m Willard Crane,” the old man said.

“And I’m an alien. You spoke to me—or my parent, however you wish to phrase it—several months ago.”

“Yes.”

“We knew you’d come back.”

“Did you? I vowed I never would.”

“But we know you. You are well known to us all, Mr. Crane. There are billions of gods on Earth for us to worship, but you are the noblest of them all.”

“I am?”

“Because only you have thought to do us the kindest gift. Only you are willing to let us watch your death.”

And a tear leaped from the old man's eye as he blinked heavily.

"Is that why I came?"

"Isn't it?"

"I thought I came to damn your souls to hell, that's why I came, you bastards, coming to taunt me in the final hours of my life."

"You came to us."

"I wanted to show you how ugly death is."

"Please. Do."

And, seemingly eager to oblige them, Willard's heart stopped and he, in brief agony, slumped to the floor in the temple.

The aliens all slithered in, all gathered around closely, watching him rattle for breath.

"I will not die!" he savagely whispered, each breath an agony, his face fierce with the heroism of struggle.

And then his body shuddered and he was still.

The aliens knelt there for hours in silent worship as the body became cold. And then, at last, because they had learned this from their gods—that words must be said to be remembered—one of them spoke:

"Beautiful," he said tenderly. "Oh Lord my God," he said worshipfully.

And they were gnawed within by the grief of knowing that this greatest gift of all gifts was forever out of their reach.

SAVING GRACE

*And he looked into her eyes, and lo!
when her gaze fell upon him
he did verily turn to stone,
for her visage was wondrous ugly.
Praise the Lord.*

MOTHER CAME HOME depressed as hell with a bag full of groceries and a headache fit to make her hair turn to snakes. Billy, he knew when Mommy was like that, he could tell as soon as she grumped through the living room. But if she was full of hellfire, he had the light of heaven, and so he said, "Don't be sad, Mother, Jesus loves you."

Mother put the margarine into the fridge and wiped the graham cracker crumbs off the table and dumped them in the sink even though the disposal hadn't worked for years. "Billy," she said quietly, "you been saved again?"

"I only was just going to look inside."

"Ought to sue those bastards. Burn down their tent or something. Why can't they do their show from a studio like everybody else?"

"I felt my sins just weighing me down and then he reached out and Jesus come into my heart and I had to be baptized."

At the word *baptized*, Mommy slammed the kitchen counter. The mixing bowl bounced. "Not again, you damn near got pneumonia the last time!"

"This time I dried my hair."

"It isn't sanitary!"

"I was the first one in. Everybody was crying."

"Well, you just listen! I tell you not to go there, and I mean it! You look at me when I'm talking to you, young man."

Her irresistible fingers lifted up his chin. Billy felt like he was living in a Bible story. He could almost hear Bucky Fay himself telling the tale: And he looked into her eyes, and lo! when her gaze fell upon him he did verily turn to stone, and he could not move though he sorely feared that he might wet his pants, for her visage was wondrous ugly. Praise the Lord.

"Now you promise me you won't go into that tent anymore, ever, because you got no resistance at all, you just come straight home, you hear me?"

He could not move until at last she despaired and looked away, and then he found his voice and said, "What *else* am I supposed to do after school?"

Today was different from all the other times they had this argument: this time his mother leaned on the counter and sobbed into the waffle mix. Billy came and put his arm around her and leaned his head on her hip. She turned and held him close and said, "If that son-of-a-bitch hadn't left me you might've had some brothers and sisters