

GREEN GLASS

by Gene Wolfe

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“It’s hard for me to believe that Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine has turned thirty. I recall early issues when Isaac himself peeped out of the “O” in Asimov’s, issues to which he was a regular contributor. Heavenly days, I recall Isaac, gracious, funny, and smart. There was never a quicker man with a quip, nor a man more concerned to see that his quips gave no one serious pain. He was a man I knew and counted as a friend, and a man I would have liked to know much better. “His magazine is the same way. I’ve read it since the first issue. I’ve sold it stories, beginning I believe with “The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus” in January of 1979. I’ve chatted with George Scithers, Gardner Dozois, and Sheila Williams whenever I got the opportunity. It is one of the few magazines I’ll always subscribe to. But I don’t know it from the inside, and I’m hoping Sheila will tell us a little about that now.—Gene Wolfe

This celebrated author’s most recent books include the two-volume fantasy Wizard Knight series, which consists of *The Wizard and The Knight, and Soldier of Sidon*, which was published by Tor Books late last year. In his newest story, Gene upends reality to take a disquieting look at life under...

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The passage, so narrow his shoulder rubbed its slick walls, ended abruptly at a wide space in which a naked woman sat cross-legged, her eyes closed, as though meditating. He thought of speaking, then of coughing. They seemed to him equally impolite. Silently, he seated himself instead and studied her.

She was young, hardly more than a girl. Brown hair—long, soft, and nearly straight—veiled her shoulders. Her face was lovely without being conventionally pretty, a face (he thought) as pure and clean as spring water. If she was not real...

He admitted the possibility. It was possible, in fact very probable, that she was not. If she was not, he hoped to go insane. To believe her, a soulless phantom conjured from his own fevered imagination, wholly real and as human as he.

Anything else, any smallest shred of doubt, would be unbearable.

She was sitting in the middle of an open area. He propped his back against a featureless green wall and sat facing her. There was no time. No day and no night. His mind wandered, and for the most part wandered among nothing, nowhere.

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At last she looked up and smiled. “Hello? Are you real?”

He grinned, “I think so. What are they going to do with us?”

“Watch us together, maybe. If you’re real. Can you get us out of here?”

“I can’t even get myself out. What about you?”

“No. I—I meet people here. People who aren’t real. Some of them are people I know. Knew.”

He nodded. “Same here.”

“I ask them to get me out. They say they will, or that they’ll try. Only I never do. What’s your name?”

“Joey. I was named for a baby kangaroo.”

She giggled. “I like that. Last name?”

“De Mio. Now you’ll think I’m a Mafioso. My dad’s in the ice-cream business, a wholesaler. Does that help?”

“It didn’t need any help. I’m Josephine Bates, and I’ve been trying to place your accent. St. Louis?”

He shook his head. “Chicago.”

“In the ice-cream business.”

“Right. Where are you from, Ms. Bates?”

“San Diego. You can call me Josephine, Joey. You said you meet people in here like I do.”

He nodded.

“People you know?”

“Sometimes. Some were characters from TV. Or movies I’d seen. Harry Potter. Bugs Bunny.”

“Are we crazy?”

“How should I know?” He rubbed his chin. “There’s a way to test it, Josephine. We meet some together and compare notes afterward. If we saw the same thing—”

“I’ve got it. How’d you get here, Joey?”

“You wouldn’t believe it.” He shook his head. “Heck, I don’t believe it, and I was there. It happened to me, but I still don’t believe it.”

“Will you believe me?”

“Sure.” He grinned. “Anything.”

“Then I’d believe you, right?”

He shook his head. “Wrong. I’m a good judge of character. That’s how I know you’re a good judge of character too, see? I know you can be trusted. You’ll know I can’t.”

“You’re sneaky?”

“Close enough. How’d they get you?”

“I was driving down two-oh-one, somewhere between Moose River and Madison. I must have taken a wrong turn. I don’t know where or how, but I sort of woke up and realized I wasn’t on the highway anymore. I was on a country road or something like that, and it had just gotten narrower. I went down into a long, dark valley with a lot of big trees...”

He said, “If this still scares you, you don’t have to tell me.”

“I was just trying to remember. No lights except my headlights. The trees shutting out the moon and the stars. Up ahead, some kind of animal, big and dark. Its eyes looked yellow in my headlights. I slammed on the brakes, and it was gone. Just gone, like it had never been there at all. I went forward again, slower, out of the valley and up onto a hilltop. There was moonlight all around, as if I were inside the moon with light coming at me from all directions. I thought to myself, *if I had a soul, I’d stop right here and enjoy this.*

“As soon as I did, as soon as I had thought that, my headlights went out and my engine quit. I kept on rolling, slower and slower. Rolling up to the very top of the hill. Finally my car stopped and I got out. I guess I was going to open the hood or something.”

“Did you?”

She shook her head. “When I stepped out, my foot wouldn’t stick. Know what I mean? It wouldn’t stay down and I went up, slowly, sort of trying to grab the ground with my feet but never getting hold of it. There was a big round thing right above me, like an umbrella but a whole lot bigger. A hole opened and I floated up into it. I couldn’t help myself, and here I am. Now what about you?”

“Later, maybe.” He stood. “I’m a pretty good liar, but I hate it when people think I’m lying and I’m really telling them the truth. Let’s go into these tunnels or whatever they are.”

“Passageways. I’ve been in them, and there’s nothing in there.”

“I was in there.” He touched his chest.

“Really?”

“Sure. I came out of there, and you were sitting there so pretty, and I sat

down to look at you.”

She smiled. “Want to give me a hand up?”

“Happy to.” He did, finding her hand small but stronger than he expected.

“Which one did you come out of, Joey?”

“I...” The room in which she had sat was ringed by the mouths of passages, all green and twilit, each promising neither more nor less than nothing. “That one, I think. Or else that one next to it.”

“I don’t think we ought to split up.”

“Neither do I. It’s just the other way, if you ask me. We’ve got to stay together, no matter what happens.”

“Want to pick?”

He shook his head. “You do it, Josephine.”

“All right, this one. You go first.”

The floor was smooth without being slick. We could dance in here, he thought. Hip hop, or whatever she wants to do. Ballroom even, if that’s what she would like. Only there’s no music.

A voice behind him said, “Hello, you two.”

He turned, looking over Josephine’s shoulder.

“Fields is my name.” The speaker wore an old-fashioned tuxedo. “Shep Fields and His Rippling Rhythm. Ever hear us? We used to be big.”

“We don’t need a band,” Josephine said. “We need to get out of here—to get off this flying saucer or whatever it is and get back home.”

From somewhere behind Shep Fields, a swing band struck up “Vaya Con Dios.”

“Let’s go!” With an emphatic gesture, Josephine urged Joey forward. “He can’t help us. Or he won’t.”

Shep did not follow them, but his music did. “It will be over soon,” Josephine said.

Joey nodded, wanting to hum under his breath. “Who was that? Was he someone you used to know?”

“You didn’t recognize him?”

Joey shook his head.

“One of mine then. Did he tell you who he was? He told me. Do you remember the name?”

“Shep Fields?” Momentarily, Joey stopped to search his memory. “He said something about rippling rhythm.”

“That’s good. We heard the same thing. How was he dressed?”

“Old fashioned. Formal. A—a tux. Is that what they called them? Only the coat was white.”

“Right. A dinner jacket. So we saw the same thing, too. I took a class in college, American Musical History. There was a tape with interviews of some old-time band leaders, and one of them was Shep Fields. He was dressed like that. They pulled him out of my mind.”

“Who’s they?”

“Whoever’s running this saucer. Move!”

Joey walked again, faster. “Will we meet more like that?”

“Not unless we walk. Or I don’t think so.”

“Vaya Con Dios” sighed away to silence; but the band was there and playing for a long while afterward, something about stars getting in people’s eyes and a moon that broke a heart.

The doctor appeared around a bend in the twisting tunnel just as the music ended, a dark, lean man with profile that might have been hacked from wood with a chain saw. “Dr. Leonard!” Josephine looked radiant. “How did you get here?”

“Kidnapped. I imagine the same thing happened to you. Do you want to get out? To go home?”

Josephine exclaimed, “Do we ever!” but Joey held his peace.

“Good. I’m going to need you, Miss Bates. I’m going to need that strapping young man with you even more. There are six of them on board. They’re not strong, but I doubt that I could handle all six by myself.”

“You’re going to take over the saucer?”

“We are. Or anyway, we’re going to try. They’ve let me see a little—more than they thought I was seeing, I expect. We’re still orbiting Earth, although we’re keeping behind the moon for the most part. As long as we are, I think I can get us back. Setting us down safely should be no problem. There’s a sophisticated system for preventing crashes. Let’s go.”

Joey asked, “How about weapons?”

“I’ve got some hidden. I’ll show you. Come on!”

Dr. Leonard strode away and turned into a side passage. When Joey and Josephine reached the corner, he was nowhere in sight.

She sighed. “I knew that one was too good to be true. He’s a doctor—the real one is, I mean. I guess I think doctors can fix just about everything.”

Joey nodded. “A lot of women are like that.”

“But they can’t, and they’ll tell you so themselves. There are diseases they can’t cure, and everybody dies sooner or later, no matter how many doctors work to keep them alive. Hug me, Joey.”

He did, and they kissed.

“That was good,” she said when they parted for the third time, “I needed to feel somebody real. They’re watching us. You know that?”

He shrugged.

“They’re bound to be. They’re watching us the way guys in the psych department used to watch the mice in their mazes. They saw us kiss.”

“I don’t care,” Joey said.

“Neither do I. All right, I do. Really I do. I don’t like being watched by people I can’t see. I’d like to get even with them someday, and maybe I will.”

Slowly, hand in hand, they walked along the passage. When they had gone a hundred steps or more, she said, “Why do they do it?”

“Study us? I don’t know.”

“Show us Dr. Leonard. Shep Fields. All the dream people.”

“You told me how they got you,” Joey said. “I didn’t tell you how they got me.”

“You said I wouldn’t believe it, and I didn’t want to pressure you.”

“Thanks. Now I am, probably. I guess I will. My mom and dad have an apartment in Chicago. I’ve got a job, but I still live with them. That probably sounds like I’m one of those kids who won’t grow up.”

“Only I know you’re not,” Josephine said. “Go on.”

“I’d like to have an apartment of my own, sure. Or maybe a place I’d share with somebody and we’d split the rent, but I pay five hundred a month to mom and dad for rent and food and they need the money. It’s a really nice apartment in a really nice building. My dad’s retired now, and they couldn’t afford to keep it if it

weren't for the money I kick in. None of this is what I started out to say."

"No hurry," she told him. "We're walking anyway, and we might as well talk to pass the time."

"Well, I ran into the super one day, and he wanted to know if I'd seen what they'd done to the roof. I said no, and he said there were all sorts of trees and flowers and stuff up there now, like a park for the tenants, and we could bring guests up if we wanted. So I went up and had a look around. It was maybe six o'clock, and the sunset was really, really pretty.

"The roof was, too. There were pots and planters. Little trees and flowers and so on. Ferns, too. I remember a lot of ferns. Maybe I didn't notice the flowers so much because they were closing. They close up at night just like stores, or some of them do. I read about that someplace."

Josephine nodded.

"Looking at that sunset with all that green around me reminded me of a big green-glass bottle I had when I was a kid. I'd put bugs and things in there so I could study them. That's what I thought I was doing, anyway. I'd take it along when we went to the park, and if I found an interesting bug or a big spider I'd put it in there. Back home, I'd watch it and pretend I was a scientist. My mother finally got tired of finding it with dead bugs in it and pitched it out."

"I don't think I like where this is going."

"Neither do I. Another thing I wanted to say is that I really did learn something from watching all the bugs in that green bottle. What I learned was that sometimes they thought they were seeing other bugs when they saw their own reflections in the glass. I think that's what's going on with us—we're seeing our own reflections, seeing things we've got in our brains. The aliens or whatever they are may not even know we're seeing them. But we are." He recalled Shep Fields' band and added, "We hear them, too. Maybe we'd even smell them, if we got close enough."

"I think so, too," Josephine said, "only I think they know about it. You knew about it when you watched your bugs, and you were just a little kid. They're a lot smarter than you. Smarter than you were then, I mean."

"Smarter than I am now."

"Smarter than both of us put together, probably. I still want to get out—to get back home. Did you ever turn your bugs loose, Joey?"

He could not remember, but he said he had and his mother had freed more.

"Then we've still got a chance. If ... It's another one."

The tall man striding toward them waved. "Captain Anno of the Past Police at

your service.” To the wave, he attached a jocular salute. “I know you think I’m just a character in a movie. You need me just the same, and I’m here to help you.”

“You mean you’re not?” Josephine sounded incredulous.

“No, ma’am. The film was a little piece of propaganda on our part. You’re entering a period of increased Zkogan activity, and our film was intended to get you accustomed to the concept and show you that we’re the good guys. Which we are. You want to be rescued, don’t you? If you don’t, I’ll split.”

“You bet we do,” Josephine said.

Joey nodded his agreement.

“Fine. I’m not allowed to bring you into your future, you understand—uptime into my own period. It’s against regulations.”

Joey nodded again. “It was in the movie.”

“Right. What I can do, if you want, is return you to a time moments after the Zkogan seized you. They’ll be gone by then. You may or may not remember all this. If you do, you may repress it.” Captain Anno raised his palms in a gesture of amused helplessness. “Ultimately, that’ll be up to you. I can’t control it. Do you want to go?”

“Yes,” Joey told him.

“Absolutely,” Josephine added, “but I want to ask one question first. Just one. May I?”

“We’ve plenty of time.” Captain Anno smiled. “Fire away.”

“Why are our names so much alike? I mean Joey’s and mine. My Aunt Virginia used to say coinkydink. Is that what this is? Just coinkydink?”

“No.” The captain’s face was serious now, and even a trifle hard. “The Zkogan are working their way through the alphabet. There was a time when they took half a dozen men named Ambrose, for example. We’d love to know why they operate in that fashion, but we don’t. We’re hoping that when they get down to Zeke and Zelda they’ll stop. But we’re afraid it’s going to be something much worse.”

Joey said, “You could just go there, couldn’t you? And see?”

“I’m afraid not. That time lies in my own future. You can fall to the floor, Joey. You can do that very easily. Let’s see you fall to the ceiling.”

Captain Anno turned toward Josephine. “Close your eyes, please. Close them and keep them closed. It’s very important. Crucial, in fact. When I say ‘go,’ you are to rap your heels together three times, understand? One, two, three. Neither less nor more. After the third such rap, but only then, you may open them. Is that

understood? If it's not, I can go over it again."

Josephine nodded.

He turned back to Joey. "You heard me, and the escape and evasion procedure will be the same for you. Try to time your heel raps to coincide with hers. The closer you come, the better off you'll be, both of you. Got it?"

"Got it," Joey said wearily. He had been trying to pretend he thought Captain Anno real; in a sudden epiphany, he understood that Josephine was doing the same.

"Good. Shut your eyes, both of you, and wait for my signal."

Joey did not quite close his, and through their slits watched Captain Anno fade away.

"He's gone," Josephine said, "and we're not. I'm just so tired."

"I understand."

"I want to sleep. I'm going to lie down right here. This place is as good as any place in this whole terrible place. You can lie down, too, if you want to."

He did not, but sat down at her head.

"Maybe I can dream about home," she whispered.

After a minute or two she added, "Maybe when I wake up, they'll have given us water, and something to eat."

Still later, when he thought she might be asleep, she said, "I know what you'd like to do and I'd like to do that, too, but not while they're watching. Tell me about your green bottle again. Tell me all that stuff, and finish it. Maybe it will help me sleep."

If she isn't real, Jody thought, she'll fade away when she sleeps.

Or when I do.

Stroking her hair, he watched her, finding her as warm and real as ever. "I'd had this green glass bottle when I was a kid. I guess it was an old wine bottle or something. I'd put bugs and spiders in there so I could watch them. I told you about all that.

"Then when I went up on the roof where the garden was, there was green all around. It wasn't quite dark, but I think I might have seen one or two stars if I'd looked for them. It was quiet and green everywhere. Very quiet, because there was nobody up there but me. Nobody at all, Josephine, just me all alone."

Her breathing seemed to him to have grown softer and more regular. Still stroking her, he continued.

“It was all green, because the flowers had closed. They’re candy stores for bees, really, but the bees had gone to bed and the flowers had closed their doors. The plants had gone to sleep, and the birds had gone home, if there had been any birds.

“I sat on one of the benches for a while, thinking about the trees and flowers and how all those things would still be there when our building had been torn down and nobody remembered it at all. After a while, I got up and sat on one of the swings. I had walked all over the roof, and knew I couldn’t get off it on any side. There was the street on the east and the alley on the west. There were other buildings north and south, but they were too far away for me to jump to. Too far, and a lot lower than ours anyway.

“It reminded me of that old green bottle my mother had thrown away a long time ago, and that reminded me that I had seen a green bottle up there on the roof while I was walking around. So I went looking for it and found it pretty easily. It was a soft drink bottle, some kind of lemon-lime drink. I don’t like those—I like Pepsi or Dr. Pepper. But someone else had liked them and had brought a cold bottle up to the roof to drink, and then had put the bottle in one of the planters instead of taking it back to his apartment.

“I took it back to the swing and sat down again and just sort of looked at it and thought about my old bottle. How had the bugs felt in there? I had watched them trying and trying to get out, but I had never thought at all about how they felt.

“Then I turned that bottle inside out, so that I was inside and the whole world was outside. And when I did that, just an hour or so ago, here I was. Maybe we’d be home if I could turn it the right way again.”

His hand still stroked, but it seemed to him that it stroked nothing, that the silky smoothness of her soft brown hair had slowly drained away as he spoke. He looked down. His fingers were fading even as they moved, their tips vanished already, the rest translucent, unsure, and unreal.

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