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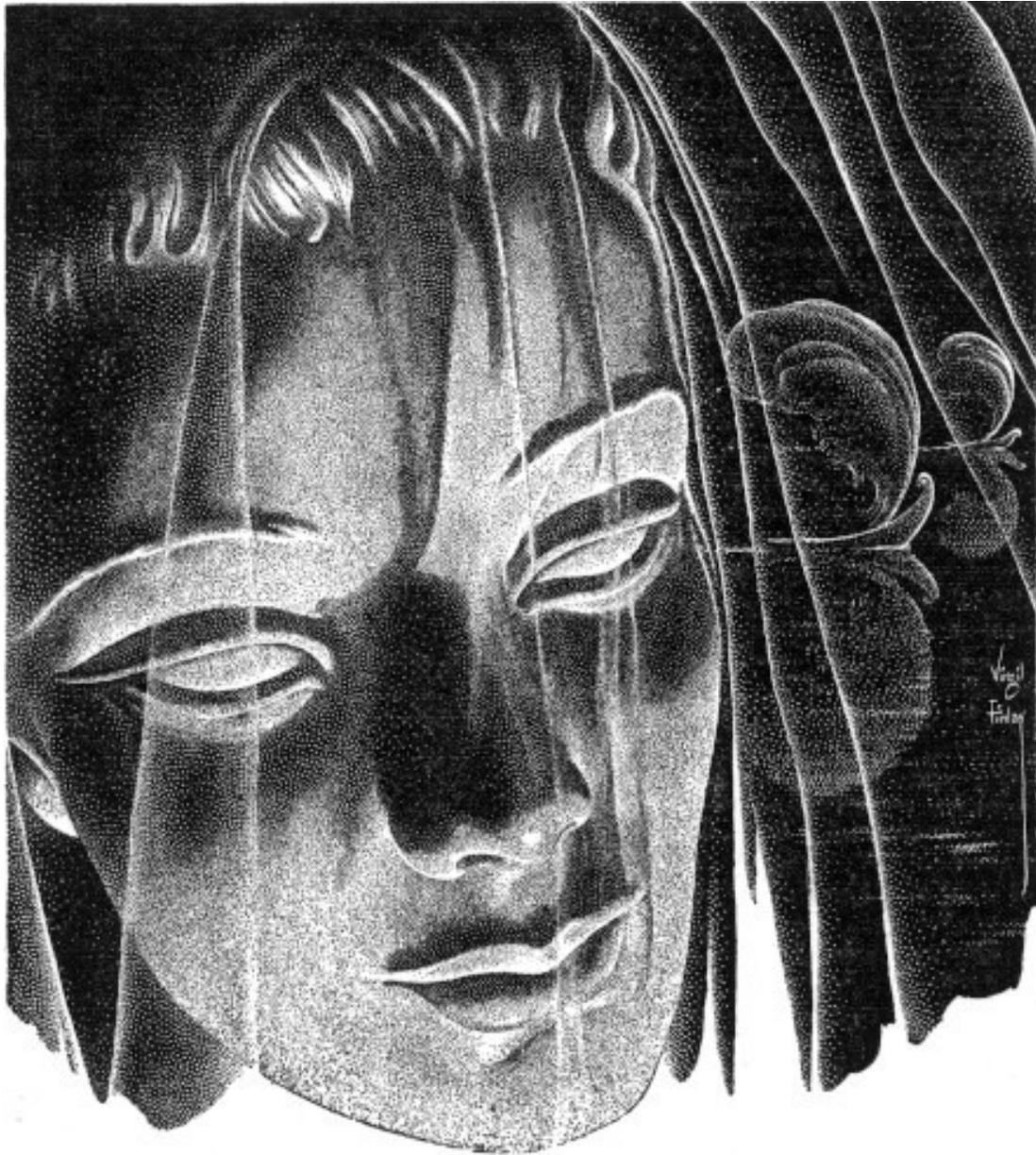
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SIBLING

By Leslie Waltham

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Andro, First Liaison Officer of the Third Planet, floated homeward with his wife's "present" beside him. His boat, pulled by an underwater sunburst of luminous fish, befitted a man of importance, a man of prestige and position. He glided past the milk-glass city where the old ones rocked and crooned before memory pools, where sticky huddles of children listened to the lyre-flowers, and where the glances of silver-eyed men and women examined,

and met—and held fast. He drifted to his home on the ledge of a mountain, where he was met by his wife with her plain, good face. And she looked at the "present," who stood behind him, and shivered....

Mya, the Earth One, rose as her companion prepared to go. She glanced at the valley below. Fingers of twilight inquired into its sands for the first, soft dying of day.

"It's simply too glorious, isn't it?" Her guest's voice clawed at irritation.

"I suppose so," she shrugged. The sleepy perfumes of the lagoon offered her its feather boats—curling, amber-crustled reminders of lost autumn leaves at home. The mountain, ripped from a vortex of sky, was kindling its transparent crags with an inner glow. Like cracked ice in a cool glass, she thought, and her fingertips reached for the forgotten chill.

Why did she hate it so? This washed, blue world that had mothered Maun, and perhaps others made of the same substance?

"Goodness, my dear! How can you look at that marvelous scenery and be so luke-warmish?"

"I don't know." Her face turned skyward. "It's up there I think. We've been here six Earth-months and haven't had one glimpse of the sun." The churning clouds sucked upon themselves in answer.

"And you never will," her comrade chirped. "That's Venus for you. But you knew that, darling, when you came."

"Only the words. The words, I knew. But the feeling waits for you outside the words."

The other woman laughed, plucking daintily for her wrap. "You *are* in a fret today, Mya."

"Those clouds must go from here to the day after eternity. I sometimes wonder if the sun is still out there."

"Well really, dear girl! To hear you talk, a person would think this was a very trying place, instead of a perfectly exquisite planet. In spite of a ten-

day rotation period—"

"That too," sighed Mya. "That too. I remember when I was a little girl and my nurse made me nap in the daytime. I thought she was always there, watching me from some place I didn't know about. I feel that way during the sleep periods here."

Somewhere a wind-clock breathed its warning of the time.

"Gracious!" the guest started. "I didn't realize how long I've been here."

"Yes."

"And your poor baby! I'd forgotten about Dikki! He must be ravenous."

"I'll feed him right away."

"How is the little angel?"

"Eats like a horse, sleeps like a rock."

"How healthy of him!" She fluttered again over her misplaced wrap. "Which is more than I can say for you, pet. Has Andro been taking care of you?"

"Just marvelous care."

"Dear Andro."

Mya would not look at her. "Yes, dear Andro."

"Well, I must be toddling. Now where *did* I put my stole?"

As she spoke, the portal mists billowed and shifted to produce a striking creature. A perfect, silver replica of Mya. Flowing in cords of reflected light to her mistress, the creature bowed.

"I do your command, Oh, Earth One."

The breathing at Mya's side caught in amazement. "What in Heaven's name —?" Her question was chopped short by Mya's hand.

As a mist rising, so the servant delivered the misplaced stole into astonished hands, and, sprinkling a few drops of dissolving liquid over the half-eaten wine-fruit, disappeared across the hazy threshold.

"Well! *Who* was that?"

"That was Maun." Mya's eyes sought a point beyond her companion's head, a distance she seemed to prefer.

"But—*what* was that?"

"That was—" She had difficulty in focusing on it. "That was only God knows what. She was sent to me by the Elders-of-Venus as a mark of respect for Andro."

"But how did she know I couldn't find...?"

"I told her."

"But you haven't been near the house."

"My mind. I told her with my mind."

Eyebrows lifted ecstatically. "Is she telepathic?"

"I suppose you'd call it that. I think of something—sometimes I do no more than graze the thought, and like a genie from some dead lamp, Maun does it."

"The minute you think of it?"

"If I don't specify any particular time. But she has a delaying mechanism, and I can think it for tomorrow or next week or next year. It doesn't matter."

"But how cunning!"

"You think so?" It didn't sound like a question.

"Of course, darling."

Suddenly, Mya stood fist high in anger. "Well, it isn't!" she cried. "What do you think it's like having everything taken away from you? *You* try running like a fool every time you think of something you'd like to do."

"Mya, you shouldn't talk that way!"

"Sorry." Her smile twisted the silence. "But there are some things I'd like to do for myself. I might even like to take care of my own son."

"How perfectly amazing!" The woman was aghast. "Here you have this lamb of a servant—"

"Who has me completely trapped. Just thinking of anything sets her off. I don't have anything left to do."

"Well, counteract the order, my sweet. That's easy enough. Tell her you've changed your mind."

"I can't! That's just it! She's a positive mechanism and can't be reversed."

The visitor's face convulsed in concern. "Mya, I said you didn't look well. You've just been overdoing, that's all, and...."

"I've just been—" Mya had to be rid of this garrulous woman immediately.

Grasping one fat elbow, she steered expertly. Past the chiding of the shrubbery. "Just a perfect treasure...." Through the soughing of sands. "Imagine a servant as divine as that...." Into a waiting boat.

The tiny bark bestrode the wind. Her visitor's words washed over Mya, blue-scented and faint.

"I only wish *I* had her...."

"I only wish you did too," she said to no one in particular.

Thoughts of Dikki carried her back into the house. Dikki. Her tiny, scrubbed morsel! Her beloved, pink tyrant. Maybe Maun wouldn't be there. Only she would be, of course.

Mya's son strode imperially across his crib, knee deep in a magnificent flutter of chewed paper bits. His greeting to her shone.

"Mum-mum-mum-my. Mummum."

She went to him and untangled his legs. Warm arms opened and closed.

"My sweet punkins." One ear invited nibbling. "You had to wait so long. Mommie's going to feed her baby right away."

"Nun-nuh." The pink sills of his lips formed words with great effort. "Mauny feeded me. I fru."

Mya swung sharp on her resentment, body tightened.

"Maun! I didn't tell you to feed him. *I wanted* to do it. I even thought about...." She waited, remembering, as the silver beauty bowed.

"I obeyed your command, Oh, Earth One."

They regarded one another across a dark silence. Then Mya's body slackened. "Thank you," she said as she went into her sleeping chamber.

And she sat for a long time staring into her empty hands.

Andro showed no concern.

"I can't understand your attitude, Mya."

He had eaten his dinner quietly, staring down into the foams of the cooking pit, sitting brittle and stiff, as befitted a man of importance, a man of prestige and position. And Mya had waited for the moment when his hand would move toward her body.

"Answer me."

"I don't know what it is, Andro. It's just a feeling I have about her."

"Please explain yourself."

"I don't want her here. I was happier before she came."

He withdrew his hand. "Oh, happy, happy ... who can say what makes happiness and what doesn't? Most women would be delighted that their husbands had been so honored, but you—?"

"I *am* delighted," she insisted. "Please understand."

"What is there to understand?"

"That I'm also afraid."

"Of Maun?" He was surprised.

"Of Maun ... or myself ... or my thoughts.... It's all the same thing."

"What nonsense is this, now?"

She peered through labyrinths of words for just the right ones. "I'm human, Andro. I can't control all my thoughts. My actions, yes. But thoughts come even when I don't call them. They can't be wrapped in tissue paper and tucked into a drawer."

"Oh?"

"Don't you see? Ask any psychiatrist. There is a stimulus, a reaction, an emotion, a thought. I can't do a thing about it."

"I fail to see what bearing this has."

"It has a lot. Things happen." She looked at the distant bubble-dwellings. In them were the silver-eyed families.

"What sort of things?"

"Well, just a while back, when the Superior was here...." After the words were there, out in the open, for him to stiffen against, she realized her error.

"The Superior was here?" He was immediately alerted. "When? You didn't mention it."

"Three sleep periods ago."

"And?" Eyeslits watched her carefully.

She opened her hands toward him. "I was hot and tired, and I happened to think I would like it if he left."

"And Maun forced him...?"

She nodded.

His face collapsed and reassembled into something blackened and hard.

"Please don't get angry, Andro. Please don't!"

"How can you expect otherwise?" he shouted. "Stupid, silly woman that you are! You dare to jeopardize my position with your petty whims of who-

stays-and-for-how-long!"

His fury clouded the room. "Only you could do it! Only Mya, wife of Andro!"

"But I've got to have some rest," she pleaded. "I've got to be able to think freely once in a while."

"Think freely, she says!" He stopped before her and fairly screamed into her face. "Doesn't Maun draw her energy from the sun? Doesn't she fall into a comatose sleep as soon as we go night-side? Isn't she almost dead just before daybreak? Can't you save your sniveling, puny pranks until then?"

"Please, Andro, please! You don't know what that means!"

"You'll tell me!" His face could not help itself.

"To think, to feel only in the night! Must I save everything—my loves, my fears, my angers—until just before daybreak?"

"Stop it!" he shrieked.

"Don't take my whole life and push it together and squeeze it into just the little time before the sun rises! Don't shove me into the dark like a sightless mole!"

Seizing her by the wrists, he drew her to her feet. With her arms bound, white and aching, to his chest, he spoke into her face. Slowly. Softly. To a not-quite-bright child.

"This ends here, Mya. I am the representative of the Third Planet. The people of Venus have seen fit to single me out and make a present to my wife. My wife will not affront them! She will not discredit me by returning this gift. She will, instead, adapt herself. It is a simple thing." The house waited.

"Do you understand?"

They stared bitterly at one another.

"Do you understand?"

"I understand." Her voice was hollow.

He released her, and she sank back, her head bent over the numbed husks of her fingers. Andro stood watching the nape of her neck. He reached down abruptly and stroked a twist of hair.

"Mya," he said softly, caressing her, "you will do as I ask."

"I will do as you ask."

The Great Liaison Officer breathed deeply. "Well now—that's better." His fingers probed the hollows of her throat.

"Andro?" She slowed him.

"Yes?"

"Do you imagine they know us this well?"

"Who?"

"The Elders. Do you imagine they knew we can hurt ourselves, maybe destroy ourselves, through a—a creature like her?"

He turned, his mind on other things, and undid his tunic.

"Mya, I am going to bed. You will follow."

"Right away." She crossed the room and picked up a globe from his work table, the miniature of a blue-green planet with wide seas and open plains. She held the full, wet summers, the clean, needle cities carefully in her hands.

As he reached the portal, Andro paused before its flow and surge.

"Oh, by the way, there is a dead bird on the wharf. I wish you'd have Maun bury it."

The globe dropped in glistening fragments at her feet. She was seeing a bird. A little, singing, gold-plated bird, whose shrill happiness had magnified the depths of her despair. And hating its happiness, she had thought she could kill it.

Mya knew the color of the bird that Maun would bury in the morning.

They sat, the three of them, saying no word, giving no sign. Like actors, Mya thought. Like actors, not acting. Just stopped—waiting on a dead stage for their cues. And when the line was said, when the words she was waiting for had been uttered, would she know what to do?

She was uneasy. Maun tended the water bushes, sharp against the sullen threat of clouds.

Dikki, boy botanist, balanced himself on his round bottom, and explored the wonders of a light-flower. One finger probed into its blue-grey flesh. The flower released a stream of scent.

"Nuh!" he said, and backed up precipitously. It had spit. Right at him. He teetered to his feet and retreated, riding his fat legs with confidence. They propelled him unsteadily, like reluctant pistons, toward the wharf.

Mya watched his progress with a tired half smile.

Then it wasn't even a half smile.

"Dikki!" she cried, "come back." Her body tensed to watch his flight. "*Dikki!*" The gap between boy and ledge grew smaller and smaller.

Suddenly, she was on her feet and running hard. "Come back!" she called to him. "Watch out, Dikki, watch out!"

She grabbed him a whisper from the edge, and they slid, rolling on one another to the brink. She looked into the sweet-smelling death of the lagoon. Frightened eyes, flung hard on its waters, looked back.

"Oh, Dikki!" she moaned. "*Oh Dikki, oh, Dikki, oh Dikki!*"

He moved in to her, pinpointed between laughter and tears. When she squeezed him, it tickled, and his face went kinky with smiles.

"Why you little imp!" She pulled him to safer sands. "What is the matter with you, running like that?" Quick, slight slaps dusting his bunting. "You can hurt yourself that way. Don't ever *do* that again."

Head thrown back, he offered her his delight.

"You naughty boy! Don't you grin at me that way. I ought to shake you till your head wobbles."

He ran in puppy circles, dragging at her fingers, bubbling to himself.

And then, from nowhere, Maun appeared in a shower of sparks. She went directly to the boy and knelt before him. She laid gentle hold of his shoulders. The palms turned inward—gently, easily—seeking the line of his throat. Long fingers laced together to form a band.

And she shook him. Great jerks set his head wobbling. Jolts ripped against the position of his body. He contorted into jagged spasms of limb and sound. An arm, a cry, his eyes ... Mya could no longer put him together.

She flung herself upon Maun with animal ferocity. Her fists struck out blindly from a time when love and violence had to be the same. She struck and struck again. She bit, but her teeth found no yielding in the flesh. She scratched, but her nails slid unnoticed from the metal. Her cries might have been the buzz of an insect.

The silver sheen became red—wet red. It came from Mya.

In final panic, she clutched her mangled hands together, half prayer, half weapon. As if she held a scythe, she cut back and forth across Maun's body, to and fro. Across the head and back ... the face, and back ... the shoulders, and back.... Furious, measured, desperate, useless, useless....

And as to each thing there is a season, so Maun released the boy in her own time. She stood motionless. Down the measure of hated body, Mya wasted herself, till at last there was nothing left to do. But to sob and beat a little upon the earth.

The statue stood stolidly above her.

"I obeyed your command, Oh, Earth One," she said, while the summer noises sang.

Pacing the late afternoon, Mya fled from fear. Thoughts touched her mind in spinning flight. Think, think, she told herself. She tried to reason, but the look of Dikki's face, the sound of his cry, hooded her effort. It would do no good. No good at all this way.

She ran to her dressing nook. Dikki slept soundly, safely, with his treasures stuffed under his stomach.

Something had to be done. But what, what, what? It was a wall. Andro would not be back—and even if he were...? *No!* There was no one to turn to.

A face in the reflection bowl stopped her. "Look at me!" she thought. "I can't keep my mind together any longer." It was falling off bit by bit, and Maun was gathering all the pieces.

She bent to meet the reflection. Her eyes were large and hulled. "What must I do?" she asked the eyes.

The lips mimicked her own. The image seemed to silver. Another face, exactly like her own, looked back at her. She turned quickly, as if starting to run, but the room gave her no place to run to.

What if she should do it again? What if she should someday become angry enough to loose Maun, and—Her mind recoiled. It had to stop, end. She had to be rid of Maun somehow.

"I'll destroy her," she thought.

She had moved to Dikki's crib before the lightening speared out and held her. Her face blanched.

"I've done it! Dear God in Heaven! I've sent out a murder wave."

She groped her way to the bed and sank down, her head in her hands. Behind closed lids, she waited. Time waited with her. There was nothing more. Just emptiness and space.

Then the wind-clock stirred and exhaled. "It's almost night," she thought.

What did it matter? Day or night?

No, stop! She raised her head and looked at something far off. "Almost night!" she said aloud.

Thoughts began to arrange themselves in a pattern she could almost see.

Think. Try. Slowly now.

Maun's energy was lessening already. As the sun went down, she would become weaker. Within one more rest period, she would be dormant. From then on, her sleep deepened with each passing hour. By daybreak she would be almost dead. It wasn't so hard now. The pieces were fitting together.

If the command could be timed for next week, or next month, why not for just before daybreak? When Maun, in her stupor, would be completely unable to carry it out? And when Mya would be free to do what she had to do?

She almost cried out. That was it. That was it. So simple, and yet so perfect. She couldn't understand why she hadn't thought of it before.

Mya shut her eyes against the world, and made the thought loud and clear. She gave it to Maun along the pathways of their minds. "I shall destroy her just before the sun rises."

She pushed it, thrust it, drove it down dark corridors to the brain that waited to receive it. "I shall destroy her *just before the sun rises*."

And turning on her face, she gave up to exhaustion.

She swam upward through a sea of sleep. Abruptly, thoughts split the surface of her mind, and she sat upright.

She looked around the room. Something was missing. Something had been forgotten, but there was no shape to the feeling of loss that plagued her.

The curtains danced in the breeze. The room breathed quietly. It looked secure and whole. She listened for the breathing of Dikki's slumber. Glancing toward the nook, she could see the line of his cheek. His sleep was flushed and happy.

But something was lost. Something was wrong. A check of the room revealed nothing. She moved about, touching small objects, feeling their safeness.

It was then she heard the footsteps, and she turned to meet them. The portal mists waxed silver as Maun stood before her. Mya looked from the other's face to the container of dissolving fluid that she held in her hand. "I shall obey your command, Oh, Earth One."

There was a moment of vertigo—the instant of sway just before a giant tree falls. During that instant, Mya thought a thousand thoughts, searched

through a thousand cubbyholes toward uttered phrases.

Where was the mistake? Where?

This was impossible. Maun couldn't be doing this. The room was still light ... the sun hadn't set....

"*The sun!*" she said, and the lost was found.

Maun had never seen the sun! No one on this planet had ever seen it. Maun didn't even know what it was!

Somewhere a sound started, low and bubbling....

The only "sun" she knew was not the one that gave her her life. It was the boy asleep in the next room. Her own son, Mya's son! The sound grew big and round and fat....

So change the words, and say the sentence, as Maun must say it, to see what it looked like now. "I shall destroy *her* just before the son rises...."

And the sound stretched high, high, high, to the sky....

Mya leaned in on it, and tasted it, and knew it to be her own laughter.

Pretty soon the laughter stopped.

But the curtains kept right on dancing....

Andro, First Liaison Officer of the Third Planet, floated back to the city with his wife's "present" beside him. His boat, pulled by an underwater sunburst of luminous fish, befitted a man of importance, a man of prestige and position. He glided to the milk-glass city where the sleep cocoons filled and closed in on themselves, where the taper trees flared, where the old dreamed of being younger, and the young dreamed of being older. He drifted to a castle, on a ridge, on a hill, where he was met by the elders with their shuttered faces. And they looked at the "present," who swayed weakly behind him, and smiled.

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