

Claire roamed the regenerating swamp, getting to know their alien visitors from behind bushes and at a distance with her bird-watching binoculars.

When the monsters were away from home, Claire studied the mudholes that the aliens produced and nurtured. She sat on the side of one or two and rubbed mud over her face and hands. She filled a few test tubes to see if the good effect lasted away from the primary mass. She was running out of wrinkles to test the stuff on.

Today Nalbo, after he left Ne-ne in the care of the Great Hand, scouted until he found Claire. She'd brought a groundsheet and sat in the lee of a couple of shrubby trees fronted by a trio of tall grass tussocks. Pampas Grass, he noted. Soft grass heads set among a mound of long narrow leaves. In front of the barrier a vacant mudbath steamed and cooked.

Summer had turned into a wintry autumn. Summer birds had flown north. A coldish breeze nibbled at his ears. Some winters the low-lying ponds here and there froze over and grass crackled under Nalbo's feet when he walked his boundaries. "Have to get our parkas out of storage soon," he said.

Such a sharp scent billowed from the bath and in among the vegetation, that Clare pulled her jacket collar over her nose. Nalbo tied his bandanna bandit-wise over his face. "You don't even know how close you are to the Huddle sometimes," he said. "If I got as close to them as you do, they'd surely eat me."

"I thought you're special to them," Claire said. "You're calling them what?"

"Huddle. It's what they are. *A* huddle or *the* huddle. Plus it can be their conglomerate name until we know better. I'm special to Ne-ne, which is what she calls herself, but she's a young child to them—as well as to me—but they have a different name for her. A different sound, anyway. Maybe it's just a word for what she is. A kid. Or a baby. Or a little girl."

"Go on," Claire said. "What else have you discovered?"

"The weird mannikins plus enlarged body-parts—arms, legs, ribcage—I don't blame them for the depredations. Because they're not in charge. I managed to find out that but not who *is* in charge. Telling them to build these baths and maraud through the countryside. I think I've said before that all the people missing from Hillet and surrounds are male? I'm no closer to discovering why."

"Someone is choosing that," Claire said. "What if normally they'd just eat everybody? Because if you look at ancient legends and myths, there's all kinds of communities going missing but rarely all the men, or all the women and children."

"A reason is just us wanting to know for science's sake," Nalbo said. "Why don't they all just go? Think of their women and kids?"

The worst thing then was such a scream as silenced the birds.

"Another poor bastard gone," Nalbo said. "When will the humans learn that the monsters are smarter than them? He'd have gone looking for those damned fanciful meteorites thinking the monsters might be up the valley."

"They *are* up the valley," Claire said. "I watched them go this morning and they're not back

yet.”

“I left Ne-ne just now when the Great Hand came for her. Ne-ne invited me to go with them to see her mudbath but the Great Hand growled me away,” Nalbo said

“And if the Great Hand is at home some of the others will be too is what you’re saying?” Claire said.

Nalbo rose with cracking joints. “Let’s go think it through in the shed. I never feel particularly safe out here.”

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Claire wrote everything that Nalbo thought aloud. “Ne-ne is surely not of Homo sapien stock. She has lived a long time in her five-year-old-body. The silvery mud is the secret. It’s what they all bathe in to come out looking renewed. And we, Claire and I, must continue with the witnessing as we have begun, however long beyond our natural span.”

Nalbo studied Claire, then turned back to staring at the wall that helped him to think aloud. “My wife Claire has made a fine start on lengthening her natural span. I suspect she bathes in the mud.”

Claire interrupted his train of thought. “A couple of days ago I had the scene to myself.” She went into story-telling mode to soften the news that she’d gone against everything they believed together. “We’re hardly ever really warm these days. I should’ve waited for warmth for summer, I know that now. Once I’d made sure the mud was unoccupied, I stepped from the bushes. Sat down at the edge of the bath. Vaguely I thought that if I stayed dressed I could argue I’d fallen in accidentally.”

“I knew it!” It burst out of him. “Tell me everything!” he snapped. Then, “Sorry.” He apologized and dictated the next sentence. “Who would blame her, the days are cold now.” *But I do blame her!*

Claire nodded at him as if she knew his thinking. And well she might. They’d had forty-five years together.

“Mud is a misnomer,” she said. “You’re right, the days are cold now. I let my jean-clad legs down into the blessed warmth. The stuff was more a slurry in consistency than cloying mud. In a few seconds it crept through the cloth’s weave and touched my skin. It felt like dozens of smooth little fingertips stippling over me, leaving their conquered territory feeling exquisitely sensitive.”

Nalbo frowned signalling that didn’t want to hear more but she continued.

“I slid from the side and stood, waist deep, mysteriously wanting the silver slurry’s warm benison everywhere. It crept up, between my clothes and my skin. My analytical thinking was on hold, I must suspect, because I didn’t wonder at the upward creep or the stippling.”

Had he always ignored stuff told in her sing-song story-telling voice? Putting himself on the spot that way, he had to answer in the affirmative. It usually was Matt and his friends and little Marina that Claire’s stories were aimed at. Whenever he heard the tone in Claire’s voice that meant a story was coming Nalbo took a break from the consensual reality surrounding

him. He then let his thoughts roam through his own inner world. Forty-five years together, did she even know that?

“Now I wonder,” Claire said.

As if she answered him. A frisson of fear, or excitement, raced through him. *Something*. He bent his thoughts back to the reality at hand. Heard her tell what he feared.

“Mud fingers stippled up, wanting to reach past my waist. I sat down at their wishful patterning, with only my head and shoulders above the surface. Last, I scrunched down to feel the smooth warmth of the supple little fingers on my bare neck. I even washed my face with the stuff, massaging it into my wrinkles.”

She looked up and searched for his gaze in the dusk-light. “Was I just nattering to myself?”

He stayed silent. She’d done it, what was there to say? Even only him half-listening had given him the heart of the matter.

“The windows will probably stay boarded up for the rest of time, do you get that feeling?” Claire said.

*Ha ha ha. Testing me.* “It’s like we’ve gone back in time, back to cave dwelling, for safety,” he said.

She slumped.

*Like she let go of all her tensions? Don’t think so.* “What?”

She sighed. Deep. “That neutral tone tells me you resent what I did. You’re thinking I did it to compete. So I could say I won that round. Or whatever you’re thinking. I did it maybe misguidedly but what do I know? Or you? What do we actually know?”

“Bitter doesn’t help me,” he said.

She scoffed. “Sez you. In Hillet last week, I heard that Orbit Smith took his sons to the ridge, there to carve out a sandstone residence with oversight of their fields on the valley floor. They take it in turn to sit guard on a stone outcrop, gun in hand.”

“A gun,” Nalbo said. “They still don’t get it.”

Claire continued. “It was Orbit’s mother telling me. He’s got a rice crop he is keen to harvest, she said. I understood from her satisfaction that she was the one convincing Orbit of the need. Who will she blame when they’ve all been taken? You obviously heard Maeve’s story about the tiffanies? And I bet you heard a couple more stories in the pub.”

He started to answer but she didn’t let him. “I’m afraid for the Smiths. They’ll be eaten, one by one. Their women and children staying over in the Town Barn until the digging is done will outlive them all. I ask myself every day, what are we doing—you and I—trying to make friends with such monsters?”

“I was going to make friends with just the child.”

“Be hard on yourself for a minute. Any child that young, are they ever alone? Remembering

our baby, we made sure she was never alone, and we befriended the parents of all her playmates. If we didn't like them, we steered her away from that family. These entities in the business of parenting the same as we were."

"So I'm supposed to make friends with the *man-eaters*?" He was appalled by the idea. By her suggestion. "How?"

She smiled ruefully. "Good question. Since I bathed in their silver mud it has come to me that they now consider me one of them, and I don't believe in mental telepathy. Sunning myself by the stone wall for a few minutes this morning, a couple of someones hovered at the edges of my view-field, and made as if to join me. Telling them every move I intended to make, despite that they probably didn't understand a word, I forced myself to rise unhurriedly, gather my things and leave the scene with dignified speed."

"I doubt a dip in the mud would work for me," Nalbo said.

"I agree. That's why I went ahead and did it. To break the stale-mate."

"There are never no consequences."

"Anything either of us do will have consequences," she said.

"Let's leave it there," he said. "Let's not quarrel."

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Another day, another dusk. Nalbo stumbled into the shed's foyer. Claire saw by the set of his shoulders that he minded that she hadn't met him at the entrance to the path with her glow-in-the-dark lantern.

"You're sitting in the dark?" he said. They kept the front shutters closed now to keep the little stove's heat in. "Not writing up your notes?" He left his boots by the door. Stepped into his scuffs.

"Getting warm," Claire said. "I slipped over and smacked into an ordinary rain puddle. Not looking where I was going. Had to come back to to dry off quick smart."

She plucked at her spare old sweatshirt. "It's across the north path. I fell in through not looking where I put my feet."

They both fell almost daily now. Keeping tabs on the aliens was always more important than seeing where they set their feet. "Make a light," she urged. "I've been sitting here thinking."

"Thinking is good," he said with his back to her. He wound up the vintage wind-up barn lamp, adjusted the bulb and they had light. Two of these were all they had for lighting now, and lucky with it. The spare one with Allie in the house.

She stared at his slumped shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"I swear Ne-ne is five years old but much much older than I am. Today she told me they'll be re-growing her. That I shouldn't cry on the day they eat her. That I'll have her renewed and beautiful to tell all my stories to again." He set the lamp on the little side table and set that

between them.

So his face was shadowed, Claire realized. Never mind, because she could see the snail-trails of his tears loud and clear. “Come sit beside me,” she said. “We’ve always thought better side-by-side.” She put her arm over his shoulders, squeezing him to her side.

“My project—you know—if she’s only ever allowed to be five ...?” He stumbled around in his explanation. “I thought to move myself on from where we ... Marina ... I thought if I could witness Ne-ne growing past where we lost ... I’d have a chance for closure. Of a kind. I forgot that they’d have their own agenda ...”

“Stop,” she said. She put her fingers over his lips. “You said something very important just then. *Their own agenda*. How long have they been here?”

They both thought. “Well, we still have Allie,” Nalbo said.

“She was barely showing at the dye-workshop. What did Maeve say? Allie should be going in to Hillet sometime in the next couple of weeks? But that’s by the by. So maybe five months?”

“One long summer, it seemed.” Nalbo’s voice was amazed. “Though it’s nippy enough now to have the stove on. But that surely is barely enough for a clone like Ne-ne to have to be regrown?”

“Five months!” Claire said again. “Clones never live as long as their originals. The further down the generations, the shorter their lives.”

“I’m shocked,” Nalbo said. “If it’s true, and that they’ll regrow her every six months, then we should leave too. I can’t do it all again and again. It’s not the same as socializing a run of grandchildren.”

“We can’t go.” Claire was appalled. *Where will I start?* “What if they breed an army? We’re the only ones who know anything about them. Someone needs to know them. Who better than us, on the spot.”

“What if they clone *us*?” Nalbo countered. “I know I’ve left a few hairs around, aside of the muck they used for my hand.” He swept his remaining hair back from his face. “I’m sure it’s dropping out everywhere. You too. That bath you had.” He felt her hands.

“They are softer,” she conceded. “Just from flailing around in the mud. It scrubs better than oatmeal soap. So there will definitely be cells of mine in that bath. Them deciding to clone us is not a risk we can overlook. It’s just another reason why we can’t leave.”

If anything he slumped further. He’d lost more weight than her. Her heart beat hard in her throat. He looked old. What if she lost him to the life she had chosen for them? *Be honest, you forced your will through on this*. “It’s still the right thing to do,” she said pushing the words past her fainting heart.

“For the greater good but not for mine now. You can see that, can’t you?” He said with his lop-sided grin, begging her to see the situation from his point of view.

“We still can’t leave. We’re the only ones not being eaten.” *Make that, Nalbo is the only man*

*in contact with the monsters and not eaten. "If only I can find out why." Preventing it is better than ... don't go there, woman.*

In the meantime, he needed hope. "Sal Smith heard from Brisbane recently, Maeve said. One of their sons does the postal run, remember? The Gaian Party that holds the power in Brisbane City's Council, pushed through an edict limiting families to one child. Families with more are pouring into regional centres. I'm quite hopeful that Matt and Belle will join us."

*Matt, Belle and Ushen. And Belle pregnant with a second grandchild.* She shuddered at the additional problems piling onto the mountain of problems already in the mix.