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THREE TO A GIVEN STAR

by **CORDWAINER SMITH**

*They were the outcasts of Earth,
and Earth had given them a destiny
that fitted their terrible crimes!*

I

"Stick your left arm straight forward, Samm," said Folly.

He stretched his arm out.

"I can sense it!" cried Folly, "Now wiggle your fingers!"

Samm wiggled them.

Finsternis said nothing, but both of them caught from his mind, riding clear and wise beside them, a "sense of the situation." His "sense of the situation" could be summed up in the one-word comment, which he did not need to utter:

"Foolishness!"

"It is not foolishness, Finsternis," cried Folly. "Here are the three of us, riding empty space millions of kilometers from nowhere. We are people once, Earth people from Old Earth Itself. Is it foolish to remember what we used to be? I was a woman once. A beautiful woman. Now I'm this—this thing, bent on a mission of murder and destruction. I used to have hands myself, real hands. Is it wrong for me to enjoy looking at Samm's hands now and then? To think of the past which all three of us have left behind."

Finsternis did not answer; his mind was blank to both of them. There was nothing but space around them, not even much space dust, and the bluish light of Linschoten XV straight ahead. From the third planet of that star they could occasionally hear the cackle and gabble of the man-eaters.

Once again Folly cried to Finsternis, "Is that so wrong, that I should enjoy looking at a hand? Samm has well-shaped hands. I was a person once, and so were you. Did I ever tell you that I was a beautiful woman once?"

She had been a beautiful woman once and now she was the control of a small spaceship which fled across emptiness with two grotesque companions. She was now a ship only eleven meters long and shaped roughly like an ancient dirigible. Finsternis was a perfect cube, fifty meters to the side, packed with machinery which could blank out a sun and contain its planets until they froze to icy, perpetual death. Samm was a man, but he was a man of flexible

steel, two hundred meters high. He was designed to walk on any kind of planet, with any kind of inhabitant, with any kind of chemistry or any kind of gravity: he was designed to bring antagonists, whomever they might be, the message of the power of man. The power of man ... followed by terror, followed if necessary by death. If Samm failed, Finsternis had the further power of blocking out the sun, Linschoten XV. If either or both failed, Folly had the job of adjusting them so that they could win. If they had no chance of winning, she then had the task of destroying Finsternis and Samm, and then herself.

Their instructions were clear: "You will not, you will not under any circumstances return. You will not, you will not under any conditions turn back toward Earth. You are too dangerous to come anywhere near Earth, ever again. You may live if you wish. If you can. But you must not—repeat not—come back. You have your duty. You asked for it. Now you have it. Do not, come back. Your forms fit your duty. You will do your duty."

Folly had become a tiny ship, crammed with miniaturized equipment.

Finsternis had become a cube blacker than darkness itself.

Samm had become a man but a man different from any which had ever been seen on Earth. He had a metal body, copied from the human form down to the last detail. That way the enemies, whoever they might be, would be given a terrible glimpse of the human shape, the human voice. Two hundred meters high he stood, strong and solid enough to fly through space with nothing but the jets on his belt.

The Instrumentality had designed all three of them. Designed them well.

Designed them to meet the crazy menace out beyond the stars, a menace which gave no clue to its technology or origin, but which responded to the signal "man" with the counter-signal, "gabble cackle! eat, eat! man, man! good to eat! cackle-gabble! eat, eat!"

That was enough.

The Instrumentality took steps. And the three of them—the ship, the cube and the metal giant—sped between the stars to conquer, to terrorize or to destroy the menace which lived on the third planet of Linschoten XV. Or, if needful, to put out that particular sun.

Folly, who had become a ship, was the most volatile of the three.

She had been a beautiful woman once.

II

"You were a beautiful woman once," Samm had said, some years before. "How did you end up becoming a ship?"

"I killed myself," said Folly. "That's why I took this name. Folly. I had a long life ahead of me, but I killed myself and they brought me back at the last minute. When I found out I was still alive, I volunteered for something adventurous, dangerous. They gave me this. Well, I *asked* for it, didn't I?"

"You asked for it," said Samm gravely. Out in the middle of nothing, surrounded by a tremendous lot of nowhere, courtesy was still the lubricant which governed human relationships. The two of them observed courtesy and kindness toward one another. Sometimes they threw in a bit of humor, too.

Finsternis did not take part in their talk or their companionship. He did not even verbalize his answers. He merely let them know his sense of the situation and this time, as in all other times, his response was—"Negative. No operation needed. Communication nonfunctional. Not needed here. Silence, please. I kill suns. That is all I do. My part is my business, not yours. My past is my business. All mine." This was communicated in a single terrible thought, so that Folly and Samm stopped trying to bring Finsternis into the conversations which they started up, every subjective

century or so, and continued for years at a time.

Finsternis merely moved along with them, several kilometers away, but well within their range of awareness. But as far as company was concerned, Finsternis might as well not have been there at all.

Samm went on with the conversation, *the* conversation which they had had so many hundreds of times since the planiform ship had discharged them "near" Linschoten XV and left them to make the rest of their way alone. (If the menace were really a menace, and if it were intelligent, the Instrumentality had no intention of letting an actual planiform ship fall within the powers of a strange form of life which might well be hypnotic in its combat capacities. Hence the ship, the cube and the giant were launched into normal space at high velocity, equipped with jets to correct their courses, and left to make their own way to the danger.)

Samm said, as he always did, "You were a beautiful woman, Folly, but you wanted to die. Why?"

"Why do people ever want to die, Samm? It's the power in us, the vitality which makes us want so much. Life always trembles on the edge of disappointment. If we hadn't been vital and greedy and lustful and yearning, if we hadn't had big thoughts and wanted bigger ones, we would have stayed animals, like all the little things back on Earth. It's strong life that brings us so close to death. We can't stand the beauty of it, the nearness of the things we want, the remoteness of the things that we can have. You and me and Finsternis, now, we're monsters riding out between the stars. And yet we're happier now than we were when we were back among people. I was a beautiful woman, but there were specific things which I wanted. I wanted them myself. I alone. For me. Only for me. When I couldn't have them, I wanted to die. If I had been stupider or happier I might have lived on. But I didn't. I was me—intensely me. So here I am. I don't even know whether I have a body or not, inside this ship. They've got me all hooked up to the sensors and the viewers and the computers. Sometimes I think that I may be a lovely woman still, with a real body hidden somewhere inside this ship, waiting to step out and to be a person again. And you, Samm, don't you want to tell me about yourself? Samm. SAMM. That's no name for an actual person—Superordinated Alien Measuring and Mastery device. What were you before they gave you that big body? At least you still look like a person. You're not a ship, like me."

"My name doesn't matter, Folly, and if I told it to you, you wouldn't know it. You never knew it."

"How wouldn't I know?" she cried. "I've never told you my name either, so perhaps we did know each other back on Old Earth when we were still people."

"I can tell something," said Samm, "from the shape of words, from the ring of thoughts, even when we're not out here in nothing. You were a lady, perhaps highborn. You were truly beautiful. You were really important. And I—I was a technician. A good one. I did my work and I loved my family, and my wife and I were happy with every child which the Lords gave us for adoption. But my wife died first. And after a while my children, my wonderful boy and my two beautiful, intelligent girls—my own children, they couldn't stand me anymore. They didn't like me. Perhaps I talked too much. Perhaps I gave them too much advice. Perhaps I reminded them of their mother, who was dead. I don't know. I won't ever know. They didn't want to see me. Out of manners, they sent me cards on my birthday. Out of sheer formal courtesy, they called on me sometimes. Now and then one of them wanted something. Then they came to me, but it was always just to get something. It took me a long time to figure out, but I hadn't done anything. It wasn't what I had done or hadn't done. They just plain didn't like me. You know the songs and the operas and the stories, Folly, you know them all."

"Not all of them," thought Folly gently, "not all of them. Just a few thousand."

"Did you ever see one," cried Samm, his thoughts ringing fiercely against her mind, "did you ever see a single one about a rejected father? They're all about men and women, love and sex, but I can tell you that rejection hurts even when you don't ask anything of your loved ones but their company and their happiness and their simple genuine smiles. When I knew that my children had no use for me, I had no use for me either. The Instrumentality came along with this warning, and I volunteered."

"But you're all right now, Samm," said Folly gently. "I'm a ship and you are a metal giant but we're off doing work which is important for all mankind. We'll have adventures together. Even black and grumbly here," she added, meaning Finsternis, "can't keep us from the excitement of companionship or the hope of danger. We're doing something wonderful and important and exciting. Do you know what I would do if I had my life again, my ordinary life with skin and toenails and hair and things like that?"

"What?" asked Samm, knowing the answer perfectly well from the hundreds of times they had touched on this point.

"I'd take baths. Hundreds and hundreds of them, over again. Showers and dips in cold pools and soaks in hot bathtubs and rinses and more showers. And I would do my hair, over and over again, thousands of different ways. And I would put on lipstick, in the most outrageous colors, even if nobody saw me, except for my own self looking in the mirror. Now I can hardly remember what it used to be to be dry or wet. I'm in this ship and I see the ship and I do not really know if I am a person or not any more."

Samm stayed quiet, knowing what she would say next.

"Samm, what would you do?" Folly asked.

"Swim," he said.

"Then swim, Samm, swim! Swim for me in the space between the stars. You still have a body and I don't, but I can watch you and I can sense you swimming out here in the nothing-at-all."

Samm began to swim a huge Australian crawl, dipping his face to the edge of the water—as if there were water there. The gestures made no difference in his real motion, since they were all of them in the fast trajectory computed for them from the point where they left the Instrumentality's ship and started out in normal space for the star listed as Linschoten XV.

This time, something very sudden happened, and, it happened strangely.

From the dark gloomy silence of the cube Finsternis, there came an articulate cry, called forth in clear human speech:

Stop it! Stop moving right now. I attack.

Both Samm and Folly had instruments built into them, so they could read space around them. The instruments, quickly scanned, showed nothing. Yet Folly felt odd, as though something had gone very wrong in her ship-self, which had seemed so metal, so reliable, so inalterable.

She threw a thought of inquiry at Samm and instead got another command from Finsternis, *Don't think.*

III

Samm floated like a dead man in his gargantuan body.

Folly drifted like a fruit beside his hand.

At last there came words from Finsternis:

"You can think now, if you want to. You can chatter at each other again. I'm through."

Samm thought at him, and the thought-pattern was troubled and confused: "What happened? I felt as though the immaculate grid of space had been pinched together in a tight fold. I felt you do something, and then there was silence

around us again."

"Talking," said Finsternis, "is not operational and it is not required of me. But there are only three of us here, so I might as well tell you what happened. Can you hear me, Folly?"

"Yes," she said, weakly.

"Are we on course," asked Finsternis, "for the third planet of Linschoten XV?"

Folly paused while checking all her instruments, which were more complicated and refined than those carried by the other two, since she was the maintenance unit. "Yes," said she at last. "We are exactly on course. I don't know what happened, if anything did happen."

"Something happened, all right," said Finsternis, with the gratified savagery of a person whose quick-and-cruel nature is rewarded only by meeting and overcoming hostility in real life.

"Was it a space dragon, like they used to meet on the old, old ships?"

"No, nothing like that," said Finsternis, communicative for once, since this was something operational to talk about. "It doesn't even seem to be in this space at all. Something just rises up among us, like a volcano coming out of solid space. Something violent and wild and alive. Do you two still have eyes?"

"Seeing devices for the ordinary light band?" asked Samm.

"Of course we do!" said Finsternis. "I will try to fix it so that you will have a visible input."

There was a sharp pause from Finsternis.

The voice came again, with much strain.

"Do not do anything. Do not try to help me. Just watch. If it wins, destroy me and destroy yourselves very quickly. It might try to capture us and get back to Earth."

Folly felt like telling Finsternis that this was unnecessary, since the first motion toward return would trigger destruction devices which had been built into each of the three of them, beyond reach, beyond detection, beyond awareness. When the Instrumentality said, "Do not come back," the Instrumentality meant it.

She said nothing.

She watched Finsternis instead.

Something began to happen.

It was very odd.

Space itself seemed to rip and leak.

In the visible band, the intruder looked like a fountain of water being thrown randomly to and fro.

But the intruder was not water.

In the visible light-band, it glowed like wild fire rising from a shimmering column of blue ice. Here in space there was nothing to burn, nothing to make light: she knew that Finsternis was translating unresolvable phenomena into light.

She sensed Samm moving one of his giant fists uncontrollably, in a helpless, childish gesture of protest.

She herself did nothing but watch, as alertly and passively as she could.

Nevertheless, she felt wrenched. This was no material phenomenon. It was wild unformed life, intruding out of some other proportion of space, seeking material on which to impose its vitality, its frenzy, its identity. She could see Finsternis as a solid black cube, darker than mere darkness, drifting right into the column. She watched the sides of Finsternis.

On the earlier part of the trip, since they had left the people and the planiform ship and had been discharged in a fast trajectory toward Linschoten XV, Finsternis' sides had seemed like dull metal, slightly burnished, so that Folly had to brush him lightly with radar to get a clear image of him.

Now his sides had changed.

They had become as soft and thick as velvet.

The strange volcano-fountain did not seem to have much in the way of sensing devices. It paid no attention to Samm or to herself. The dark cube attracted it, as a shaft of sunlight might attract a baby or as the rustle of paper might draw the attention of a kitten.

With a slight twist of its vitality and direction, the whole column of burning, living brightness plunged upon Finsternis, plunged and burned out and went in and was seen no more.

Finsternis' voice, clear and cheerful, sounded out to both of them:

"It's gone now."

"What happened to it?" asked Samm.

"I ate it," said Finsternis.

"You what?" cried Folly.

"I ate it," said Finsternis. He was talking more than he ever had before. "At least, that's the only way I can describe it. This machine they gave me or made me into or whatever they did, it's really rather good. It's powerful. I can feel it absorbing things, taking them in, taking them apart, putting them away. It's something like eating used to be when I was a person. That wild thing attacked me, wrapped me up, devoured me. All I did was to take it in, and now it's gone. I feel sort of full. I suppose my machines are sorting our samples of it to send away to rendezvous points in little rockets. I know that I have sixteen small rockets inside me, and I can feel two of them getting ready to move. Neither one of you could have done what I do. I was built to absorb whole suns if necessary, break them down, freeze them down, change their molecular structure and shoot their vitality off in one big useless blast on the radio spectrum. You couldn't do anything like that, Samm, even if you do have arms and legs and a head and a voice—if we ever get into an atmosphere for you to use it in. You couldn't do what I have just done, Folly."

"You're *good*," said Folly, with emphasis. But she added: "I can repair you."

Obviously offended, Finsternis withdrew into his silence.

Samm said to Folly, "How much further to destination?"

Said Folly promptly, "Seventy-nine earth years, four months and three days, six hours and two minutes, but you know how little that means out here. It could seem like a single afternoon or it could feel to us like a thousand lifetimes. Time doesn't work very well for us."

"How did Earth ever find this place, anyhow?" said Samm.

"All I know is that it was two very strong telepaths, working together on the planet Mizzer. An ex-dictator named Casher O'Neill and an ex-Lady named Celalta. They were doing a bit of psionic astronomy and suddenly this signal

came in strong and clear. You know that telepaths can catch directions very accurately. Even over immense distances. And they can get emotions, too. But they are not very good at actual images or things. Somebody else checked it out for them."

"M-m-m," said Samm. He had heard all this before. Out of sheer boredom, he went back to swimming vigorously. The body might not really be his, but it made him feel good to exercise it.

Besides, he knew that Folly watched him with pleasure—great pleasure, and a little bit of envy.

Casher O'Neill and the Lady Celalta had finished with making love.

They had lain with their bodies tired and their minds clear, relaxed. They had stretched out on a blanket just above the big gushing spring which was the source of the Ninth Nile. Both telepaths, they could hear a bird-couple quarreling inside a tree, the male bird commanding the female to get out and get to work and the female answering by dropping deeper and deeper into a fretful and irritable sleep.

The Lady Celalta had whispered a thought to her lover and master, Casher O'Neill.

"To the stars?"

"The stars?" thought he with a grumble. They were both strong telepaths. He had been imprinted, in some mysterious way, with the greatest telepath-hypnotist of all time, the Honorable Agatha Madigan, who had gone down in history as the Hechizera of Gontalon, the only person in history to hypnotize the men and robots of a battle fleet so that it destroyed itself in open space. Casher O'Neill had also retained dim memories of a half-grown girl, incredibly lovely in a simple blue dress, lost to him somewhere beyond amnesiac stars, but in the Lady Celalta he had a companion worthy of his final talents, a natural telepath who could herself reach not only all of Mizzer but some of the nearer stars. When they teamed up together, as she now proposed, they could plunge into dusty infinities of depth and bring back feelings or images which no Go-Captain had ever found with his ship.

He sat up with a grunt of assent.

She looked at him fondly, possessively, her dark eyes alight with alertness, happiness, possessiveness and adventure.

"Can I lift?" she asked, almost timidly.

When two telepaths worked together, one cleared the vision for both of them as far as their combined minds could reach and then the other sprang, with enormous effort as far and as fast as possible toward any target which presented itself. They had found strange things, sometimes beautiful or dramatic ones, by this method.

Casher was already drinking enormous gulps of air, filling his lungs, holding his breath, letting go with a gasp, and then inhaling deeply and slowly again. In this way he reoxygenated his brain very thoroughly for the huge effort of a telepathic dive into the remote depth of space. He did not even speak to her, nor did he telepath a word to her; he was conserving his strength for a good jump.

He merely nodded to her.

The Lady Celalta, too, began the deep breathing, but she seemed to need it less than did Casher.

They were both sitting up, side by side, breathing deeply.

The cool night sands of Mizzer were around them, the harmless gurgle of the Ninth Nile beside them, the bright star-cluttered sky of Mizzer was above them.

Her hand reached out and took hold of his.

She squeezed his hand. He looked at her and nodded to her again.

Within his mind, Mizzer and its entire solar system seemed to burst into flame with a new kind of light. The radiance of Celalta's mind trailed off unevenly in different directions but there, almost 2° off the pole of Mizzer's ecliptic, he felt something wild and strange, a kind of being which he had never sensed before. Using Celalta's mind as a base, he let his mind dive for it.

The distance of the plunge left them both dizzy, sitting on the quiet night sands of Mizzer. It seemed to both of them that the mind of man had never reached so far before.

The reality of the phenomenon was undoubtable.

There were animals all around them, the usual categories: runners, hunters, jumpers, climbers, swimmers, hidiers and handlers. It was some of the handlers who were intensely telepathic themselves.

The image of man created an immediate, murderous response:

"Cackle gabble, gabble cackle, man, man, man, eat them, eat them!"

Casher and Celalta were both so surprised that they let the contact go, after making sure that they had touched a whole world full of beings, some of them telepathic and probably civilized.

How had the beings known "man"? Why had their response been immediate? Why anthropophagous and homicidal?

They took time, before coming completely out of the trance, to make a careful, exact note of the direction from which the danger-brains had shrieked their warning.

This they submitted to the Instrumentality, shortly after the incident.

And that was how, unknown to Folly, Samm and Finsternis, the inhabitants on the third planet of Linschoten XV had come to the attention of mankind.

IV

As a matter of fact, the three wanderers later on felt a vague, remote telepathic contact which they sensed as being warm-hearted and human, and therefore did not try to track down, with their minds or their weapons. It was O'Neill and Celalta, many years later by Mizzer time, reaching to see what the Instrumentality had done about Linschoten XV.

Folly, Samm and Finsternis had no suspicion that the two most powerful telepaths in the human area of the galaxy had stroked them, searched them, felt them through, and seen things about them which the three of them did not know about themselves or about each other.

Casher O'Neill said to the Lady Celalta:

"You got it, too?"

"A beautiful woman, encased in a little ship?"

Casher nodded: "A red-head with skin as soft and transparent as living ivory? A woman who was beautiful and will be beautiful again?"

"That's what I got," said the Lady Celalta. "And the tired old man, weary of his children and weary of his own life because his children were weary of him."

"Not so old," said Casher O'Neill. "And isn't that a spectacular piece of machinery they put him into? A metal giant. It felt like something about a quarter of a kilometer high. Acid-proof. Cold-proof. Won't he be surprised when he finds that the Instrumentality has rejuvenated his own body inside that monster?"

"He certainly will be," said the Lady Celalta happily, thinking of the pleasant surprise which lay ahead of a man whom she would never know or see with her own bodily eyes.

They both fell silent.

Then said the Lady Celalta, "But the third person..." There was a shiver in her voice as though she dared not ask the question. "The third person, the one in the cube." She stopped, as though she could neither ask nor say more.

"It was not a robot or a personality cube," said Casher O'Neill. "It was a human being all right. But it's crazy. Could you make out, Celalta, as to whether it was male or female?"

"No," said she, "I couldn't tell. The other two seemed to think that it was male."

"But did *you* feel sure?" asked Casher.

"With that being, I felt sure of nothing. It was human, all right, but it was stranger than any lost hominid we have ever felt around the forgotten stars. Could you tell, Casher, whether it was young or old?"

"No," said he. "I felt nothing—only a desperate human mind with all its guards up, living only because of the terrible powers of the black cube, the sun-killer in which it rode. I never sensed someone before who was a person without characteristics. It's frightening."

"The Instrumentality are cruel sometimes," said Celalta.

"Sometimes they have to be," Casher agreed.

"But I never thought that they would do that."

"Do what?" asked Casher.

Her dark eyes looked at him. It was a different night, and a different Nile, but the eyes were only a very little bit older and they loved him just as much as ever. The Lady Celalta trembled as though she herself might think that the all-powerful Instrumentality could have hidden a microphone in the random sands. She whispered to her lover, her master:

"You said it yourself, Casher, just a moment ago."

"Said what?" He spoke tenderly but fearlessly, his voice ringing out over the cool night sands.

The Lady Celalta went on whispering, which was very unlike her usual self: "You said that the third person was 'crazy.' Do you realize that you may have spoken the actual literal truth?" Her whisper darted at him like a snake.

At last, he whispered back: "What did you sense? What could you guess?"

"They have sent a madman to the stars. Or a mad woman. A real psychotic."

"Lots of pilots," said Casher, speaking more normally, "are cushioned against loneliness with real but artificially activated psychoses. It gets them through the real or imagined horrors of the sufferings of space."

"I don't mean that," said Celalta, still whispering urgently and secretly. "I mean a real psychotic."

"But there aren't any. Not loose, that is," said Casher, stammering with surprise at last. "They either get cured or they are bottled up in thought-proof satellites somewhere."

Celalta raised her voice a little, just a little, so that she no longer whispered but spoke urgently.

"But don't you see, that's what they *must* have done. The Instrumentality made a star-killer too strong for any normal mind to guide. So the Lords got a psychotic somewhere, a real psychotic, and sent a madman out among the stars. Otherwise we could have felt its gender or its age."

Casher nodded in silent agreement. The air did not feel colder, but he got gooseflesh sitting beside his beloved Celalta on the familiar desert sands.

"You're right. You must be right. It almost makes me feel sorry for the enemies out near Linschoten Fifteen. Do you see nothing of them this time? I couldn't perceive them at all."

"I did, a little," said the Lady Celalta. "Their telepaths have caught the strange minds coming at them with a high rate of speed. The telepathic ones are wild with excitement but the others are just going cackle-gabble, cackle-gabble with each other, filled with anger, hunger and the thought of man."

"You got that much?" he said in wonder.

"My lord and my lover, I dived this time. Is it so strange that I sensed more than you did? Your strength lifted me."

"Did you hear what the weapons called each other?"

"Something silly." He could see her knitting her brows in the bright starshine which illuminated the desert almost the way that the Old Original Moon lit up the nights sometimes on Manhome Itself. "It was Folly, and something like 'Superordinated Alien Measuring and Mastery machine' and something like 'darkness' in the Ancient Doyches Language."

"That's what I get, too," said Casher. "It sounds like a weird team."

"But a powerful one, a terribly powerful one," said the Lady Celalta. "You and I, my lover and master, have seen strange things and dangers between the stars, even before we met each other, but we never saw anything like this before, did we?"

"No," said he.

"Well, then," said she, "let us sleep and forget the matter as much as we can. The Instrumentality is certainly taking care of Linschoten Fifteen, and we two not need bother about it."

And all that Samm, Folly and Finsternis knew was that a light touch, unexplained but friendly, had gone over them from the far star region near home. Thought they, if they thought anything about it at all, "The Instrumentality, which made us and sent us, has checked up on us one more time."

V

A few years later, Samm and Folly were talking again while Finsternis—guarded, impenetrable, uncommunicating, detectable only by the fierce glow of human life which shone telepathically out of the immense cube—rode space beside them and said nothing.

Suddenly Folly cried out to Samm loudly:

"I can *smell* them."

"Smell who?" asked Samm mildly. "There isn't any smell out here in the nothingness of space."

"Silly," thought Folly back, "I don't mean really smell. I mean that I can pick up *their* sense of odor telepathically."

"Whose?" said Samm, being dense.

"Our enemies', of course," cried Folly. "The man-rememberers who are not man. The cackle-gabble creatures. The beings who remember man and hate him. They smell thick and warm and alive to each other. Their whole world is full of smells. Their telepaths are getting frantic now. They have even figured out that there are three of us and they are trying to get our smells."

"And we have no smell. Not when we do not even know whether we have human bodies or not, inside these things. Imagine this metal body of mine smelling. If it did have a smell," said Samm, "it would probably be the very soft smell of working steel and a little bit of lubricants, plus whatever odors my jets might activate inside an atmosphere. If I know the Instrumentality, they have made my jets smell awful to almost any kind of being. Most forms of life think first through their noses and then figure out the rest of experience later. After all, I was built to intimidate, to frighten, to destroy. The Instrumentality did not make this giant to be friendly with anybody. You and I can be friends, Folly, because you are a little ship which I could hold like a cigar between my fingers, and because the ship holds the memory of a very lovely woman. I can sense what you once were. What you may still be, if your actual body is still inside that boat."

"Oh, Samm!" she cried. "Do you think I might still be alive, really alive, with a real me in a real me, and a chance to be myself somewhere again, out here between the stars?"

"I can't sense it plainly," said Samm. "I've reached as much as I can through your ship with my sensors, but I can't tell whether there's a whole woman there or not. It might be just a memory of you dissected and laminated between a lot of plastic sheets. I really can't tell, but sometimes I have the strangest hunch that you are still alive, in the old ordinary way, and that I am alive too."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful!" She almost shouted at him. "Samm, imagine being us again, if we fulfill our mission and conquer this planet and stay alive and settle there! I might even meet you and—"

They both fell silent at the implications of being ordinary-alive again. They knew that they loved each other. Out here, in the immense blackness of space, there was nothing they could do but streak along in their fast trajectories and talk to each other a little bit by telepathy.

"Samm," said Folly, and the tone of her thought showed that she was changing a difficult subject. "Do you think that we are the furthest out that people have ever gone? You used to be a technician. You might know. Do you?"

"Of course I know," thought Samm promptly. "We're not. After all, we're still deep inside our own galaxy."

"I didn't know," said Folly contritely.

"With all those instruments, don't you know where you are?"

"Of course I know where I am, Samm. In relation to the third planet of Linschoten XV. I even have a faint idea of the general direction in which Old Earth must lie, and how many thousands of ages it would take us to get home, travelling through ordinary space, if we did try to turn around." She thought to herself but didn't add in her thought to Samm, "Which we can't." She thought again to him, "But I've never studied astronomy or navigation, so I couldn't tell whether we were at the edge of the galaxy or not."

"Nowhere near the edge," said Samm. "We're not John Joy Tree and we're nowhere near the two-headed elephants which weep forever in intergalactic space."

"John Joy Tree?" sang Folly; there was joy and memory in her thoughts as she sounded the name. "He was my idol when I was a girl. My father was a subchief of the Instrumentality and always promised to bring John Joy Tree to our

house. We had a country and it was unusual and very fine for this day and age. But mister and Go-Captain Tree never got around to visiting us, so there I was, a big girl with picture-cubes of him all over my room. I liked him because he was so much older than me, and so resolute-looking and so tender too. I had all sorts of romantic day-dreams about him, but he never showed up and I married the wrong man several times, and my children got given to the wrong people, so here I am. But what's this stuff about two-headed elephants?"

"Really?" said Samm. "I don't see how you could hear about John Joy Tree and not know what he did."

"I knew he flew far, far out, but I didn't know exactly what he did. After all, I was just a child when I fell in love with his picture. What *did* he do? He's dead now, I suppose, so I don't suppose it matters."

Finsternis cut in, grimly and unexpectedly: "John Joy Tree is not dead. He's creeping around a monstrous place on an abandoned planet, and he is immortal and insane."

"How did you know that?" cried Samm, turning his enormous metal head to look at the dark burnished cube which had said nothing for so many years.

There was no further thought from Finsternis, not a ghost, not an echo of a word.

Folly prodded him:

"It's no use trying to make that thing talk if it doesn't want to. We've both tried, thousands of times. Tell me about the two-headed elephants. Those are the big animals with large floppy ears and the noses that pick things up, aren't they? And they make very wise, dependable underpeople out of them?"

"I don't know about the underpeople part, but the animals are the kind you mention, very big indeed. When John Joy Tree got far outside our cosmos by flying through space he found an enormous procession of open ships flying in columns where there was nothing at all. The ships were made by nothing which man has ever even seen. We still don't know where they came from or what made them. Each open ship had a sort of animal, something like an elephant with four front legs and a head at each end, and as he passed the unimaginable ships, these animals howled at him. Howled grief and mourning. Our best guess was that the ships were the tombs of some great race of beings and the howling elephants the immortal half-living mourners who guarded them."

"But how did John Joy Tree ever get back?"

"Ah, that was beautiful. If you go into spaces, you take nothing more than your own body with you. That was the finest engineering the human race has ever done. They designed and built a whole planiform ship out of John Joy Tree's skin, fingernails and hair. They had to change his body chemistry a bit to get enough metal in him to carry the coils and the electric circuits, but it worked. He came back. That was a man who could skip through space like a little boy hopping on familiar rocks. He's the only pilot Who ever piloted himself back home from outside our galaxy. I don't know whether it will be worth the time and treasure to use spaces for intergalactic trips. After all, some very gifted people may have already fallen through by accident, Folly. You and Finsternis and I are people who have been built into machines. We are now ourselves the machines. But with Tree they did it the other way around. They made a machine out of him. And it worked. In that one deep flight he went billions of times further than we will ever go."

"You think you know," said Finsternis unexpectedly. "You think you know. That's what you always do. You think you know."

Folly and Samm tried to get Finsternis to talk some more, but nothing happened. After a few more rests and talks they were ready for landing on the third planet of Linschoten XV.

They landed.

They fought.

Blood ran on the ground. Fire scorched the valleys and boiled the lakes. The telepathic world was full of the cackle-gabble of fright, hatred throwing itself into suicide, fury turning into surrender, into deep despair, into hopelessness, and at last into a strange kind of quiet and love.

Let us not tell that story.

It can be written some other time, told by some other voice.

The beings died by thousands and tens of thousands while Finsternis sat on a mountain-top, doing nothing. Folly wove death and destruction, uncoded languages, drew maps, showed Samm the strong-points and the weapons which had to be destroyed. Part of the technology was very advanced, other parts were still tribal. The dominant race was that of the beings who had evolved into handlers and thinkers; it was they who were the telepaths.

All hatred ceased as the haters died.

Only the submissive ones lived on.

Samm tore cities about with his bare metal hands, ripped heavy guns to pieces while they were firing at him, picking the gunners off the gun carriages as though they were lice, swimming oceans when he had to, with Folly darting and hovering around or ahead of him.

Final surrender was brought by their strongest telepath, a very wise old male who had been hidden inside a deep mountain:

"You have come, people. We surrender. Some of us have always known the truth. We are Earth-born, too. A cargo of chickens settled here unimaginable times ago. A time-twist tore us out of our convoy and threw us here. That's why, when we sensed you far across space, we caught the relationship of eat-and-eaten. Only, our brave ones had it wrong. You eat us: we don't eat you. You are the masters now. We will serve you forever. Do you seek our death?"

"No, no," said Folly. "We came only to avert a danger, and we have done that. Live on, and on, but plan no war and make no weapons. Leave that to the Instrumentality."

"Blessed is the Instrumentality, whoever that may be. We accept your terms. We belong to you."

When this was done, the war was over.

Strange things began to happen.

Wild voices sang from within Folly and Samm, voices not their own:

Mission gone. Work finished. Go to hill with cube. Go and rejoice!

Samm and Folly hesitated. They had left Finsternis where they landed, halfway around the planet.

The singing voices became more urgent:

Go. Go. Go now. Go back to the cube. Tell the chicken-people to plant a lawn and a grove of trees. Go, go, go now to the good reward!

They told the telepaths what had been said to them and voyaged wearily up out of the atmosphere and back down for a landing at the original point of contact, a long low hill which had been planted with huge patches of green turf and freshly transplanted trees even in the hours in which they flew off the world and back on it again. The bird-telepaths must have had strong and quick commands.

The singing became pure music as they landed, chorales of reward and rejoicing, with the hint of martial marches

and victory fugues woven in.

Alan, stand up, said the voices to Samm.

Samm stood on the ridge of the hill. He stood like a colossus against the red-dawning sky. A friendly, quiet crowd of the chicken-people fell back.

Alan, put your hand to your right forehead, sang the voices.

Samm obeyed. He did not know why the voices called him "Alan."

Ellen, land, sang the rejoicing voices to Folly. Folly, herself a little ship, landed at Samm's feet. She was bewildered with happy confusion and a great deal of pain which did not seem to matter much.

Alan, come forth, sang the voices. Samm felt a sharp pain as his forehead—his huge metal forehead, two hundred meters above the ground—burst open and closed again. There was something pink and helpless in his hand.

The voices commanded, *Alan, put your hand gently on the ground.*

Samm obeyed and put his hand on the ground. The little pink toy fell on the fresh turf. It was a tiny miniature of a man.

Ellen, stand forth, sang the voices again. The ship named Folly opened a door and a naked young woman fell out.

Alma, wake up. The cube named Finsternis turned darker than charcoal. Out of the dark side, there stumbled a black-haired girl. She ran across the hill-slope to the figure named Ellen. The man-body named Alan was struggling to his feet.

The three of them stood up.

The voices spoke to them: "This is our last message. You have done your work. You are well. The boat named Folly contains tools, medicine and the other equipment for a human colony. The giant named Samm will stand forever as a monument to human victory. The cube named Finsternis will now dissolve. Alan! Ellen! Treat Alma lovingly and well. She is now a forgetty."

The three naked people stood bewildered in the dawn.

"Good-by and a great high thanks from the Instrumentality. This is a pre-coded message, effective only if you won. You have won. Be happy. Live on!"

Ellen took Alma—who had been Finsternis—and held her tight. The great cube dissolved into a shapeless slag-heap. Alan, who had been Samm, looked up at his former body dominating the skyline.

For reasons which the travelers did not understand until many years had passed, the bird-people around them broke into ululant hymns of peace, welcome and joy.

"My house," said Ellen, pointing at the little ship which had spat forth her body just minutes ago, "is now a home for all of us."

They climbed into the successful little ship which had been called Folly. They knew, somehow, that they would find clothes and food. And wisdom, too. They did.

Ten years later, they had the proof of happiness playing in the yard before their house—a substantial building, made of stone and brick, which the local people had built under Alan's directions. (They had changed their whole technology in the process of learning from him, and—thanks to the efficiency and power of the telepathic priestly caste—things learned at any one spot on the planet were swiftly disseminated to the whole group of races on the planet.) The proof of happiness consisted of the thirty-five human children playing in the yard. Ellen had had nine, four sets of twins and a single. Alma had had twelve, two sets of quintuplets and a pair of twins. The other fourteen had been bottle-grown from ova and sperm which they found in the ship, the frozen donations of complete strangers who had done their bit for the off world settling of the human race. Thanks to the careful genetic coding of both the womb-children and the bottle-children, there was a variety of types, suitable for natural breeding over many generations to come.

Alan came to the door. He measured the time by the place where the great shadow fell. It was hard to realize that the gigantic, indestructible statue which loomed above them all had once been his own self. A small glacier was beginning to form around the feet of Sann and the night was getting cold.

"I'm bringing the children in already," said Ch-tikkik, one of the local nurses they had hired to help with the huge brood of human babies. She, in return, got the privilege of hatching her eggs on the warm shelf behind the electric stove; she turned them every hour, eagerly awaiting the time that sharp little mouths would break the shell and human-like little hands would tear an opening from which a human-like baby would emerge, oddly-pretty-ugly like a gnome, and unusual only in that it could stand upright from the moment of birth.

One little boy was arguing with Ch-tikkik. He wore a warm robe of vegetable-fiber veins knitted to serve as a base for a feather cloak. He was pointing out that with such a robe he could survive a blizzard and claiming, quite justly, that he did not have to be in the house in order to stay warm. Was that Rupert? thought Alan.

He was about to call the child when his two wives came to the door, arm in arm, flushed with the heat of the kitchen where they had been cooking the two dinners together—one dinner for the human, now numbering thirty-seven, and the other for the bird-people, who were tremendously appreciative of getting cooked food, but who had odd requirements in the recipes, such as "one quart of finely ground granite gravel to each gallon of oatmeal, sugared to taste and served with soybean milk."

Alan stood behind his wives and put a hand on the shoulder of each.

"It's hard to think," he said, "that a little over ten years ago, we didn't even know that we were still people. Now look at us, a family, and a good one."

Alma turned her face up to be kissed, and Ellen, who was less sentimental, lifted her face to be kissed too, so that her co-wife would not be embarrassed at being babied separately. The two liked each other very much. Alma came out of the cube Finsternis as a forgetful, conditioned to remember nothing of her long sad psychotic life before the Instrumentality had sent her on a wild mission among the stars. When she had joined Alan and Ellen, she knew the words of the Old Common Tongue, but very little else.

Ellen had had some time to teach her, to love her and to mother her before any of the babies were born, and the relationship between the two of them was warm and good.

The three parents stood aside as the bird-women, wearing their comfortable and pretty feather cloaks, herded the children into the house. The smallest children had already been brought in from their sunning and were being given their bottles by bird-girls who never got tired of watching the cuteness and helplessness of the human infant.

"It's hard to think of that time at all," said Ellen, who had been "Folly." "I wanted beauty and fame and a perfect marriage and nobody even told me that they just didn't go together. I have had to come to the end of the stars to get what I wanted, to be what I might become."

"And me," said Alma, who had been "Finsternis," "I had a worse problem. I was crazy. I was afraid of life. I

didn't know how to be a person. I didn't even know how to be a woman, a sweetheart, a female, a mother. How could I ever guess that I needed a sister and wife, like the one you have been, to make my life whole? Without you to show me, Ellen, I could never have married our husband. I thought I was carrying murder among the stars, but I was carrying my own solution as well. Where else could I turn out to be me?"

"And I," said Alan, who had been "Samm," "became a metal giant between the stars because my first wife was dead and my own children forgot me and neglected me. Nobody can say I'm not a father now. Thirty-five, and more than half of them mine. I'll be more of a father than any other man of the human race has ever been."

There was a change in the shadow as the enormous right arm swung quietly but heavily toward the sky as a prelude to the sharp robotic call that nightfall, calculated with astronomical precision, had indeed come to the place where he stood.

The arm reached its height, pointing straight up.

"I used to do that," said Alan.

The cry came, something like a silent pistol-shot which all of them heard, but a shot without echoes, without reverberations.

Alan looked around. "All the children are in. Even Rupert. Come in, my darlings, and let us have dinner together." Alma and Ellen went ahead of him and he barred the heavy doors behind them.

This was peace and happiness; that at last was goodness. They had no obligation but to live and to be happy. The threat and the promise of victory were far, far behind.

[End of *Three To A Given Star*, by Cordwainer Smith]