THE LAST ROSE OF BALDY HUGHES

·by D.W. McDougall

Three of them were gathered at the antiquated water cooler, broken whispers and snatches of uneasy laughter interspersing the periodic gurgling of the bubbling water.

He approached them slowly, cautiously trying to make them notice him, trying to let them know he wasn't eavesdropping on their privacy. They didn't notice him. He coughed to draw their attention. The cough startled them. They hastily crushed their paper cups and split three separate ways back to the cubicle offices of their work spaces, petitioned off from one another by ceiling high panels of neutronated audiofoam which absorbed the electro-static humming and blipping of their data terminals.

As always, he felt awkward, red-faced for being the cause of their beetle-like scurrying back to their isolated spaces where the white-sound from concealed ceiling auditrons suppressed any and all sound from without. He imagined silent screams pressing down upon them, invisible barriers of banshee decibels confining and compressing them as in an old gothic movie where dungeon walls relentlessly closed upon a terror-stricken prisoner, spikes about to draw blood.

A gurgle from the water cooler burbled away his dungeon thoughts. He reached his large right hand to pluck a conical paper cup from the stainless zirconium dispenser mounted beside the cooler. He tapped a cupful and sipped, the water cool upon his tongue. He didn't know if the hearsay was true or not, but he had heard that the cooler's water came from far underground, possibly the last artesian aquifer anywhere in the country, perhaps anywhere in the world.

Strange, he often thought - strange. Nobody tapped the earth for water anymore-no need to - distilled straight from the atmosphere and gammified pure - no minerals nor salts to contaminate it - absolutely sterile. Still the cooler's water was sweet - pure or not. He sipped again, the coolness chilling his teeth - a liquid image flowed in his head. A hand dipped down, a child's hand scooped clear water from a blue sky fjord... The image shattered! A sudden booming bruised from wall of rock to wall of rock of the narrow channel. An urgent voice resounded, "Hurry Balder, hurry now, we must get to the boat!" And then their sea-borne flight from the Feuhrer-madness.

The cooler gurgled again. He turned and trudged back to his cubicle, cradling the paper cup in his broad hands. Seated again at his data terminal, he reached up under his desk and withdrew a brier smoking pipe from a secret bracket beneath. He clenched the pipe between his teeth, imagining the aromatic incense of wreathing smoke that once used to curl from the lighted bowl. How long had it been now - since last he had dared take a pipeful? Six years and six months he answered himself - six years here at work, and six months at home.

The corporate doctor had warned him about smoking nearly a year ago, but he had thought that the man was only advising him for the sake of good health than dictating corporate smoking policy. But six months ago when the blood tests of his yearly physical showed positive for tobacco consumption, he had been taken aside by the vice president and told point blankly: "Give up smoking, Baldy, or give up your job. Government contracts old boy, government contracts. Corporate central wants us to be squeaky clean; squeaky clean and we get Genesis II - billions and billions, we're talking about billions. Smoking's no good for you anyway - heart, lungs, liver - you know what I mean. Next physical be clean ...got a hundred, Jesus likely a thousand young neutron nippers just splitting at the seams to take your place. At 50 where are you likely to get another job like this. With Genesis II you're good for another ten years; don't blow it for a lungful of smoke."

So now, all he could do was chew on the smokeless stem of his pipe as he sat at his terminal day in and day out, calculating, theorizing - formulae stabbing out of his thick fingers onto the terminal keys, blipping across his screen which at the top constantly read Genesis II: Unified Field Project. Only a month ago security had installed spectromic smoke detectors that were so sensitive a billionth of a particle could set them to beeping. As a precautionary measure he had taken his brier home and soaked it in a solution of hydrochloric acid before he dared bring it back to work.

After his first week of cessation the urge to light up became less frustrating, and by the end of his first smoke free month the remembered aroma of his pipe tobacco was sufficient to calm him down when time after time his theoretical formulae proved untenable to account for the myriad quark variables of weak, strong, magnetic, gravitational and electrical forces fluxing to the beat of a single nuclear drum. Five days a week, eight hours a day he bent his mind to his task - the water cooler his only break from his nuclear solitude.

But ah - ah - when his day was done, he'd take his pipe from his teeth, hook it back to his secret bracket beneath his desk, run a save program for the information processed that day, and then trudge away from his terminal, formulae and symbols, and digital blips falling down into the holds of thought, the heavy pressure of his lumbering gait treading away all particles of Genesis II. Once he reached the last security check - point and the iron-faced guard had let him pass, he seemed to revive, seemed to take on a vitality that firmed up the sagging flesh of his three hundred pound frame. The sluggish blood quickened, sometimes almost to the point of giddiness as the rushing impulse of his subterranean shuttle sped him homeward. And then he was there, briskly stepping a final hundred paces to his door, checking this way and that behind him before inserting his I.D. disc to enter.

The house was old - how old he couldn't say, but his landlord had said that this was one of the last Victorian residences in the city. Victorian or whatever, Balder didn't know what the architectural style was supposed to signify. He only knew - felt at peace here, where God was in his heaven and all was right with the world of Balder Hughes. And what was at the heart of Balder's domestic peace was the true job of his life - thick fingered though he was, Balder Hughes was a gardener. There wasn't a room in his rambling house that didn't vibrate with the herbaceous scent of wines and leaves and buds and blossoms - perfumes of mint cool green, deliquescent violet, aster radiant yellow, dark purple-black of hidden orchid and roses-roses-roses everywhere fusing and mingling, breathing upon hyacinth "Ai, Ai", nudging the virginal lilies. And at the center of his living room stood Balder's dearest one - a blood black rose.

First, always first to the rose he went, speaking softly as he approached, "And how is my lady today, how is my lady today?" And sometimes he knew, yes he knew, he heard the black rose languorously sigh, and he would whisper back, "The little ones, my lady - today their little ones were troublesome. I will speak to them." And then he knew, yes he knew, for he could feel the velvet caress of the rose's pristine essence quicken his heart, that she again was composed and waiting for the tender touch of his loving hand.

And after having touched her velvet petals Balder would then smooth his hands through his hair, her lingering perfume stirring down into the roots of his tingling scalp. He believed heart and soul that her precious scent was solely responsible for what seemed to him a latter-day miracle. For years he had been steadily been going bald. But since the black rose had first bloomed and his ritual caresses had begun, his hair had come back come back as dark and red as the day he was born - come back so fully that nothing but his nickname of Baldy reminded him of the embarrassment of his once balding pate.

But Balder not only took from the black rose, he gave in return. Before he had been compelled to stop smoking, he had nightly taken up his capacious easy chair at the rose's side, puffing contentedly at his brier, breathing out wreathes of carbon-rich smoke that spiralled and curled amongst the deep green leaves. And he knew, yes he knew, he heard her sign, "Ah, my sire, the breath of the gods is in you - hidden in your silver smoke - I live for thee and thee for me - we live and live eternally." And when he heard her thus sigh, he knew, yes he knew, that the little ones in all their rooms were secretly smiling in their leaves. And Balder those nights slept the sleep of the innocent.



But more and more often now when he cam home to his black rose her sighs to him were more troubled. And though he had installed an apparatus to dispense CO2 to keep all his little ones and the dark rose healthy, little by little she had withdrawn until no more at all did she sigh her perfume sigh of immortality to Balder. And it was then that Balder noticed again, as he had noticed years before, that his hairline was receding.

Though he tried to put it out of his mind, he knew, yes he knew that the black rose was dying, and instead of concentrating on his work at Genesis II, more and more the Languishing queen pervaded the essence of his thoughts.

What was worse, when his next physical showed extraordinary levels of CO2 in his blood, Balder was forced to discard the CO2 apparatus which had at least kept the black rose alive - corporate policy - global policy: all persons caught and prosecuted for contributing CO2 to the atmosphere were subject to incarceration. Balder Hughes snapped.

For a week before quitting Genesis II, he stockpiled food and water, and more importantly he located a black market source, which, at the expense of his life's savings, sold him enough contraband tobacco to last for twenty years.

Leaving Genesis II on his last day, into the bowl of his brier pipe he secreted an optic-crystal micro-chip. Nervously he explained to the iron faced security guard that he had been negligent in not having discarded his brier and was now correcting his oversight. The guard sniggered, but let him pass.

Once home Balder stepped inside, barricaded his door, went to his black rose, pipe in hand and said, "I have it, my queen, at last I have what they want." He plucked the optic-crystal micro-chip from the bowl of his brier and bowed an eloquent bow. He then went to his private data terminal, accessed an open channel and entered: Genesis II: Unified Field Theory: I am Balder Hughes: Son of the One God: Born Eternally of Smoke and Fire: The Rose and I are One: I have the formula of the Unified Field: Root and Stem-Branch and Leaf-Flower and Fruit.

Back at Genesis II the terminals were a buzz with Balder's message, and for days and months no one knew quite what to make of it. Instead of a few gathered at the gurgling water cooler, a dozen or more whisperers at a time now gathered, speculating on the sudden nature of Balder Hughes gone mad. Everyone with half a brain knew that Genesis II was just a smoke screen to syphon billions into the corporate books-everyone knew that.

The CO2 police, however, were not so ready to pass off Balder as a crank. The readings from his Victorian dwelling had nearly blown up their detectors. Something had to be done. The man was a menace. They moved in. Balder was waiting.

Seated contentedly in his big easy chair, he leisurely puffed at his brier, sending out wreathes of silver smoke that spiralled and curled through the deep green leaves of the blood black rose, listening to her sigh. "Ah, my sire, the breath of the gods is in you - hidden in your silver smoke - I live for thee and thee for me - we live and live eternally. And Balder knew, yes he knew, that all the little ones in all their secret rooms were secretly smiling in their leaves.

"Come out Balder Hughes - we know you're in there. This is the CO2 police - give yourself up!"

Balder Hughes got up from his chair, went to his data terminal, removed the back panel, inserted the optic-crystal micro-chip which he had slipped out of Genesis II, hit the return key of his keyboard, and then went back to stand before his black rose. His hand caressed the velvet petals.

The terminals at Genesis II wildly blip-blipped: Genesis II: Unified Field: I am Balder Hughes: Son of the One God: Born Eternally of Smoke and Fire: The Rose and I are One: I give you the formula of the Unified Field: Root and Stem - Branch and Leaf-Flower and Fruit: Genesis II, EROS...6-5-4-3-2-1-0.

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