MZ14-12

It was a one in three-and-a-half million chance, getting pregnant. It hardly ever happens in space. And on Heptennial Patrols it isn't allowed. The punishment is – or was then, it was 25 years ago, no one came back for us – the punishment was to be cast away, to be chucked down a chute on to the nearest planet. It was the modern equivalent of walking the plank. The problem was that Patrols were too finely balanced to sustain personnel increase. On Flights it didn't usually matter, being shorter, while on Tours, being so much longer, it was invariably offset by fatalities. But Heptennial Patrol Protocol required you to abort, no option, no discussion. The punishment wasn't for getting pregnant – the punishment was for insubordination if you refused to have the abortion. I refused. I'm afraid I didn't consider it for a second, I refused; I didn't argue or make a case for myself, I just blankly refused.

Commander Merridew scowled at me as though I was letting the side down, but ruled sympathetically. Protocol required me to be dumped on the nearest habitable planet, habitable being defined as Dreyfue 3 to 7 inclusive. We were in MZ sector off a horrific-looking 3. He postponed the hearing on some trivial technical excuse until we came nearer to MZ14-12, a beautiful green Dreyfue 6, though uninhabited. He ruled that two people were being cast away, so we got two full survival kits and two rations. He logged that I was an exceptionally capable medical technician whom he was sorry to lose, and recommended rescue by a future Tour craft at Priority 8.

Lin Chao, my immediate superior and my friend, exercised her prerogative as Medical Officer, unquestionable even by the commanding officer, of certifying me sick. Merridew questioned it nonetheless, he said he was obliged under log-recording conditions to be on record as pointing out that pregnancy is not an illness on Earth. She replied that a biomedical incident that's a three million to one chance must be classed as sufficiently abnormal to cause medical concern, which meant she would be remiss under her Oath not to exercise her prerogative of sectioning me to Sickbay for continual observation. Merridew smiled. Chao wasn't trying to get me off the hook. But it meant I spent my last few weeks in comfort rather than in the Capital Cell; or at any rate in my familiar surroundings, since, being me, I did what I do and continued doing my job as her Technical Assistant, right down to the last day.

Chao's intervention also meant I got a full medical emergency field outfit to bring with me – virtually a clinic in a sack, the most expensive portable kit the vehicle carried, which has proved extraordinarily useful. We wouldn't be alive today, Robin and I, without it. For although his birth was easy – in fact it was a dream, I enjoyed every

second of the twenty minutes of it, I think I liked it better than the twenty minutes that gave rise to it – but for all that, our first year was an awful struggle against illness.

Going down the tube was a horrible experience – give me walking the plank any day. Even though you can't see out, even though your fall is controlled, even though you arrive gently (like being born, I later thought), it's stomach-churning. Literally – I ate a hearty breakfast but we arrived on the planet separately! Even though I'd done tethered rescue training, I found it absolutely hair-raisingly terrifying. Even though I knew the destination was a beautiful temperate paradise.

MZ14-12 is one of the nicest places in the universe, it's amazing it hasn't been colonised – well, it has now of course. It's covered in lush green vegetation, mostly a slightly rubbery grass and various fern-like shrubs, with clusters of green trees around the dew-ponds. By green I mean the trees aren't made of wood, with bark, they're a rigid version of the green vegetable substance, tough and stringy inside. And it's all edible, bland but reasonably nutritious; and so are the greeny-brown fruits, in season. Or drinkable anyway: the fruit rots quickly but is abundant enough to make huge quantities of protein-rich juice that lasts throughout the year and tastes remarkably like vanilla coke. But I must stop myself – I didn't set out to write a cookery-book (not a bad idea though).

The year by the way – it seems normal now, and Robin always finding it so helped me acclimatise – is about seven Earth months long, or rather (there being no such thing as months here) thirty weeks. MZ14 is a huge star of course, bigger than the Sun, so we're further out in the System (Earth's number 3 and we're number 12). It looks only slightly bigger, and less harshly bright through the haze. You can't tell but presumably we're whirling round it far faster, well we must be, to give the shorter year, though what also speeds things up is that *it's* whirling too, as some stars do, or wobbling, around some miniature companion or pinprick black hole. It makes the years irregular but I can't be bothered with that, nor with leap years and calculating Easter – thirty weeks is close enough. Days however are only slightly shorter, and nights (the dark bit) vary from just minutes to about three hours.

I wish I'd read up on it all while I was waiting in Sickbay. I thought I'd briefed myself adequately, and then I thought of a thousand questions once I was here. Cosmic Geography isn't really my strong point, as you can tell, and in both Heptennials I've served in I concentrated on doing my job, immersing myself in my library of fantasy reading and music, and finding someone nice for Friday Night. I wish now I'd studied more, especially about the Systems we were patrolling, and childcare. And I definitely wish I'd done some craft classes – I know, the wickerwork's brilliant, thanks; but it took me years to get there, and as for my pottery, you don't want to see it.

I wished at times I'd abstained from Friday Nights too. There were activity classes that would have made me just as sweaty; or for less effort, what are politely known as 'interactive' movies. I even wished a few times – the very worst times – that I'd taken Option 18. Option 18 is the concession to those condemned for Capital Offences (being cast away billions of miles from Earth, even on a Dreyfue 6 with Rescue Priority 8 and plenty kit, counts as Capital Punishment) the option to take the pill, the cop-out, the legal slide into dreamless eternity. I'm ashamed to have wished it now, though it was only in the darkest dreadful time of my illness when Robin was a baby, but I'm sorry it even crossed my mind. Not because life here has been idyllic – there's no such thing as life being idyllic, or if it is, it isn't, you're asleep – and not because we've always been deliriously happy – though I suppose we've been deliriously happy at least as often as we've been sad, or cross or bored. Or scared.

No, I can't regret that fateful Friday Night. For as well as putting me in the Garden of Eden as Eve, founding mother of a new people, it gave me in due time Friday Nights in profusion, and Sunday mornings and Thursday afternoons as well. And now and then an entire Tuesday. It gave me Love (yes, OK, the sweaty wrestly bit included, the part that puts the F in Friday – but I said Love first, and meant it) it gave me Love of an intensity I didn't know existed in the universe at all. Even in Eden, even in paradise, even on a green Dreyfue 6!

And an Adam to share it.

Life on the Green Planet

Robin was born in a somewhat misshapen and precarious cabin made of basketwork, my first attempt, using the strong, flexible branches of the green trees that grow around the dew-ponds. It wasn't very good; but it had kept me busy during the last month or so of pregnancy, and it was better than giving birth in the plastic survival tent from the survival pack, where I slept at first. It's more an instinct than a need, here anyway, to take shelter, to have a bolt-hole. It does rain gently, or drizzle, during what passes for the Winter season, and the nightly haze deposits a heavy dew most of the year round; but otherwise the planet, or this part of it, is warm and pleasant, and we've lived a largely alfresco existence, a largely uncovered existence. As befits the Garden of Eden. But it felt reassuring to have the tent at first, I was glad of it, and a deep psychological necessity to have 'a place of one's own' (however rickety and tottering) in which to bear my son, and protect him thereafter.

Not that there was much to protect him from. Early morning damp, green fatigue, vegetarian bingeing, over-protective mothering ... loneliness ... I obviously remembered to check, before I was cast away, if the planet was inhabited, its wildlife I mean. Sabre-toothed caterpillars? greenfly? lesser-spotted amoebae? It's what they call a

Vegan Planet – veg only. The surveys are very reliable, very good at detecting or eliminating living organisms above the ultra-microscopic. So I knew there was nothing but plants. (And no, in case you're thinking what I'm thinking – man-eating or woman-molesting plants couldn't have evolved in a vegan eco-system.)

Except there are always microorganisms, and since that's where life starts, at such a primitive level you can't classify them between plant and animal, the surveys don't rule out unevolved protozoa, like our belovèd amoeba. And bacteria. Benign hopefully; though being uninhabited (uncolonised I mean) there was no trial data to know whether pathogenic microbes (those harmful to humans) might be present. Bacteria or something answering to their Earth specification, possibly micro-fungal, presumably are, if the fruit rots so readily. Viruses however (harmful microorganisms in search of host cells) usually *follow* or accompany humans around the universe, rather than waiting to greet them. Like comedians.

I thought that's what it was, the illness, at first. Not a comedian. A virus or a virus-like parasitic microbe come to see what we were made of. The existing inhabitants perhaps, taking a dim view of this large complex organism invading their paradise; or else welcoming it as a new sort of apartment block, or dinner. But in the end I was neither colonised nor eaten. I'm sure they could have done either if they'd wanted to, if they existed. If they exist. Robin thinks they do, in fact he's certain of it; so until the next baby the electorate's 50/50 divided.

What I eventually decided was that it was poison, that caused my illness. I couldn't come up with anything, but the need to assign blame, or cause, was so great I plumped for poisoning or allergic-type response. Which leaves the door open to the microorganisms, admittedly, but what I was thinking of was either some imported contamination in the survival kit or rations, or, if indigenous, possibly the nasty-tasting shrub I'd tried (and rejected) while testing the edibleness of the local veg. Exacerbated and prolonged by stress and related psychosomatic factors, as well as by post-natal immune-defficiency, plus ... what? there must be other things. Dramatic change of diet for instance; or adjustment to the slightly different oxygen level: it goes into the blood and brain and belly and everywhere, the body's tolerances are finely balanced. Acclimatisation, literally.

One thing that certainly prolonged and worsened it was abstention from some of the medicines that might have helped – the powerful ones, the strong analgesics and antibiotics and intruder-zappers, the bodily blitzkrieg, all marked with no thought of irony 'not to be taken while pregnant or breast feeding'. The medical outfit saved my life (and thus both our lives), without question, but the things in it that might have cured me pronto or anyway vastly reduced my symptoms I didn't dare take lest Robin got overdosed on them through my milk.

Less a dilemma than a Hobson's Choice – if I died *he* died, but saving myself at the cost of his life or health wasn't an option either.

You'd think being a medical technician I'd know – what was wrong with me I mean, and its cause; but as with everything, the knowledge I had didn't quite coincide with the knowledge I needed. Diagnostics isn't a med-tech's responsibility. Analytics *is* – but (you guessed it) microbes aren't my special area, plus the microscope I have isn't showing me any, which could be the limitations of the microscope optics. Infectious diseases just don't occur on space flights, and poisoning is usually self-inflicted. Overdosing aside, bellyache is over-indulgence, menstruation, or nerves. So nervous stress, psychosomatic, may have been part of my problem, I now think; and then, when the illness got worse, sheer panic. The fact that when I began to think this I also began to get better supports that. (It doesn't of course: rational thinking returning after weeks of delirium is a chicken-and-egg sort of cure.)

I often say (I talk to myself I'm afraid, it lets Robin off the hook) that the fact we've never been ill since proves it *wasn't* a native virus or the like, a tiny-invisible hostile alien, and the planet is thus free of invasive microorganisms. Though that too may be a fallacy. It could have been a benign one that I reacted to adversely but am now used to (or who's used to me). It could have been a nasty that my White Guards vanquished and I'm now immune to (or who's gone to fetch reinforcements ...). We've not been ill since though, in all these years. In which case there's presumably just the one, one type I mean, if at all, and we're now living in peace with one another.

Robin thinks that. Or rather, an extreme version of it – he believes we came to an understanding with the existing micro-inhabitants, an alliance, and have since lived not simply in harmony but in symbiosis. He thinks we integrated. If they're bacterial or micro-fungal then he's right, they could have taken up residence inside us without our being aware or harmed, my initial illness either a temporary irritation, a perfectly natural immune-system over-reaction, or a fight for mastery with some of my existing bacterial stock or corpuscular defenders. One thing I do know is that a larger proportion of the human body than most people realise is not actually us but our bacterial passengers, and they help keep us healthy. So Robin's version isn't fantasy – he could be right!

Or even (Robin likes to think) the invisible locals themselves came to my aid and saved me – saved me from the illness, whatever it was caused by. Saved us both. He thinks they took a special, protective interest in the first human to be born on their planet. He was a healthy baby, thankfully, and remained unaffected by my illness, medically speaking; though obviously if I'd died he couldn't have survived. So – or so the theory goes – *his* welcoming committee had to save *me*.

Yes, you're right, I'm often told it: I do tend to wax tedious on my pet topics – thinking about it for years as I have is either good brain exercise, like crosswords, or a thorough waste of time, depending which planet you're on. And Robin, unlike me, is a native of this one, not an immigrant, not strictly an alien, or rather ... (now there's an ambiguous thought). So it all means something different to him. He thinks about it with a different logic, in a way that I can understand but can't share. I'm sure he feels that if there *is* a microorganism here, he's sort of related to it now. And if it's *in* us I suppose that's true.

But of course he has no recollection of the terrible months we had, after he was born: how I had to drag myself out of delirium by sheer willpower, bare-knuckle maternal bloody-mindedness, realising after hours of feverish confusion that the crying baby was crying for me; how I'd dose myself with what I could risk just to get the strength or focus to do the simplest things, like wash him or decant the water purifier; how I felt so ill that it wasn't hunger but the milk drying up that reminded me I needed nourishment too; how I literally crawled to the dew-pond and sat chewing the green bushes until my milk came back, while Robin cried in the distance; how some days I was too weak to move, at all – my bladder moved but I didn't ...

How I kept finding myself back on the spacecraft, wandering the corridors in a state of semi-undress, and then back at school on Earth (the corridors are identical), wondering how I'd got there and where my knickers were and then realising in a shrieking panic how many billions of miles it was to get back to my crying baby. How we lay curled in a corner for whole days sweating and shivering and crying with terror as hallucinatory winds and murmurings and shadows laid seige to our sagging wicker shack, the whole thing lurching about like a dinghy in a gale, and creaking until creaking became a menacing alien language ... Welcome to life on the Green Planet.

I kept a fever chart – part medical training, part desperate attempt to keep focused, or keep track of time – it's a work of art, we have it mounted all round our wickerwork bedroom. Robin coloured it in when he was little – shades of green mostly. He thinks there's a pattern to it, a sort of dialogue between my body and the micro-chaps. It seems all over the place to me, though there are repeated cycles of course – long gentle fall-off after a dangerous peak, hot-and-cold undulations, etc. The dramatic ones are medication spikes, where I took something that rapidly plunged my temperature (in desperation, and then had to refuse him milk for hours) – the gain being that it enabled me to go food gathering, to wash, and to wash *him*. He spent a good deal of my illness rolling in his own poo while I lay drenched in a ripe mixture of sweat and piss, if you want some of the graphic detail.

By the time he was born I was on native diet, the double rations from the ship only lasted a few months and – foolishly or sensibly, I think I was being sensible – I guzzled it unstintingly with the thought that both

of us needed to be robust and well-fed to ensure a good birth, and survival. Not to mention pre-natal craving (there was quite a lot of chocolate, always is in emergency survival kits, but oddly no onions). But the rations they send with you aren't meant to last long, they're to tide you over while you establish a food supply (either by going native or by cultivating). The water that came with us I rationed strictly though, guaranteed pure drinking water. The protocol is to mistrust the native water more than the native food, and make thorough tests before drinking it. That of course is where the nasty little-fellas will be lying in wait, as they do on Earth. I analysed it repeatedly and didn't find any.

The native water consists of dew most of the year and light drizzle in Winter, both of which come from the perma-haze that answers for cloud-cover here and draws in mistily every evening. There are no rivers or springs, at least we haven't found any yet, and the lakes – we'll come to them shortly – it turns out the lakes don't contain water at all! So the dew ponds are our water-supply. We rely on them now. It certainly wasn't the pond-water that made me ill, for even though it was fresh and clean I used it for washing but drank emergency-ration water as long as it lasted, to be ultra-safe for the baby, and meanwhile set up a purifier to distill our drinking water (which in fact we still do).

Drinkable or purifiable water, breathable air, and an atmospheric envelope that protects from radiation (radioactivity) are what make it a Dreyfue 6. They're extremely rare, the four pre-conditions together. Tolerable temperatures, is the one I missed out. (Greenery isn't an official pre-condition since proper colonisers arrive with everything they need to grow their own.) Even colonised planets don't always have the air – it's a luxury not to have to live in a hermetically sealed box, wear breathing apparatus to go out, and expend much of your resources constantly manufacturing or recycling air and water. The air here is a mix surprisingly similar to Earth's, more oxygen but within human tolerance. A little extra's quite exhilerating! Low temperatures likewise, up to a point, can be tolerated or fended off as on Earth, but high temperature planets are uninhabitable (I don't mean tropical, I mean where your flesh melts). As I think I said earlier, MZ14-12 is temperate-to-warm, like a pleasant Spring holiday.

The one that's most critical or non-negotiable is the least obvious, the radioactivity: there's nothing we can do (without specialised structural materials, such as the spacecraft is made of) to dodge deadly solar and dark radiation, so there has to be some natural protection. Either that or we burrow into the ground and stay there, and evolve into worms – Earth worms. The complete upper-atmosphere haze that permanently envelopes Twelve protects us perfectly, keeping out more radiation than Earth's atmosphere does while letting in sufficient light and heat for life's needs and the mild, even climate.

So, that wasn't anything to do with my illness either – we'd be long dead if it had been radiation sickness. The geiger-counter was my constant companion, and never registered more than safe readings, whether ambient nor from specific objects or substances. I geigered the food and water and the wickerwork and everything, Robin's poo – you name it. I kept thinking of it when I was ill – at the back of my mind I *had* wondered if that might be the answer to why such an inviting planet hadn't been colonised. But it ain't.

Likewise I knew the terrors were hallucinatory, were delirious nightmares and products of fever and disorientation, because the very thing you don't get here is wind, nor any of the accompanying phenomena – the various sounds of wind, trees whispering (no, nor grass), buffeting and creaking of my wicker architecture (except when it creaks and sags and collapses of its own accord), trees rustling and swaying, clouds dashing across the sky, shadows lurching at you – none of the above. That's why I haven't bothered describing it in detail, the nights or days of terrifying blustery wind and menacing shadows and weird whispery murmerings that assailed our shack during the worst part of my illness – because I know it wasn't real, it was delirium. I knew really at the time, even though I was terrified; but I know for certain now, because it's never happened in all the years since – no wind, no breeze, no draught, not so much as a breath.

Shadows here are soft and slight (like ghosts!) and move slowly round with the Sun, which is always fuzzy because it's viewed through a gossamer haze; while the nearest thing to clouds are indistinct variations in the haze as it's closing in at evening, night being defined more by the falling of this thin mist than by actual darkness, which is briefer. Brief but total – did I mention there's no Moon? Twelve has no satellite, and no stars show through the perma-haze. Which would be disappointing if I was an astronomer, but on balance is good for keeping the nights from getting chilly as well as for keeping the starry-night blues at bay, the urge to feel sad or terrified, or to go insane, when you look out across the vast universe and contemplate how far from home you are.

If that's the mood you're in, it's the silence and stillness that's more likely to get you – the opposite to my delirious hallucinations. Windless and animal-less, it's so quiet you can actually hear the trees grow – they do a sort of airy, slightly squeaky fart, as an expanding rubbery thing would. I did used to get the starry-night terrors, once upon a time: the horrifying thought of how very far from home I am, the heart-breaking knowledge that I'll never see my mother again. But not any more – far from home I'm not, my home's here, with Robin. It's a spartan life, admittedly, and choice of company's limited; but luckily I love both, the place and the company. I think my companion does too. Now he's nearly grown and we've worked out our future – how we're going to conduct our lives together, and make a future – I'm content with the choice I made, the decision that landed us here.

And my stubborn resolve on that issue – the abortion – previewed a character trait that came in handy later. Even when things were at their worst, I think I knew we'd pull through. I'm fairly mentally resilient – I wouldn't have been on a spacecraft at all if I hadn't bluffed some tough psychological examiners into thinking I was – so I've always been able to rely on the instinctive parts, the adrenelin, the sheer will to survive. Anyway, survival's part of the job – the skills *and* the attitude – we're trained until it's second nature to us. That, willpower, stubbornness, maternal instinct, Merridew's double-ration, Chao's medical kit, all helped us pull through ... and who knows, perhaps Robin's right – permission to stay from the welcoming-committee.

From the micro immigration officials of the beautiful Green Planet.

The F Question

I had years to think about the million-dollar question. Years enough to worry it round in circles and back again, and change my mind a thousand times. A hundred and ninety-six anyway. Years and mind-changes enough – you'd have thought – to think of a name for it, yet I never really fixed on one. Let's call it the F Question – in honour of Friday Nights. The question of the Future. The Future of our species, our Family. It's a multi-layered conundrum. It's not just a question of *our* Future, it's a question of *the* Future, the Future of MZ14-12. Are we a blink in the history of nothing, Futility? or are we the Founders of a human colony on what is evidently one of the most Friendly and potentially Earth-like planets in the Firmament?

When viruses wipe out life on Earth or Sun goes ballistic, will humanity be all space vehicles and genetic Freezers and teflon suits and prefabricated colonial domes ... or will some nice natural humans still be living in their nice natural skin in a nice natural environment and doing nice natural things: bathing in dew, eating Fruit, Feeling – happy, sad, groovy, each other, themselves, who cares – Feeling human as they watch the hazy sunset? Fundamental, natural things like having Fun, including on Fridays, making Furniture out of tree-branches, raising a Family and looking to the Future.

I generally looked Forward to Friday Nights – back on the Patrol I mean. I think I've always scraped into the nice-girl category, and I've certainly never had Fun and Frolicks just for the sake of it, for mere Fysical gratification, mine or anybody else's; without candles and music it's meaningless! Without talking and tenderness and the beautiful delusion of being cherished ... But I'm not a nun and was never more than half-hearted (or mildly intoxicated) in the solitary business, the act of entertaining or cherishing myself (even *with* candles). So the F for Friday question arises before the F for Future question, even if it's less important. Do I really want to spend the rest

of my life celibate? or Frustrated? or Finding Fulfilment in my own Effing Fingers?

No, no candles in the survival pack, just a rather chunky solar-rechargeable torch; not my type at all I'm afraid. Though the emergency medical kit has some rubber tubing ... But seriously, is a relationship with a piece of rubbery vegetation anything more than a stop-gap – Forgive the expression – however Firm and Flexible? There's a shrub with long Fronds that compress when you squeeze them, like a green sponge, and then thicken out and elongate slowly over the next Fifteen minutes – wow ... but I mustn't digress – keep it for the cook-book: Chapter Five!

And what about Robin? when the time comes – or actually quite a bit before, to be Fair. Do I keep him in ignorance and then have some awkward explaining to do when he gets the itch? or scratches it? and realises there's a whole day of the week I haven't told him about? a Fascinating bit of his body – or mine – only half-explained. A Fundamental Fysiological Function I Forgot to mention! Do I bring him up to be a monk? or a Friar? careless of the Future, or anything else beginning with F. Or, do I Follow modern parenting and educate him Fully and Frankly into the options? – celibacy, onanism, Fellatio, Fetishism, Flora-philia: cutting little slits in a rubbery squashy vegetable, and/or ...

Of course I hope like all mothers that *he*'ll see it as more than gratification too, that he'll be blessed with the capacity to cherish, and the wish to *be* cherished. As I do. So, micro-inhabitants aside, where does *he* go For it? where does Robin Find beautiful affection and cherishment? never mind Fulfilment? Whom does he spend his Friday nights with, once he's old enough to know what they're For? what F really stands For. And to yearn For it. Where on Earth (err) is he going to Find a Friend on MZ14-12? Except ...

Yes, you begin to see my dilemma as a parent. Forbidden Fruit or no pudding at all. And thus, perhaps, you'll see how I reasoned myself – and I think it *is* reasonable, damn me if you like, but I really believe I was being rational, and unselfish – I reasoned myself into making the F Question revolve around what's best for *him*. *The* Future is *his* Future. *Our* Future is his. Because the same rationale dovetails what's best for Robin into the Future of the planet – to be or not to be – the Fate of the latest human colony marooned in space. I know well enough from the months I spent here without him (sort of) how utterly desolate and ... I don't think there's a word for it, for being all alone on a entire planet, not even your own, billions of miles across the Galaxy. When I die I want there to be someone else to keep him company, something for him to look Forward to – as *I* had *him*, the birth of my baby and a Future greater than just my own, to Fix my aspirations on, to live for, literally: to *not die* for.

There's no question *that* kept me sane and Focused from the outset, just as he himself, once he arrived, kept me determined not to die through my post-natal illness. Psychosomatic may or may not have helped cause it, but it undoubtedly helped me triumph over it – without something to live for and something, or rather someone, I *had* to live for, an instinct stronger than survival, probably the strongest drive wired into the human psyche, or anyway the Female psyche, the instinct to protect our offspring ... That's why I'm here, on this planet, after all – my instinctive inability to countenance the murder of my Foetus. What point would there have been, struggling back from the edge, when I was ill, if all I had to live for was a lifetime enduring the greatest loneliness the universe has to offer? I don't want Robin *ever* to know what that Feels like. Nothing is too 'sinful' or taboo or unmentionable that I wouldn't do it, to shield him from that.

F's a mischievously Flexible letter, naughty but nice, deep and shallow by turns. F for Future becomes such a big, such a serious question, the Friday Night contemplations that take you into it seem Frivolous. In the end Sex has nothing to do with it. Honestly. World-shortage of entertainment aside, loneliness or cherishment aside, the way to give greater meaning to our being here and being alive at all is Frankly to procreate: to be Fruitful and multiply. The only way to ameliorate my dying, for either of us – me knowing I leave him alone and him discovering for the First time what it's like to *be* alone – is to make sure he isn't: to become a Family, to Found a colony. Foil death that way. Looked at in that light it's not a Fraught decision. We have to do what all living creatures do, and are meant to do: we have to reproduce.

And that doesn't solve it of course. Once I've given him his new playmate – a daughter, a little sister, a second wife – we have to bring *her* up under a certain expectations management that allows her to realise her nature as a biological being too, but likewise with limited options. The Future passes to her along with my own dilemma – or non-dilemma, for it can't be a dilemma where there's lack of choice, can it? And my Fear of dying doesn't end with her. I suppose I shan't want to die until she's given me grandchildren.

It doesn't seem like a difficult choice, looking back. Robin I mean – deciding to tell Robin about Friday Nights, and spend them with him. And I'd like to be able to say it was obvious and spontaneous, that I had no qualms about it – *because* it's so obviously the right thing to do. Like the decision that got us here, I wish it had been like that. Because we've had such a nice time, we've had and we *have* such a Fantastic relationship – the Fysical, yes, but oh the cherishment! But human beings are human beings, on any planet. I Felt and still Feel huge hairy dollops of uncertainty and guilt and indecision and self-loathing and insecurity and shame and all that great useless baggage that human beings drag around the universe with them, that humans Feel but microbes and vegetables don't.

I agonised over it for twenty years; or rather, I had twenty years to agonise over it, so I did. MZ14 years. Though I think it was obvious after 18 of them (or 10½). If it hadn't been all along, the logic of what we had to do was obvious to me by then. And by an apt and peculiar coincidence – almost makes you believe in some kind of orchestrated Fate, destiny or God or whatever Earthlings call it – his 21st birthday (12¼ in Earth years) seemed the perfect time to commence. Gently. The gradual preliminaries I mean, the Foundation course, the nervous introductions and Fumbling. It was easy, and nice, and natural, it wasn't like you're imagining at all. I didn't take him by surprise, we didn't plunge into it like dog and bitch ...

We'd slept together often enough, all through his childhood, and we always slept in the same room. Bigger as it got with each rebuilding my famous basketwork cabin has only the one. We've always been tactile, and never bothered much with clothes, or privacy. The way we lived – the way we *had* to live here – gave us little alternative. He grew up at home in my embrace, knowing it was there for him, neither of us shy about bodily contact. He'd come out of one part of me and sucked Food from another, so what did *I* have to be coy about? why shouldn't he re-visit them, now, if the Fancy took him? So the Freshman stuff, the introductions and prelims, the Familiarisation, weren't awkward, really. Fiddling and giggling Followed, a season of Foreplay. Then, the Full consummation, our First proper Friday Night, came about naturally and almost unremarkably, when it Finally came about.

I know ... I know the intimacy even of the most uninhibited maternal affection isn't remotely the same as the intimacies of lovers. I'm not blurring them into one another. It's precisely because they're different, you Feel completely different, that I'm trying and probably Failing to explain the transition: the way that in unique and unforgiving circumstances, lovingly and tenderly and trying hard not to do harm, not to abuse or traumatise, how in a situation that left us no reasonable choice we progressed from being mother and son to being lovers; how I managed as best I could for the most honest of motives, to relinquish the role of mother for the role of wife.

Anyway wasn't it my job as a modern mother-wife to brief him about various things beginning with F? carefully but Frankly, while weaving into it an ongoing discussion of the F Question, the pseudo-dilemma that applied uniquely to *us*. The Foundation course was as much cerebral as practical, there was lots of discussion. He's an intelligent boy, you'll have gathered – I'm proud as a mother could be of his brain, though I like his body too – he grasped the import of the F Question quickly, quickly overcame embarrassment in speaking of it, quickly had rational and confident views of his own on the matter. He didn't agree with me about everything – which was Fine, I was pleased; it's high time I stopped getting my own way! Bearing in mind I'd educated him single-handedly, it's little short of a miracle how

clever and articulate and sensible he is. Though I like to think his emotional depth and sensitivity, his capacity for genuine affection, is something I can take credit for ...

So in the end it was *his* idea, as much as mine, and the timing more especially so, our First Full Friday Night. The Final Fulfilment. The big F. It was Robin came to me, all Frisky, that Fabulous Friday. And believe it or not it was me Felt like the novice, it was me Felt like it was my First time. A small step for him, a giant leap for me. A leap of Faith ... It was natural and nice, and very loving. It Felt right. We both enjoyed it, slept soundly, and woke up without regrets.

When the baby comes I'll have another twenty years or so, MZ14 years – or rather we'll have, Robin and I – to help a little human being become the clever, sensitive person she's capable of being, and to agonise and Fret and Feel guilty about what we're going to do to her, what Future we – or Fate – already have Fixed for her. Or in Robin's case perhaps to look Forward to – though I Flatter myself he'll be content with his mother-wife for the time being, not *too* eager to swap her for his new sister/daughter-wife. Not for a while anyway. Though on reflection he doesn't have to – I mean, he doesn't necessarily have to divorce me (or I might divorce him!) to mate with her. I'm not sure why I presumed there were laws of monogamy here – monogamous rubbery green bushes ...

But there is another consideration, projecting Forward. At our customary low birth-rate (back on Earth) the problem doesn't go away. At one or two children per couple per generation, each generation (the word ceases to have a pure meaning in our case) Faces the same moral dilemma – though perhaps if they're not taught to see it that way, they won't ... But the point is, to move away from it you have to create cousins, and to create cousins you have to have more children, larger Families – I ought really to have Four, two brother-sister couples. Twins perhaps! Then *their* offspring will be cousins and things start getting normal.

That's biologically necessary anyway – it's not just about Earth morals or taboos: as Founding Fathers we're seriously lacking in genetic diversity, given the health-risks of inbreeding, of pairing identical DNA. That's the scientific basis of the taboo of course. Spending Friday Night with your son or your Father isn't inherently wrong, nature has no 'sinful' or 'immoral', it's just programmed into us that way because it's risky for the genetic health of our descendants. But *we* have no choice – other than the truly unthinkable, extinction. Like cannibalism after a crash (no, it hasn't come to that yet, anyway we're vegetarians) it's mitigated by the unforgiving circumstance, the absolute starkness of the life-or-death choice ...

First generation should be OK. It's a cumulative thing, the detrimental effect of inbreeding I mean. But after a Few generations you need as

genetically diverse a population as possible. There's also the other long-term question, that of demographic viability – small breeding populations are always vulnerable, breeding populations of one or two couples are on the edge of extinction, like pandas and rhinoceroses, which exist only because of human intervention. A colony like a species is critically endangered and not likely to survive until there's a stable and naturally self-renewing population. Ideally we should churn out ten or a dozen (no, I don't have time, I've only got one or two left in me, age-wise), and each pair of them should do likewise, not to create an Earth-style population explosion or a wicker-hut shanty town but to present pair-bonding diversity and assured demographic continuity to the generations that follow.

And what if it's a boy? My baby by Robin I mean.

Trek to the Green Lake

You'd think I'd be curious about the planet that was now my home, but I assumed it was all the same and saw little reason for exploration beyond a comfortably defined area around where we lived. Or anyway, that's the mind-set I got myself into. Strolling in the park rather than exploring. Which is what it mostly resembles – the area where we live, and I originally thought most of the planet's surface was like this – an English country-house park, gently rolling (not quite flat) grassland with occasional clumps of trees or shrubs and a few ponds. Without the Grecian temples and the rare-breed cattle, and the car parks.

I was misled, in some measure, by the definitions and pictures. MZ14-12 really is a 'green' planet: as Earth looks blue Twelve looks green, and really is. All analysis has shown it almost entirely covered in green grassland or tundra, with frequent clusters of green trees, and occasional lakes or inland seas also green, oddly (or not – the options were either green in the same way that Earth's skies and oceans are blue, an optical predisposition I think they call it; or alternatively full of green plant-life, algae, phyto-plankton) – but no forests, green or otherwise, and definitely no deserts, mountains, or oceans. Nothing to spoil the colour scheme, except for frosty bits at either pole, as is usual in the habitable Dreyfue 3-to-7 zone. And no evidence of significant contours or beautiful scenery – unless you fancy green!

But of course I should have realised the distant pictorial mapping of planets flattens them to the point of optical illusion. I remember now, from student days, the Moon pictures that showed a circular feature, like a giant flat race-track; the picture taken under slightly different lighting conditions showed the same thing as a huge crater or depression; the new picture from the surface revealed it was one of the most gigantic volcano-like mountains on the entire Moon.

I'm being a bit unfair on myself. I explored at first, on first arriving, of course I did: I had to. I found us the ideal place to live – the ideal place

for my son to be born – and we live there still. I satisfied myself the surroundings weren't hostile, or swampy, or radioactive; I formed the impression they were boringly similar, for many miles in any direction, which was good. I noted alternative dew-ponds and shrubberies, in case ours proved inadequate (we have occasionally augmented our supplies of edible shrubs from them, so as not to over-harvest the local resources). But this initial reconnaissance was the necessary preliminary to a settled, safe existence; it didn't, and even if it might have I couldn't allow it to, inflame me with wanderlust. My duty for most of the next twenty local years was to do the opposite – to nurture my precious offspring and protect him from all risk.

Throughout his childhood Robin's welfare was paramount, which meant being precious with myself too. If *anything* happened to me it might compromise him, as well as terrifying him (when he was little I mean). So I set a limit and kept to it for years, effectively a few miles radius: that was *our* territory, our manor. We went for walks and runs of course, once he was mobile, exercise was essential, for both of us; but for anything beyond a jog around the dew-ponds I carried emergency supplies in all categories – defensive, medical, food, bivouacking – making for quite a heavy back-pack.

My policy was to go no further than the distance at which I needed to rest. I was absolutely strict about it. Once I needed to rest, I rested, and then we turned round and came back. Yes, a picnic, of course; but then we headed back. The point being that I was carrying everything that would guarantee our survival in the event of a mishap or of encountering something hostile (terrain, climate, aliens, geiger-counter going crazy), while we were never further from home-base than I knew we could get back in a single walk, or run (or crawl).

But it's true I suppose that in consequence I'd trained myself to be less inquisitive about the planet than might have been normal. And OK, perhaps I'd got a bit lazy. It was Robin's restless energy and growing curiosity shook me out of it. He was forever gazing east, or sweeping with the binoculars, and then once the evening mist came in nagging me about mounting an expedition. I *had* noticed them, of course, the distant highlands that formed our eastern horizon. But it was Robin who wanted to visit them. His eagerness, irritating at first, was infectious in the end. So it was Robin's urge to explore (having got to an age for exploring, and urges) dragged us on our first trek, our first vacation I suppose, where we discovered the green velvet mountains, and beyond them the beautiful Green Lake.

My resistance seems odd now, looking back. Perhaps I was being *too* cautious – but as far as I was concerned any trek outside our comfort zone, especially into unknown landscape like hills, was out of the question until my Number 2 was mature enough to face the worst imaginable outcome and survive (me being eaten by a big green bush, him being separated from me and getting lost in a big green desert,

either of us – or both if us – stumbling into a big green swamp). I had to have taught him basic survival skills, practical *and* psychological; he had to know what to do, have the mental maturity to focus on doing it, be strong or skilled enough to do it. I understood his frustration (and occasionally feared he might defy me and set off alone), but it just wasn't sensible to make a journey into unexplored territory until he was old enough to splinter and bandage me, drag me home, and stay fairly calm and purposeful while doing it, in the event that I fell and broke my leg (for example). Tripped over a big green log.

So when it came time I recruited a well-trained, sensible youngster as my second-in-command and scout. First we reconnoitred, approaching it in stages. We made several extended walks, returning home the same day, the next day, and after two days. This was both to accustom ourselves to the rigours and to reassure ourselves (me) that the territory did not become hostile. The geiger-counter stayed at base-normal; neither green swamps nor walking bushes engulfed us. We went at a deliberately leisurely pace. Well I did; Robin kept running ahead and running back so *he* went three-times the distance (and slept like a log). I carried ample survival and emergency stuff, as usual, and extra water. On one of these dummy treks we took additional supplies and put down an interim camp – a way-station with food, water, emergency supplies, and tent, just in case. Thus prepared and reassured, we set off on our first proper expedition, and headed into the hills.

They were broader and higher than we'd thought, but the slope was gentle. The grass shrank and petered out almost immediately in favour of an upland vegetation like moss: the hills are almost entirely covered in this thin velvetty carpet. Two days saw us on the first summit. From there it was obvious that an undulating landscape of mossy mountains continued in this direction, though they all look the same – smooth and moss-covered. We haven't been beyond the third, which if my aneroid barometer is calibrated correctly is about 800 metres higher than local-base (the second dew-pond just below our hut). South of the third hill, and stretching away east as far as the eye can see, is the Green Lake.

We discovered blue crystals, outcropping where the moss is thinnest at the hilltops. So now we have some home-made jewellery; the bracelet's my masterpiece (until the necklace is finished – slow going). We discovered semi-dry hillside hollows or tarns containing a revolting mustard-coloured mud or clay, that I've been attempting to make pottery of; and failing. And we discovered the huge Green Lake. Or sea perhaps, we couldn't see its end. So still, so absolutely flat and still, that it looked like a fake lake, a model: the gently sloping green land coming down to a flat plastic slightly-shiny surface, also green, pretending to be a lake. But when we touched it with our fingers it was liquid, green liquid.

Robin wanted to swim, he'd just have paddled straight into it. It brought home to me how different we were – how much his

environment was contributing to his education. Earth was a foreign country to him; to him, Earth was the alien planet, not Twelve! His norm was here, whatever we discovered he accepted as normal and natural. It wasn't peculiar to him at all, the lake, he didn't see why a lake shouldn't be full of opaque green liquid. He'd have splashed straight in, swallowed a few gulps, and then gone for a swim. But I wouldn't let him, not on the first few visits.

I brought a bottle of it back, expecting my microscope would reveal it was water full of algae or whatever, dense microscopic vegetable life, impurity as it might be called on Earth. I don't have a powerful microscope, but the trusty McArthur-Galaxy in the survival pack is quite good – it shows no content or structure, it doesn't resolve the liquid at all, not into cells or grains nor into a watery habitat for little green organisms in abundance. It appears to show a naturally green liquid, solidly green, like paint.

The basic chemical tests I had or could contrive were neutral or indeterminate; except it was slightly alkaline of course. Filtration proved the microscope right, the green liquid was fine enough to pass through anything I had without leaving residue. Heating and distilling it did extract water, which is not surprising, all life-forms contain a fair amount of water; leaving a greenish paste, which could be further desiccated by repeated distillations into something like dried leaf-cake. Which except for the negatives (it didn't become crystalline, it never entirely lost its pigmentation, it was all a waste of effort) told me nothing very useful about it. And Robin, believing it was a living organism, thought it was cruel. I'd rather make fires to cook, or make pots, so we decided enough was enough and drew a line. Final desperate experiment: I sucked a dipped finger ... it tasted like green liquid, I didn't die, I didn't get diarrhoea.

I'd forgotten how precocious you can be at that age – how assured and mature and fearless. I was like that too, once upon a long time ago. I was eleven when I announced my career choice of astronaut. My mother was appalled; and I remember now being perplexed as well as frustrated by her counselling me to keep my options open for a few more years. In fact I was hurt by her disbelief, her literal lack of belief in me, in my capacity (and right) to have decided by such a mature age exactly who and what I was. And like Robin, I was right. You'll be gone for such a long time, I remember her saying ...

We argued and he defied me. Several visits later, when he was beginning to think and act independently, some way into our Sex Education phase, he walked into the Green Lake, firmly not looking round when I called his name. I've never been strict with him, and never punished him – a look of hurt betrayal is my usual fall-back, or the old you-and-me line: it's just you and me sweetheart, if *we* can't co-operate ... He was always so intelligent, he usually understood. So if reasoning with him didn't work, forbidding him or shouting at him was

out of character and irrational, I couldn't do it. It would rankle as our worst argument, his only out-and-out defiance of me ever – except that, after a good long swim, and me watching in clenched trepidation in case he disappeared (zero visibility, unknown depth, plus suspicion that the liquid might eat him), he came running out straight into my arms mixing I'm sorry with It's great Ma it's lovely, please try it. It was the first time I'd noticed he was taller than me.

It was, it *was* lovely. It was beautiful. Swimming in the Green Lake was the most beautiful thing I've done here – it was in the top four anyway! The most beautiful thing I've done without assistance from another living being. Though I'm not sure that's true either – I think the Green Lake may be exactly that, a gigantic living being or a gigantic community of ultra-microscopic beings in symbiosis, a super-organism, like a coral reef. I might also have said it's the most beautiful thing I've done without having an orgasm – swimming that is – but point 1 is, I didn't quite have one when I was giving birth, and point 2, I now think I probably did when I swam in the lake. I didn't realise it at the time, or name it, and we were laughing and having such a nice time, I abandoned myself to the pleasure of it; but that's what it was like, as I swam through the green liquid, it was like, or probably *was*, one of those lovely slow gentle all-over ones ...

I went in at first for Robin, in spite of my qualms, in spite of my distaste at first, not to mention the fear of being consumed – I'd pictured us being absorbed into it, like a fly in a carniverous plant! But he worked so hard begging me to join him, to swim with him, I did it to please him. It was consuming in a different sense – it was completely overwhelming – as he'd sort of said it was. I think he was under-zaggerating actually, he was probably embarrassed about how intense the pleasure was. Or couldn't put it into words if I wouldn't feel it for myself. And speaking of orgasms ... I remember now, how he mentioned it after our first, our first Friday Night. Which was also beautiful and overwhelming. He said it felt like swimming in the lake. I didn't think anything of it at the time, I was too busy having a different, somewhat jerkier orgasm; but he was right, it did.

We thought of moving to the lakeside but decided not to. The dew-ponds and trees and other vegetation around our first original home, our lovely parkland, are rather useful, our essential food and water-supply. Its orientation to the Sun (I've decided for want of a better name to call MZ14 The Sun), its combination of light and shade, open space and trees, are perfect. We debated it a little, obviously it was Robin who was the keener to move up into the hills and be near his belovèd lake. In the end we were agreed that fetching water from distant dew-ponds wasn't a chore we needed; but a trek to the Green Lake wasn't a chore at all, it was healthy and fun, and will now be a regular part of our life. We go up every few weeks. We swim, we make love. We enjoy the walk too, at least I do, and I certainly needed

the exercise. I've been a lot leaner and fitter since taking up (or resuming) walking and swimming, and Friday Nights.

It was just after we consummated our new relationship that I gave in and swam in the lake. Now we were lovers, official, physical, I was more biddable. Funny but I was, I lost a little of my feisty independence and a good deal of my mother-knows-best, and found myself happy to defer to him as an equal, as my partner, as (dare I say it) the man in the relationship. The man of the rickety wicker house! I was eager to please him and to share with him, as lovers are. So that's why (or why I thought at the time) I gave in and swam, just at that particular moment. But now I see a more direct connection, a more real physical-psychological interplay between making love and swimming. I think I knew that once I'd shared my body with him, I must accept his sharing the lake with me; subconsciously I knew they were linked.

And once again I have to concede that Robin could be right – it's a ménage à trois. It might not have been me who initiated him after all. It was the great Green Lake he had his first Full Friday with, *then* me. Then I had it with the lake. What's the point denying it's a life-form in its own right? green being, after all, the universal colour of vegetable life. It's a zoophyte hermaphrodite, both/neither male and female, both/neither animal or plant. I haven't decided if it's the biggest motherfucker on the planet or the smallest. Since the liquid doesn't resolve in my microscope, I don't know, optically or scientifically. But spiritually I know. My soul knows, perhaps my body too, that it's a living creature. Whether great big green nympho or billions of little green nymphettes in unison, I know the lake's a sentient sensual being.

It *is* like water by the way, it's not slimy, it's not gunge (the natural expectation or prejudice – which Robin didn't have of course). It's not horrible in the slightest. It's a bit thicker than water, more like paint, as I've said. So it's buoyant, you float in it, and it's much more tactile and sexy to swim through. When you come out most of it runs off you, it doesn't cling or stain you – well only slightly. It doesn't evaporate of course (since it's not water). The towel we wipe our hair with we somehow don't like to ring out, so we hang it on a tree beside the lake and it drips dry. What's left on us runs off when we lie on the grass after a swim, and (we assume) makes its way back to its matrix, the lake. Or sometimes, we lick it off one another ...

We haven't plumbed the depths, diving equipment not being part of our survival kit. We'll probably do exactly that, contrive a plumb-line, something heavy on some stringy green rope, one of these days when we're bored. I suspect it's not very deep. For the rest, *we're* the guinea pigs. Swimming and drinking aren't separate issues: you can't swim without some of it entering your system, even aside from gulping or licking. So far so good. It hasn't poisoned us yet, nor turned us into cabbages. I have goggles but didn't bother, I followed Robin in not

worrying about it getting in my eyes – it isn't uncomfortable and doesn't seem to do any harm. I already have green eyes anyway.

And Robin's are turning green since we started making love.

Dream of the Green Girl

I dreamed she turned out green, Robin's sister, my daughter. *Our* daughter, our beautiful child. The hormone tests confirm she's a girl. We're both everso pleased. I want to thank God or shout Hallelujah or do a rain-dance or something – I've spent much of my life trying not to believe that life and the universe are miraculous: then I came to MZ14-12; then I made Robin; then I made love with Robin; then I swam in the Green Lake; and now ... Well anyway. We're thinking of calling her Marion – Robin and Marion, ha-ha.

But I dreamed her green. She came out of *me* but she was green. Beautiful, smooth skinned, long limbed – already eleven soon after being born (in the dream) – running with him hand-in-hand, laughing and green. I wasn't horrified. I wasn't appalled or mystified or alienated. I was sad, especially when she grew up so quickly, twelve or fourteen in no time (dreams are good at these rapid transformations), for I knew I would lose him to her, young and beautiful and full of laughter. They would go and live in a cabin by the lake, laughing and swimming, dancing at the lakeside, making love ... leaving me like a widow in the low pastures. And I didn't feel I was her mother, really, I was just the carrier, the incubator. Or the mother-in-law!

Yet I wasn't horrified. I didn't question her, her colour, her origin. I didn't hate her. I accepted and took it for-granted she was as she should be, a native of the Green Planet, a vegetable girl. I loved her. And I'd never seen skin so smooth, so beautiful, never heard laughter so light and angelic and liquid. She spoke in a whisper, like a warm breeze. She skipped and ran everywhere; and Robin ran with her, and held her hand. They were inseperable. They swam together in the Green Lake, in which she was invisible. Her eyes were also green – so at least she has *something* of me. Her hair ... oddly I don't remember her hair, from the dream; it must have been green too – or perhaps she stayed bald. Yet beautifully so, beautifully smooth and bald and bare, and green.

It will be right. I cannot hold on to my origins, my ethnicity; I can't hold back their destiny, the destiny of my descendants. It will be right for them to be new people, people of this planet. I hope now it *is* so – I hope she *will* be green. It doesn't make sense. Waking, it doesn't make sense, it was just a dream. Yet some dreams aren't, some dreams are by no means just dreams. I dreamed of Robin before he was born, and he was every inch as beautiful as I dreamed him. I dreamed of making love with him, improper and improbable as it seemed, and we eventually did. It came true. I dreamed of swimming in the lake ...

So now, since my dream of the Green Girl, I hope it will be so. I hope our daughter will be green. Except for my milk, his diet has been native green stuff, he's never eaten anything else. I can see my way to a scientific rationale of it. You are what you eat. Robin fathers the first Green Girl; together they are the ancestors of the new Green People. I can't dismiss it, my medical training doesn't reject it. If Robin's near-exclusive nutrition has come from the vegetation of the planet, some part of him – the softer more liquid parts of him – aren't or isn't me, or Earth, or his father, but the beginning already of a merger, a hybrid, a new species.

That's quite apart from the micro-fellas, if they exist, which (if they exist) are microphytes – tichy green plants. I no longer think it makes sense to dismiss the homogeneity of the planet's native life. I've thought about it, and faffed around with my microscope, long enough for science and dreams to merge; and Robin's right – they're veggie, they're green, and they're our friends. If he's also right that they're inside him, however or whenever they got there, it's not scientifically or biologically impossible that they would be transmitted in his sperm. It's perfectly feasible that our offspring, his offspring, will have something of the planet in it, in her. His ejaculation *is* slightly greenish, always has been.

And it just occurs to me that that solves our genetic diversity problem, which I was worrying about earlier. It could be *better* than benign, it could be the very thing we need to keep our offspring (the girl) and *her* offspring (by Robin) and their descendants genetically healthy, to save our progeny, our future race, from the curse of inbreeding. When Robin eventually mates with his green daughter her DNA will be significantly different from his, optimising the quality of their children, from a breeder's point of view. *And* unlike me, she'll be starting early enough to have ten or a dozen, broadening the genetic diversity and solving the demographic conundrum too, the species viability.

So the girl – our Green Girl – will get her good looks, her green eyes, her bodily structure, her large brain, her nice personality (I hope) from me, from us, a human being, an Earthling; but Robin will pass on to her the beginnings of her new species identity, the magic ingredient, his body the vehicle, a bridge across the biological divide. The greatest barrier for life to cross: the transmutation from vegetable to animal; the inception of animal life on Twelve. Pigmentation is a variable, soft-wired not hard, it's not that hard to alter; or anyway a single gene can flip it. OK *genes* aren't altered by diet. The genetic cells though, germ cells and genomes ... *they* could be altered, or entered, by our microscopic friends if they've colonised us, or him, as he believes. If they're small enough; if they exist. But we're in unknown territory, this ain't Kansas. A Green Planet, an entirely vegetal world, a world with a Green Lake and green trees, has to have bio-genetic capacities and possibilities unknown on Earth, not operating to our rules.

Humans are arrogant. But I've been here long enough to know I'm a newcomer, a stranger in an alien world – benign, I still hope, I'm pretty sure, but alien nonetheless. These green plants aren't plants – *they're* the indigenous population, the aliens; the green water's some sort of alien life-form; even the microorganisms are little aliens – invisibly little but green! Their long-term biological capabilities, all of them, their potential, their destiny, are unknown to me, are not part of the science I learned, don't follow the rules (or limitations) I take for granted. Who's to say there can't be Green People on a Green Planet? a vegetable-animal fusion in a place where the biological balance is so different? It would be outrageous human arrogance for me to sit here on MZ14-12 and say the green gene can't have migrated into Robin's body, become part of his chemistry, entered his sperm, affect his descendants, our descendants.

The first Green Girl is not a scientific impossibility. Nor is she a freak, a curiosity, a mutant. Nor is she an aberration. She's the Future. My future, the planet's future, humanity's future. She's a beautiful triumph of evolutionary syncretism, of adaptive evolution, of genetic cooperation and assimilation. And of Love. She's a miracle, an evolutionary miracle, *our* miracle. I now long for it, long for her, long for her to be green. I already love her that way.

I shall be disappointed if she isn't.

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Note

This semi-copycat story is inspired by Marion Zimmer Bradley's short story "The Wind People" (1959), a haunting, dreamy and ultimately nightmarish story of a mother and baby son who voluntarily stay 'on an idyllic green paradise of a planet ... inhabited only by trees and winds'. The names of my characters Commander Merridew, Lin Chao, and Robin might be suspected of having been loosely based upon those of her characters Captain Merrihew, Chao Lin, and Robin. (And did she choose Robin because her name was Marion?) Less unsubtly, the idea that 'Something about ship-gravity conditions' (her words) impedes conception is an MZ invention (derived presumably from the concern when training the first astronauts that zero-gravity would impede menstruation, though as far as I'm aware it doesn't); while the notion of the boy being especially empathetic with the world to which he is not an alien is the core of her story. What I wanted instead of wind or wind people however was the F Question, and a less pessimistic ending – a dream instead of a nightmare.

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