

SCIENCE FICTION

Maya's Blossoms

By H.M. Friendly

When she was nine, my daughter Maya disappeared from her bed, without a trace, late on December 24th. She wasn't the only one. That night, nearly every child in the Western Hemisphere vanished. Christmas arrived to riots and a raw, anguished wailing.

However, that morning, I awoke at daybreak, to silence. This alone was nothing strange: most parents slept in as long as they could. It was our earned right to make the kids wait till eight or nine, when we'd had at least one cup of coffee. But, every year, I would come padding into the living room to find Maya on the couch in her pajamas, usually assuaging her impatience by noisily playing with her dolls, action figures, and toy cars, using the back of the couch as a mountaintop stage upon which they enacted and recontextualized the ongoing drama of her short life.

She would yip in excitement when she saw me. Then she would run and jump into my arms, babbling nonstop. I would squeeze her solid warmth and bury my nose in her tangled, wispy hair, breathing her sweet musty scent for just a moment before she launched herself off me to go diving into the presents.

Yet that morning I knew something was different. When I awoke, it felt as if some invisible force was pulling at me, trying to reconfigure me, rearranging me at a molecular level. It felt like I had awoken in a separate place entirely, although everything around me looked completely familiar.

I walked down the creaking hallway. The coloured lights on the tree bathed the room in variegated, flickering hues. I looked on the couch; Maya was not there. I looked in her room; Maya was not there. I looked outside, upstairs, downstairs, in closets, my panic rising.

Maya was not there.

Soon, the neighborhood echoed with sirens. I was on hold with the police for nearly an hour before being disconnected; I imagine nearly every house in the country was calling. Across the continent, sweet-smelling evergreen trees stood silent and twinkling, their gifts undisturbed.

Hundreds of thousands of children had gone missing, and nobody knew why, or how. There were no signs of break-ins, no struggles, no ransom notes. Nothing but an empty silence, a surreal feeling that we'd all been transported to an alternate dimension within which nothing is right and nothing makes sense. We were a broken people.

That was four years ago. Maya would be thirteen, now. It makes me cry to think about it. But still, life must go on.

I buried myself in my work as a neuropsychologist, studying the strange environment of dreams and dream logic, like how we may say to someone the next morning, "You were there, but you didn't look like you."

Where is the crucial point at which an altered reality is completely accepted without argument?

Somehow, determining this seemed even more relevant after we lost our kids.

I would take to the bar after work, and sit in the murky yellow light, the air thick with cigarette smoke, and watch all the other empty-eyed ex-parents stare through the amber liquid in their glasses, their eyes dark and glassy. Tensions boiled over: people brawled and crawled all over each other, bashing and smashing and yelling their anguish.

They lashed out at the innocent, too. Word quickly got out who *didn't* lose their kids, and those parents were bullied and ostracized.

I remember stumbling through an icy parking lot late at night. I had somebody's arm around my shoulder; he was staggering, blood streaming from his face. He had been attacked without provocation by two assholes in a bar. They shattered a pint glass with his face, telling him he didn't belong there because he still had his kids. I couldn't hope to fight them off, so instead I shouted that it wasn't his fault and that now, more than ever, his kids needed their father. It was a shot in the dark, but it worked. They stopped and stared and looked ashamed, then tidied his collar and tried to buy him a beer. Of course, he just wanted to go home to his children.

People dealt with the tragedy in all sorts of ways, and this included those lucky parents. There were a few hundred kids left, and most perplexing was that there were households who lost one child, but not another. Some parents became neurotic, keeping wakeful watch over their children every night. Others pointed out that the children who remained said they were too excited to sleep, and suggested keeping them awake indefinitely, lest they also disappear. Of course, this was rejected as an abusive solution, but ironically, these parents were right – sleep was indeed the axis around which the vanishing rotated.

Yet, even more tragic were the parents who lost their children, and the grief drove them insane. Absurd nutcases rambling about totally illogical, unscientific theories. I couldn't help but pity them.

Anyhow, this is pretty depressing... I'd much rather think about Maya, who was the sunshine that made rainy roads sparkle.

She had a smile that was like a lantern in a dungeon: no matter how bad things were, seeing Maya smile was like a window opening into an ethereal realm from which I never wanted to leave. Even if it was just to try to cheer me up after a hard day, she was never hesitant to smile. Some evenings I'd be tired and irritable, and she would curl up in my lap, all bundled up in a blanket with her tiny bare feet

poking out, and she would simply talk about whatever thoughtful things came to her mind, or maybe she would invent stories and jokes on the spot. She was always smiling; she cracked my cold, surly, concrete scowl every time.

She had fine, wispy, golden hair that shone in the sunlight and was always in tangles. She had a tiny nose with perfect symmetry, with angles that seemed soft and sharp at the same time. She constantly mumbled and giggled to herself, in her own little world, and when she laughed hard, it was an effervescent, bright sound, like bubbles rolling over each other, and she would have a fit of hiccups every time. Her blue eyes seemed brightly backlit and were often wide with excitement.

She had a sense of wondrous curiosity about the mechanics of the world, how and why things were the way they were.

“Wow, Daddy, look at this awesome leaf!” she said once, running over to show me a leaf I had seen a million times before. Totally unremarkable.

“What’s awesome about it?” I said, and she held it up to the light so that the sun made the chlorophyll glow green, and an amazing network of veins and structural elements would appear.

“Sееее? It’s soooo coooool!” She traced each little line carefully with a tiny fingertip.

“You know, if you peel it apart, you can see all of that glistening beneath the surface, without having to hold it up,” I said. “Here, like this.” And I tried to take the leaf, to show her, but she looked aghast and twisted her body to hold it as far away from me as possible, safe between her palms. Her eyes flickered with alarm, and I couldn’t help but apologize for the affront.

Maya loved dreams.

Every morning, at breakfast, she recounted them in great detail. From knights and castles to weird space monsters, Maya had been there. She told me about her adventures as I herded her around the house, getting her ready for school. While I waited outside her bedroom for her to get dressed, she continued regaling me through the door. When I asserted that she momentarily stop orating to brush her teeth, *properly*, I thought her head would explode. Then, as soon as she spat and rinsed, she was back at it again.

Maya *lived* in her dreams.

“Daddy, I found this awesome world!” she exclaimed one day at lunch. “You should come with me ’n’ see it!”

I was chopping red peppers for a green salad. “Honey, dreams aren’t real. I can’t come into your mind,” I said, but I felt a growing curiosity.

She frowned. “No, you go to it in *your* dream,” she said. Then she beamed at how clear she had made the concept. I pondered a moment.

“So...a dream is like a room with multiple doors?” I said. “You go into it in *your* dream, and I go into it in mine; then we’re both in the same dream? And it’s totally real?”

“Uh-huh!” She bounced up and down and wiggled her hips; we had just shared a moment of intellectual solidarity.

I murmured and lapsed into thought.

“So will ya come?” she prodded me.

“I’ll try, honey,” I said, and I was actually serious.

As I was tucking her into bed, she described the dream she was going to have, and how I should go about having it, too, as if she were giving me directions somewhere. She spoke of a playground, and cherry blossoms. As I fell asleep, I concentrated on this vision. I held it in my mind until it fractured, and I sank into oblivion.

“You didn’t come,” said Maya the next morning, her voice heavy with disappointment. I assured her that I really *did* try, and it didn’t even occur to me to ask how she knew I hadn’t been there. I wouldn’t even think of it until a couple years after she disappeared.

It was around that time I learned about the rogue planet.



“Get this,” said Daniel, one of my fellow researchers, about a year ago. “That Christmas Eve, a massive planet passed close to the earth.”

“Which one?” I said. My understanding of our planetary orbitals did not suggest this was possible.

“They didn’t specify, but it wasn’t from here; it blasted right through our solar system. It was big enough that the sun couldn’t even capture it.”

“That same night,” I said slowly.

He nodded. “The next morning, did you get the feeling that something just *wasn’t right*?”

I couldn’t even respond, but the look on my face must have said a lot, because Daniel winced.

He never had kids.

“Sorry, dude,” he said, flushing a little. “I mean, other than that.”

“I did get that feeling, yes,” I said slowly, staring into myself, trying to see past all the wreckage to that one moment when my life was just on the apex of obliteration.

“A planet that big has gotta have a major gravitational pull of its own, a *huge* electromagnetic signature. I wonder if those two events are causally related,” said Daniel. “Especially since the Vanishing only happened on one side of the planet.”

An MRI machine works by aligning the protons of hydrogen atoms within our body to a specific orientation and polarity, using huge magnets. It manipulates the magnetic resonance of our tissue.

I was thinking about this on the way home that day when I absent-mindedly fumbled the gearshift, nearly throwing it into reverse while advancing. Fortunately, it didn't shift; it just ground horribly.

Our brains are susceptible to magnetic frequencies, and therefore, being inseparable, so are our conscious minds. I read a paper from a theoretical physicist who stated that alternate realities are nothing more than successive bands of electromagnetic resonances in incremental frequencies. If an object can be induced to align to the resonance of another dimension, it will shift over instantaneously, like a smooth gear change. If the resonances are dissonant, it won't happen. It'll grind.



“So tell me something,” Daniel said a few months later as we were working to modify an old MRI machine. “If it's true that the planet produced a massive magnetic resonance shift, why didn't all the adults get flipped, too?”

“Because children *believe* that dreams are real, and this already changes their physiology; they undergo a resonance shift on their own,” I replied. “The planet simply boosted it to the next band.”

Daniel simply shrugged. He stared off into the distance for several minutes before speaking.

“You know, nobody understands what you're doin' here, man,” he said. “I don't even get it. The best I can grasp is that you theorize our children have been transported to an alternate dimension by an ‘electromagnetic resonance shift,’ and you're modding this machine to try to bring 'em back. To reunite all of these bereft parents with their children. That's the whole reason we've been doin'”

this, right?” Daniel’s eyes pleaded with me for some semblance of comprehension and cohesion.

I stood up and walked over to the coffee machine. The coffee was cold, but I poured it anyway.

“No,” I said. “To bring them back, we would need to alter the children’s resonances in those other dimensions, and we don’t have the capacity for that. Going there is our only option. We must *join* them.”

Daniel stared at me for a very long moment. Then slowly, unblinking: “You’re... expecting everybody who lost their children... to just flash themselves into some unknown dimension and *never return?!?*” His jaw hung open, his eyes wide.

“Daniel,” I said, sipping my cold black coffee, “I don’t give a damn what *everybody* does. I’m doing this for me.”

For the first time since I’ve known him, Daniel turned pale. We worked in relative silence for the next few months. I lost a friend that day, but I didn’t care. Of course he wouldn’t understand. He never had kids. He was also expendable. His validation was not required.

I had a goal. Maya and I were going to be together again, or I’d die trying.



Fog obscures the ground, low clouds, like steam rising from a city sewer at night, drifting high and white into the sky. It’s snowing, but the snow is floating upwards, rising into the white void, and they’re actually cherry blossoms, soft and velvety, and I can fly, too. I go up, and up, and up, following the cherry blossom snow. Upside down, in the sky, an orchard approaches. The trees are blooming pink; the ground is covered in it; I alight and sink to my shins in the stuff. I wade through the fragrant snow, and a wind picks it up in a swirling storm that obscures my vision completely, but I keep walking, and it settles down. Far in front of me I see a children’s playground. It’s empty, except for one lone

figure spinning and dancing around the structures. I quicken my pace, and now I'm here, but I stop right at the edge. I can't go any further.

You turn and you see me, and your eyes light up. You run to me; your feet are bare; you're wearing your favourite green dress; your shimmering blonde hair is totally tangled. You look just as I remember you, and you glow like an angel. As I did, you stop right at the border between the orchard and the playground. You're out of breath; your cheeks are cherry red.

"You came!" you shout. "You finally came!"

I can only nod wordlessly, my breath catching in my throat in a suppressed sob. There's a palpable pain in my chest. I take a deep shuddering breath. "But I can't stay. I'm not close enough yet."

"What'ja mean?" you say, crestfallen. You reach up to me, and I automatically hold my arms out for your embrace. But we cannot come together, and when we try, the storm kicks up again, swirls around us, and I know you're about to fade into it, so I step back, and the blossoms fall.

You look so small, standing there, with your arms held out, and when I step away, your soft, gentle features crumple into tears.

"Why'ja wait so long?" you say. "Why can't'ja stay?" My own cheeks are hot and damp, too.

"Baby, I'll be back as soon as I can." I turn and run into the snowy void. I don't dare look back.



"Danny," I gasp, emerging from the depths of the machine. "Dial it up twenty Ohms. We're almost there!" Daniel silently makes the adjustment to the modified MRI machine.

"And what happens then?" he says. "You just gonna flip or something? And *then* what? You'll be stuck in some unimaginable alternate reality forever?"

I look into him and speak carefully.

“Danny, I’ve been stuck in some unimaginable alternate reality for *four years*.”

He stares at me for a long while.

“Look, man, you’ve been messin’ with this every night for a year. Our funding was pulled. They think you’re nuts. I’m gonna get blacklisted if I don’t distance myself from you.”

“This is *it!*” I say, gulping from a bottle of water. “I *know* it!”

Danny gives me the same silent grimace he’s worn for months. After a pause, he walks over to his locker.

“Look, I’ve tried to support you, even to humour you, but I just *can’t* anymore, dude. You’re on your own.” He pulls on his coat and looks askance at me. “You’ve slipped, man. You should get some grief counselling, and, you know, move on with your life.”

“I *am* moving on!” I say. I can hear the strained hoarseness in my voice. I haven’t had proper, unmedicated sleep in so long.

Daniel’s mouth opens long before he produces any sound from it. “You’re insane,” he says flatly, staring at me.

“I am *not*,” I say. “The science clearly supports the theory.”

Daniel just shakes his head slowly. He walks towards the door, but before he leaves, he looks back one last time. “Hey. Be careful, okay? You take too many of those sedatives, you *will* die.” His eyes are dark with worry. Then he’s gone.

I walk over to the console, verify the settings, and fire it up again. I pop two more sublinguals, then I slide back into the huge, clanging machine. I close my eyes and focus on cherry blossoms.

Maya, hold on, baby! Daddy’s coming.