

# Yesterday's Taste

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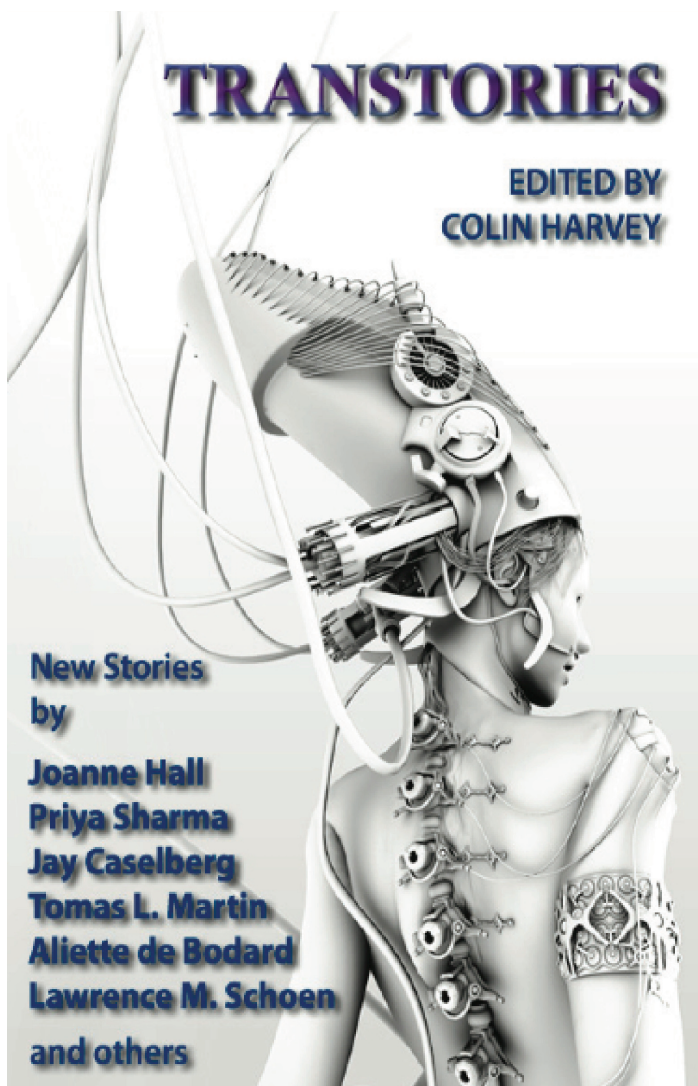
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# YESTERDAY'S TASTE

LAWRENCE M. SCHOEN

When Dugli, the most powerful and feared food critic in the galaxy, invited me to join him at a restaurant so exclusive even billionaires like me have to wait two years for a table, I didn't stop to ask why. I packed a bag, scooped up my buffalo dog, and headed for a planet so far off the trade routes that Dugli had sent his private shuttle to ensure I'd come.

Bwill is not a tourist destination. The people smell, the air tastes funny, and the local language will make your ears bleed. But alongside other more common sea creatures, its oceans team with *lithic ichthus*. They thrive there, a species of silicon-based fish hard as corundum and ugly as sin. Imagine a swimming creature made of rock. Rock fins, rock gills, rock scales. The culinary masterminds of Bwill prepare them using a series of marinades that permeate the minerals of these creatures, and over the course of months render them as tender and delicate as meringue, and exquisitely safe to be ingested by us carbon-types.

Dugli's shuttle delivered me to Bwill, and a waiting sloop took me from the splashport straight to the dock of *Stone Fin*, a restaurant created by master chef Plorm. A crowd of Bwillers — with a handful of offworld foodies — loitered in front, waiting for their reservations. I was probably the only human on Bwill and Dugli the only Caliopoean. A dark, otterish pelt covered him from crown to heel, with tiny flaps where humans would keep their ears and a whiskered nose that gave him an astonishing palate. We spotted each other at once.

"Conroy!" Dugli's webbed hand pulled me from the sloop and before I could say a word he had frogmarched

me past the outraged stares of would-be diners and into the restaurant. Reggie, my buffalito, clattered after on tiny hooves, desperate not to be left out. We were expected. Plorm herself took us through the curtained maze typical of Bwill style and seated us at an elegant table of polished onyx and chalcedony.

I settled Reggie into a booster seat intended for Bwillian toddlers. Dugli waited for the chef to return to her kitchen before speaking. His dark eyes gleamed in the restaurant's candlelight. "So, Conroy, what's it been? Three years?"

"Life is good, Dugli. How's the galaxy been treating you?"

"Truth to tell, I've been despondent of late. But a few months back, I heard a whisper of a hint of a rumor that turned out to be true, and now I'm the happiest man alive. Or I will be soon. That's why you're here."

I smiled, waiting for the catch. "If feeding Reggie and me a fine meal makes you happy, who am I to argue?"

Dugli snorted. I knew he didn't approve of feeding fine cuisine to pets, particularly given that buffalitos were capable of ingesting literally anything. Moreover, he knew that I knew it, but he didn't bring it up. That should have been my second clue that he wanted something.

"It won't be a good meal, Conroy. It will be a *great* meal. Plorm studied under Nery, the greatest chef this world ever produced."

"I know. I'm looking forward to her stonefish."

His head bobbed in agreement. "Exquisite. The second best meal ever found on Bwill. But... What if I said you could have the *very* best served alongside it? Nery's seven cheese cribble puffs!"

"That's crazy. The secret of Nery's cribble course vanished with him twenty years ago."

"I assure you, I'm completely sane."

“Then how? Nery’s dead. Everyone knows that.”

“What everyone *knows* is a lie. He’s been lost all this time, not dead.”

“Lost?”

Dugli grinned like an otter. “And I’ve found him!”

At dawn a groundcar waited to take Reggie and me from our hotel. We shared the road with pedicabs and bicycles but passed no other motorized vehicles on our way to the fish market. Picture a series of cracked and stained piers where the denizens of the local fishing industry — which is to say every third person on Bwill — had tied up their boats. I’m normally good at distinguishing among members of an alien race, but that morning I would have sworn my limo driver was the same Bwiller who had bussed our table the night before, having just changed clothes and gone on to his second job.

We arrived amidst a cacophony of scavenging seabirds and whirring cargoloaders. The pierworkers’ shanties sounded to my ear like a orphanage’s worth of two-year olds in a nursing home of cheek-pinching grandmothers. Even worse than the noise was the smell! The piers reeked of decay, the boats stank from a local sealant made with the rotting remnants of seaweed, and the pungent citrus scent of hardworking Bwillers filled in any olfactory gaps. The fisherfolk of Bwill have an ironic avoidance of bathing that has them banned from traveling offworld; imagine fermented limes and tangerines blended with the funk of human body odor and you’ll get the idea. With Reggie trotting after me, I exited the limo reluctantly, limited by having only two hands and desperately wishing I could cover my nose and both ears simultaneously. Dugli strode toward me, one delicate, webbed hand broadly plastered over his whiskers. He had his aural flaps sealed tight.

“Conroy! Come on, if we hurry we can catch the last bit of the performance.”

We rushed down the length of one of the older piers, it's shattered and crumbling surface held together by layers of graffiti and little else. At its far end a group of Bwillers milled about with their backs to us. Dugli pulled me toward them.

The natives of Bwill are humanoid, same as you and me, but on average a head shorter. Their complexions are a bit craggy — though many an adolescent boy on Earth has endured worse acne — and range in color from sunset red to crayon orange. Dugli shoved his way through the throng of locals and yanked me after him. Reggie scampered underfoot, dodging shoes and the thorny toenails of bare Bwiller feet. I muttered apologies, but no one noticed. Everyone was focused on the old man at the edge of the pier who sat chanting in a voice as raspy as sea salt. I could see him easily over the heads of the others, but Dugli pushed us to the front with the determination of a man whose outlook on life includes the certain knowledge that his opinion is infinitely superior to yours.

“There he is, Conroy. The fish poet. His name is Rhine.”

I nodded. The oldster was tall for a Bwiller. His burnt orange skin had achieved the clear complexion of the elderly. He wore only a dirty overall, patched and mended beyond its years and possessed a full beard, which on Bwill generally denoted poverty or at a minimum a healthy disregard for money. Wielding a knife in each hand he balanced, juggled, flipped, and methodically sliced away bits of an enormous, marinated stonefish, all while intoning sonnets with a voice like sandpaper. Fish poetry. Beautiful to watch and painful to hear. I don't get it, and I probably never will.

“Dug, you could have sent me a vid,” I raised a hand to pinch my nose shut as a wave of fish art wafted my way,

breaking through the other odors that I was becoming inured to. "What's so special about this guy?"

"He's Nery," said Dugli, his face lighting up like he'd just tasted the best Eggs Montrachet on four planets, and for good reason if he wasn't wrong.

"Why are you so sure he's not dead?" I turned away, my head ringing from phonemes and tones that I couldn't begin to parse, as a smell thick enough to elbow its way down my throat threatened to push my gorge back along the way it had come. The crowd of art-loving Bwillers parted as I pressed through. I kept walking.

Dugli followed. "The Bwill government doesn't permit physical death as punishment, not since the transpersonal faction took power. Instead, they wiped away the man he was and sent him back into society. Nery became Rhine. Rhine the fish poet was once Nery the master chef. The man who invented the legendary seven cheese cribble puff is still alive, and I've found him."

We were nearly to the limo with its promise of scentless silence. I faced Dugli and shook him by his shoulders. "He was also Nery the master spy. When he wasn't cooking, he was stealing industrial secrets and selling them to the highest bidder, right up until he was caught, convicted, and killed. The body may be the same, but the mind is gone. Nery doesn't live in that man's head any more. The only person home is Rhine. All I saw on the pier was a broken-down fish poet."

"Well, sure," said Dugli, grinning like a young otter caught with one hand in a fishy cookie jar. "Why do you think I brought you here, Conroy? Because your buffalo dog business has made you rich? Nonsense! I know plenty of people richer than you. But you're the best hypnotist I know."

"I'm the only one you know. What do you expect me to do?"

"Regress him."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't be coy. You've done this for me before. Remember that woman on Kaftan's World? You hypnotically regressed her back to childhood until she remembered a day when she watched her grandmother preparing fireweed kreplach. We recovered the recipe."

"Dugli, she hadn't been on the wrong end of transpersonification. It's not the same!"

"You don't know that. The Bwill medical establishment has never heard of hypnosis. The techniques they employ here may not be proof against your own methods. Just imagine it, Conroy, by this time tomorrow we could be enjoying seven cheese cribble puffs!"

The mere idea of the possibility set my mouth to watering like an old Russian dog. Dugli had rung my bell. "I'll try, but I make no promises."

Dugli hurried off to 'make arrangements'. I picked up my buffalito and wondered if anyone would bother to ask the fish poet what he wanted.

Reggie and I spent the rest of the day in our hotel suite with the windows sealed tight and the air controls turned up to full. It wasn't just to give us a reprieve from Bwill's aromas. A buffalito's unique ability to eat any and all matter is eclipsed only by its talent for converting whatever it consumes into flatulence of pure oxygen. I could have kept Reggie from farting by limiting his intake, but there were so many new things for him to taste on Bwill it didn't seem fair. Instead I'd ordered a variety of small plates from the extensive room service menu, and a steward who could have been the twin of my limo driver delivered them, along with a special bottle of stonefish liquor sent compliments of the manager.



I scattered the small plates across the floor, pausing just long enough to transfer a small portion of each onto a platter for my own enjoyment. Reggie wound his way through the culinary slalom, sampling a bit before moving on, repeating the circuit several times until he'd consumed every morsel. I finished my own meal before he was halfway through and turned my attention to the unexpected booze.

It takes months to make stonefish edible, but it takes decades to make it drinkable, and then just barely. The good stuff — and I had to assume the bottle in my hands represented such — could take centuries. The rumors I'd heard back in Human Space spoke of a smoky elixir that put the best single malt scotch to shame, but I'd never been able to verify them. The government of Bwill refused to allow even so much as a single drop of their precious liqueur offworld. A visiting diplomat from the Gilman colonies had tried to export a flask in a diplomatic pouch and the ruckus had cost them their embassy. She'd also been relieved of the flask.

And here I was with a full bottle.

I cracked the seal and wafted the opening under my nose. The smell was... primal. Antediluvian. It made me think of the sea and things that might be found in its deepest depths. Of darkness and tastes predating history.

Reggie pranced over, happy and proud for having licked every plate clean. He climbed onto my chair, crossed onto my lap, and navigated up my chest to shove his face next to mine for a sniff of the bottle. I don't know if it brought primordial oceans to his mind, but he yipped in interest. I reached for one of his freshly cleaned plates.

"Dugli's dreams of cribble puffs will probably never materialize, but at least we get to sample the mysteries of liquid stonefish." I poured a portion onto the plate and set it on the floor. It resembled a miniature oil slick, viscous, with

a sickly, greenish tinge. Reggie gave it a tentative lick. He barked, jumped back from the plate, and barked again.

“Not to your liking, boy?” He advanced on the plate, gave it another lick, and backed off again. Weird. I considered taking a swig right from the bottle, then got up to fetch a glass instead, the better to appreciate it.

That’s about the time the remains of the oil slick exploded!

Reggie went flying, horns over tail, and landed on the other side of the suite. The blast knocked me off my feet, but I managed to hold onto the bottle. It sloshed a bit but not enough for anything to splash its way up and out of the neck, let alone mingle with the air or whatever else had produced such volatile fumes. I scrambled back to where I’d left the stopper, jamming it into place. To do this I’d had to maneuver around a crater in the floor that looked down into the suite on the level below.

Reggie scampered back, none the worse for being a cannonball. He peered into the hole and barked at the Bwill couple that were now looking up, twin expressions of confusion on their orange faces. My own expression didn’t look half so calm.

Someone from the hotel took the bottle away. Then someone else escorted Reggie and me out, and not into custody as I’d feared but into an even nicer suite. A third someone must have contacted Dugli because he arrived soon after in the company of the hotel manager who assured me nothing like that had ever happened before and couldn’t apologize enough.

After the manager had groveled sufficiently to allow him to exit I confronted Dugli.

“Someone just tried to kill me.”

“Don’t be absurd. You probably had some residue on your clothes that interacted with the liqueur. Something you brought in from offworld. I understand if you’re a little on edge after the accident, but that’s all it was. Flukes happen.”

“Maybe. Or maybe someone doesn’t want Nery brought back.”

“Conroy, there are probably a hundred people on Bwill who don’t want Nery back. Do you have any idea how many he betrayed? The man was a legend. He had the culinary powers of a god, the athletic prowess of a planetary champion, and a list of romantic conquests that included every Bwill female with any real political power, wealth, or beauty. He used his talents to worm his way into people’s confidences and then stole them blind!”

“So you’re saying someone did try to kill me?”

“Not at all. Only that someone might, if he knew what we’re attempting. But nobody does. I told you, I’m the only one who knows that Rhine was Nery. If I thought otherwise, I’d be shoving you and your pet back onto that shuttle, and climbing in right behind you, and getting offworld before the fireworks started.”

Reggie chose that moment to bump against my leg for some attention. I scooped him up and stroked the fur on his hump. He closed his eyes and pressed his head against my chest. I said nothing, content to glare at the Caliopoean.

Dugli sighed. “Look, if it will make you feel any better, I’ll shift some other people around and make it look like you’re still staying here. Meanwhile, I’ll secretly move you to a different hotel, and in the morning send Rhine to you so you can do the regression there. Okay?”

“If you don’t believe there’s a threat, why are you so quick to humor me?”

“What I believe doesn’t matter, Conroy. If you think

you're in danger, you're not going to be focused on the task at hand. I need you at the top of your game. We'll probably only get one chance at this."

"Why's that? You said no one knows Rhine was once Nery."

"No, but people are going to start asking questions soon enough, and if I could figure it out, once they know where to look, others will too. Before that happens, I want us both on my shuttle halfway back home."

"With a big basket of seven cheese crumble puffs, I assume?"

Dugli smiled. "Two baskets. One for each of us."

Dugli's driver took us to a different hotel on the opposite side of town. The driver went in and registered a room in the name of the Bwill equivalent of John Smith, and Reggie and I moved in as unobtrusively as the only human and a buffalo dog on a planet full of ruddy, smelly, craggy people can manage. My buffalito has a long history of being able to curl up and sleep anywhere. Somehow, I followed his example, because I was awakened hours later by Dugli pounding on the door to my room. Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I had the room's security console visually confirm the person who had yet to stop knocking, and let him in. He entered, escorting the familiar figure of an aging fish poet.

"Why are you here so early?" I double-locked the door and followed my 'guests' into the room.

"Early? Don't be insulting, Conroy. We've been up for hours. Fish poets wake before dawn to meet the new catch at the docks. They find it inspirational. Now, let's get started. Where do you want us?" Rhine had changed into clean overalls since yesterday's performance at the pier. He moved with a limp. Dugli seated the Bwiller on a low couch, securing him all around with throw pillows.

“I want you gone. This isn’t a stage performance, so I don’t need an audience. Besides, you’ve got some misdirection to be managing. Leave me and, uh, Rhine here. We’ll be fine. Come back later, and bring brunch.”

The food critic glowered but left. I dropped into a chair across from Rhine and Reggie took it as his cue to leap into my lap. We both looked at the fish poet who sat staring at his bare feet.

“So, Rhine? Please tell me you speak Traveler, yes?”

He nodded. “Some. They taught us in school, back when I was a boy.” His voice rasped much as it had the day before, and his accent rang with an overlay of tones that might have been a critical part of his native language but had no place in the pidgin speech used by this part of the galaxy.

“Great. And you know why you’re here?”

“Your friend thinks I used to be someone else, and that you can make me remember who. I told him he’s wrong, that I’ve always been me.” He lifted his head and smiled. His eyes were a pale mint green. “He was very certain though. When he was done I was half convinced he was right.”

“But only half?”

“Mr. Conroy, look at me. Look at my hands. See all these scars? They’re from a lifetime of handling stonefish. I’ve worked with them all my life, fishing and netting and mongering and versing. These aren’t the hands of a lover or a champion caster. I’ve had my share of tumbles in and out of beds, and as a fry I cast discs with my friends, same as everyone else. But my life’s been hard work. The man your friend wants me to be didn’t do menial work like that. If he were here, his hands would be manicured, not rubbed raw by life.”

I studied his outstretched hands and the crisscross tracteries of too many scars. Were any of them more than

twenty years old? Were some of them caused not by catching stonefish but from cooking them?

"Well, like you said, Dugli can be pretty insistent. Since we're both here, and he won't be back with brunch for a while, why don't we humor him and give this a try? Just sit back, close your eyes, and listen to my voice. Let the room fade away and picture yourself back at the pier. Imagine the sounds and smells of the place, the taste of the air, the feel of things."

I continued building a familiar sensory tableau and eased him into a suggestible state. Then I created a two word trigger that instantly plunged him deeper each time I spoke it. Then up again, then deeper. Which answered the first of Dugli's unasked questions: the natives of Bwill could indeed be hypnotized. I took my time, reinforcing the trance over and over, until I was having a conversation with a part of his subconscious mind. Everything to this point had been preamble and stage setting. It was time to get specific.

"Do you know who Nery was?"

He snorted, eyes still closed, slumped over but alert despite his posture. "Everyone knows Nery. He was famous. Dead too, for about twenty years now."

"Think about him for me. Imagine everything you know about him is arrayed before you, like silvery fish in a net."

"I see them."

"Good. Now, grasp a fish, the one that represents your earliest memory of Nery. What is it?"

"When he came from nowhere and won the world title. I'd just gotten back from days at sea, been working as part of a five-man crew and we had a hold full to bursting of stonefish, twice what we'd hoped to bring in. The whole crew had landed in a bar at the dock and was celebrating, and there on the vid was Nery, hitting every target on the

range with his disc, ricocheting it off pillars and beams with precision casting like no one had ever seen. It was poetry watching him..." He fell silent, and his hands, which had been clenched tightly around an imaginary fish as he spoke, fell open and empty again.

"Take up the next fish in the net," I said. "What's that memory."

"A story I heard from a bedmate. She was going on and on about some actresses in the tabloids, fighting over which of them was having a fling with him..."

"And the next?"

"Delivering a fresh catch to one of his restaurants. Just missed meeting the man himself. I was dropping off a cage of gargantua crabs. One of the other chefs signed for 'em. Nery was out front, hobnobbing with some diners and serving up cribble puffs..."

We went on like that for most of an hour, one gleaming fish of memory at a time. Each sounded flat, like a news clipping from Nery's life tied to a bit of episodic memory from Rhine's, up to and including where he'd been when Nery's death sentence had been announced.

"That's when I took up my knives and words. It just didn't make sense no more, that someone larger than life like that could be brought low. Just cause my life didn't matter wasn't excuse to snuff out his. That was my inspiration. That injustice gave me voice, and these hands that had caught and hauled began to carve and slice, and the poems just came out of me from nowhere."

This last memory convinced me. The fish poet had been born when the master spy had died. Rhine and Nery were one and the same. But knowing that wasn't the same as being able to do anything about it. I couldn't regress him back to his other self. The transpersonality techniques

had installed a past into him. Whether it was fictitious or borrowed or constructed from a template didn't matter. It was whole and complete unto itself. I tried to slip past it, sneak into Nery's memories by some backdoor association, via primal emotions, even through base sensations of pain and delight, but I couldn't. There wasn't anything to sneak in to. His memories hadn't simply been erased. Rhine's had overwritten them. Nery was dead, and only the fish poet remained.

I eased Rhine back to full consciousness, leaving him with the suggestion that he'd feel relaxed and well rested and with no ill effects from his hypnotic experience.

"Did it work? Am I really Nery, like your Caliopoean believes?"

Reggie jumped into Rhine's lap and butted his head against the fish poet's stomach demanding to be petted. "No. And yes. I think he was right, but those memories, the person you were, if any of that still exists I can't reach it."

"Good." His fingers worked through the ringlets of Reggie's wooly head.

"You wouldn't want to be famous?"

"I do sonnets about people who are larger than life. They always end tragically. It's better to be a fish poet. Sure, I live on charity, but people think I'm lucky. And the hours are better."

My smile was interrupted by a rumble from my stomach. I hadn't had breakfast and it was well past time for lunch. Dugli still hadn't returned and I wasn't willing to wait any longer. After yesterday's experience, room service was out of the question.

"Are you familiar with this part of the island? Any place you'd recommend for a good meal? I'm buying."



Rhine set Reggie aside and stretched. "Have you ever had Nyonya?"

"You have Indonesian food here on Bwill?"

"We have a culinary exchange program with several planets, yours among them. Every year we send some of our best chefs offworld for a year. Many return and open fusion restaurants. There's a woman who went to Malaysia and came back with a cargo of leaves and spices. Her place isn't far, but we can't get a pedicab this time of day. Do you know how to ride a bicycle?"

I smiled. "It's been a while, but I'm sure it will come back to me."

He limped to a comm unit on the wall and called down to the front desk. "They'll have a pair of bicycles waiting for us by the time we get downstairs. You'll probably want a basket for yours if your friend is coming."

Reggie yipped. "I wouldn't dream of denying him a taste of Nyonya-Bwill fusion."

It's true what they say about riding a bicycle. I hadn't been on one in decades, but after a wobbly beginning that startled Reggie, my body remembered what to do and I was traveling smoothly down an avenue on a sunny, noxious day. Rhine peddled effortlessly alongside. After twenty minutes of brisk, below-the-waist exercise we were deep in the corporate sector of town and guiding our bicycles down canyons formed by hundred-storey walls of capitalistic zeal, all gleaming ceramo and hurricane-proof glass that was as different from the poverty of the docks as day from night. A doorman dressed in a loose tunic, trousers, and sarong took charge of our bicycles and welcomed us to *Nyonya Baba*. The restaurant was one of several in the building that catered to the robber barons responsible for running things on Bwill.

The lunch rush had come and gone. The maître d' didn't look twice at me, but practically bowed to Rhine as she escorted us through the maze and past a dozen empty tables before seating us by a window.

"Don't take this the wrong way," I said, "but this doesn't strike me as the kind of place you could normally afford."

"It's not. But it's considered lucky to have a fish poet in your establishment, provided he can afford the fare. You're still paying, aren't you?"

I nodded, and we ordered three servings of the day's special, a variation on traditional otak-otak made with stonefish wrapped in a locally grown banana leaf. Whether a result of the exercise getting here or the exquisite meal, Rhine became loquacious. While Reggie and I ate he unwound an introduction to the intricacies of fish poetry with commentary on everything from the complex pairing of vocal pitch and stress with angle and speed of knife strokes while juggling/slicing a marinated stonefish within the strictures of a sonnet's fourteen lines.

As we topped off our meal with kuih, brightly colored cakes made from the Brill equivalent of glutinous rice, he brought his lecture to a close. "Ultimately, it's a lot like the bicycle."

I paused with a mouthful of cake. "Sorry?"

"Once you know how to do it, you don't worry about it any more. I don't have to think about the movements of the knives or the rhythms of my voice. That's automatic. All of my focus is reserved for the new part, the words I'm using for that specific poem. Everything else my body already knows how to do."

Reggie chose that moment to let loose with a long stream of otak-otak inspired flatulence, which in turn triggered an epiphany for me. I knew the solution to Dugli's problem.

When it came time to pay the bill, I asked the waiter to send the manager over. From her flawless pumpkin complexion she had to have been older than Rhine. Her long, lustrous hair was as black as the shimmering pajamas she wore. She addressed Rhine first, speaking in a local language. He waved her to me and she switched to crisp and flawless Traveler.

“You found your meal satisfactory, sir?”

“No, I found it incredible. I’ve had the pleasure of dining in Singapore and Malacca many times, and your otak-otak was the finest I’ve ever sampled.”

“I will pass your words on to our chef. Please, how else may I be of assistance?”

I’d hoped for more of a reaction, but I hadn’t praised the food to soften her up. “This is going to sound very odd, but I would like to rent out your restaurant for the rest of the day.”

“Sir? I am sorry, but if you wish to host a dinner party here, you would need to give us at least six days notice.”

“You misunderstand. I don’t want dinner. I want the restaurant. Actually, just the kitchen. But everyone can go home. Everyone *has* to go home. I want to pay you for the use of your empty kitchen and have you close your restaurant. Just for the next few hours.”

“What you ask is not possible.”

“Normally, I suppose not. But it’s your lucky day. I’m traveling with a fish poet of some renown.” I took out my credit chip, keyed in the cost of lunch, moved the decimal point three places to the right, and handed it to her. “Possible?”

She stared at the chip long enough to confirm the number. Then she pulled back a sleeve to reveal a standard comm bracelet and clipped my chip to its transaction port

before I could change my mind. As she handed back my chip she spoke to her wrist, a rapid singsong of instructions. In the next instant she was gone.

Rhine stared at me. "She just ordered her staff to tell all the patrons there's been a small fire in the kitchen, apologize, and ask them to leave, while inviting them to return for a complimentary meal any time in the future."

"Excellent!"

"What are you doing?"

Before I could answer our waiter returned. "If you will follow me please?"

"To the kitchen?" She nodded. I stood and tucked Reggie under my arm. "C'mon, Rhine. Time to make history."

"We're making history?"

"No, just me. You're making seven cheese cribble puffs!"

The kitchen staff was leaving as we came in. Reggie began scampering around ready to wreak havoc but calmed down once I built him a bed of dish towels. Rhine seated himself on a tall stool near a walk-in freezer. With Reggie napping, I forced an apron and the Bwill equivalent of a toque on the fish poet.

"What's the point of this? You said it yourself, I'm not Nery. I'm no kind of chef. I can carve stonefish, but I can't cook."

Instead of replying, I positioned him in the middle of the kitchen, right where an executive chef would stand to command his sous-chef and the various station chefs below. But no, that wasn't right. Nery had never allowed anyone in the kitchen with him when he made his cribble puffs. Which meant he'd had to be able to reach and do everything by himself.

Those legendary seven cheese crible puffs had defied classification. A braised entree that was also a fish dish that nonetheless had the delicacy of the finest pastry. I moved Rhine to a spot midway between where *Nyonya Baba's* poissonnier and rôtiisseur would have stood, a quick step would take him to either spot. The pastry chef's station was a bit further but still near.

"Mr. Conroy, what do you expect me to do?"

I stood directly in front of him, and caught his gaze. "Ride a bicycle," I said.

"What?"

"Hestia Ambrosia." Rhine responded to the trigger I'd installed and slipped instantly into trance. His eyes closed and he swayed in place. "Listen carefully now. Let your mind go blank. I don't want you to think. You don't need to think. It doesn't matter that you don't remember anything of Nery's life. You don't need his mind to be a master chef. The memory of how to cook is in your muscles and reflexes. Your body knows everything Nery knew. In a moment, you're going to open your eyes. You won't need to think. You won't be able to think. You'll just respond to the needs of the situation. Your body knows what to do. Let it do it. Just go with it. If you understand, let your mind sink deeper, surrender yourself to the situation, open your eyes and let your body respond."

I stepped back out of his line of sight. Rhine opened his eyes, tensed and waiting.

"Order in, chef," I said. "Seven cheese crible puffs!"

Nery flew into action. It was the same deliberate movement I'd seen on the pier when the fish poet's knives had juggled and carved a massive stonefish. He grabbed bowls and pans, opened cupboards and cabinets, sought and discarded ingredients and spices. *Nyonya Baba's* kitchen

had everything he needed, and I watched as he prepared the signature dish that had died with him twenty years before. Seeing the intricacy of it, the elaborate construction of the entree, made me understand why it had never been duplicated. It was culinary complexity that made fish poetry look like throwing together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich by comparison. And then, after an eternity that passed too quickly, he was done. Nery placed several circular pans into a pre-heated oven and set a timer. Then he stepped back, tensed and waiting once more.

“Both of you, step away from the oven doors. Now!”

While I'd been absorbed watching Nery, another Bwiller had entered the kitchen. Her voice sounded familiar, and when I turned toward the entrance and saw Dugli standing in front of her, soaking wet and with a chef's knife at his throat, the pieces all fell into place. It was Plorm.

“Why couldn't you leave him to his sonnets?”

I eased Rhine/Nery away from the oven, positioning one of the station chef's tables between us and the others. “You knew who he was all along.”

“Of course I knew. He was the sun to me. A pair of overalls and beard couldn't blind me to him. He made me all that I am. But cooking wasn't enough for him. For years after his death his students suffered the shame of his crimes. Now my name burns brightly on its own, no longer tainted by his. But you wanted to bring him back.”

I could have kicked myself. “You tampered with the bottle in my suite. The steward who brought it was the driver, who was also a busboy at *Stone Fin*.”

“My son,” said Plorm.

Dugli sobbed. “He tried to drown me, Conroy! He drove me into the sea.”

Plorm shoved Dugli in my direction, freeing her other hand and drawing another knife from her belt. “This ends now. I didn’t set out to hurt anyone. Your mad quest for Nery’s recipe will destroy everything I’ve rebuilt. But you’ve conveniently arranged for everyone to be gone from here tonight, and every chef knows how dangerous a kitchen can be. A trio of tragic but fatal accidents.”

The bell on the oven dinged. Reggie woke up and barked. Plorm shifted her glance for an instant to my buffalito. Nery snatched up a circular pan and flung it into the air.

Plorm ducked, but it wasn’t necessary. The pan flew wide and high, passing harmlessly over her at great speed. She laughed once and took another step toward us, brandishing both knives.

With a clang the pan hit the wall, ricocheted off, struck the adjacent wall, bounced again, and caught Plorm in the back of the head with sufficient force to knock her to the ground senseless.

The authorities took Plorm away to a forensic hospital to test for a concussion, and sent someone to pick up her son back at *Stone Fin*. They took Dugli to the hospital too, just to check him over. Other officials suggested that Rhine and I leave the kitchen-turned-crime scene, sooner rather than later. I agreed, but asked the fish poet to get Reggie for me. As he did, I found a clean, cloth sack and emptied the contents of two cooking pans into it from the oven.

We left the restaurant and walked a while. Office workers coming off shift flooded the street around us, and if these worthy Bwillers found anything unusual in the sight of a human, his buffalo dog, and a transpersonified fish poet they had the good grace not to let it show. After several blocks, a pedicab stopped in front of us and the

operator invited us aboard in broken Traveler. We set off for my hotel.

Rhine hadn't said a word, even after I brought him out of trance. The only sound was the cabby's feet slapping against the street. I considered using his trigger again, to understand and try to ease his obvious pain, but I didn't have that right. Instead I said, "Rhine, talk to me."

He looked up at me and reached for Reggie, pulling my buffalito into his lap and cradling the animal tenderly. That simple gesture broke something open in him. "I could have killed her. How did I do such a thing? How is it possible?"

"You didn't do a thing. That was all Nery."

"No, you said you couldn't reach Nery, that he was gone. That leaves only me. I did it."

"Rhine, were you ever a champion disc caster?"

"What? No, I told you, I just fooled around with it as a kid."

"That's right. But Nery was the best on Bwill. He trained at it, burned the knowledge into his muscles. When the situation called for it, the body remembered how to do it, and was able to do it because I prevented you from being there to interfere. Do you see that?"

"I... suppose."

"And another thing. Plorm was never in danger for her life. She'd been Nery's protégé; he'd never have hurt her. I don't know if some part of him still resides in you and knew her or not, but consider the cast that took her down. A double ricochet to catch her by surprise? Nery was that good. If he'd wanted to do more than knock her out, do you have any doubt it would have happened?"

Rhine looked down into Reggie's soulful brown eyes and managed a smile. "You're almost as convincing as your Caliopoean."



“I’ll take that as a compliment. Now, what do you want to do?”

“How do you mean?”

“You’re not Nery, but I could help you to recover some of the things your body remembers. You could recreate his recipes, maybe even become a competitive disc caster if you like.”

He passed Reggie gently from his lap to mine. “No, Mr. Conroy. Those skills belong to someone else. I told you, I’m content to be a fish poet.”

There was nothing left to say and the pedicab continued on in silence again. I offered Rhine the sack and he reached in and helped himself to a puff. I took two, one for myself and one for Reggie. They were still warm. I bit into mine and it burst in my mouth like a succulent explosion of savory delight. Beside me I heard Rhine gasp.

“Oh my! I think I finally understand what brought you and Mr. Dugli to Bwill.”

“Yeah. Nothing else like it in the world. On any world.”

“May I have another? For inspiration? I think there are sonnets that need to be written about these things. What did you call them?”

“Nery’s legendary seven cheese cribble puffs. Sure, have as many as you like.”

He laughed. “I don’t dare. There wouldn’t be any left for you or Mr. Dugli.”

“Good point. He’d better hurry back if he expects to get some.”