

[**Ursula Wills-Jones**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/cgi-bin/read_db.pl?search_field=author_id&search_for=UrsulaWills-Jones&order_by=author_last,title&page=1)[**The Wicker Husband**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/WickHusb726.shtml) **(SCI-FI)**

Once upon a time, there was an ugly girl. She was short and dumpy, had one leg a bit shorter than the other, and her eyebrows met in the middle. The ugly girl gutted fish for a living, so her hands smelt funny and her dress was covered in scales. She had no mother or brother, no father, sister, or any friends. She lived in a ramshackle house on the outskirts of the village, and she never complained.

     One by one, the village girls married the local lads, and up the path to the church they'd prance, smiling all the way. At the weddings, the ugly girl always stood at the back of the church, smelling slightly of brine. The village women gossiped about the ugly girl. They wondered what she did with the money she earnt. The ugly girl never bought a new frock, never made repairs to the house, and never drank in the village tavern.

     Now, it so happened that outside the village, in a great damp swamp, lived an old basket-maker who was famed for the quality of his work. One day the old basket-maker heard a knock on his door. When he opened it, the ugly girl stood there. In her hand, she held six gold coins.

     'I want you to make me a husband,' she said.

     'Come back in a month,' he replied.

     Well, the old basket-maker was greatly moved that the ugly girl had entrusted him with such an important task. He resolved to make her the best husband he could. He made the wicker husband broad of shoulder and long of leg, and all the other things women like. He made him strong of arm and elegant of neck, and his brows were wide and well-spaced. His hair was a fine dark brown, his eyes a greenish hazel.

     When the day came, the ugly girl knocked on the basket-maker's door.

     'He says today is too soon. He will be in the church tomorrow, at ten,' said the basket-maker. The ugly girl went away, and spent the day scraping scales from her dress.

     Later that night, there was a knock on the door of the village tailor. When the tailor opened it, the wicker husband stood outside.

     'Lend me a suit,' he said. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to church naked.'

     'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the tailor, and ran out the back door.

     The tailor's wife came out, wiping her hands. 'What's going on?' she said.

     'Lend me a suit,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married tomorrow, and I cannot go to my wedding naked.'

     The tailor's wife gave him a suit, and slammed the door in his face.

     Next, there was a knock on the door of the village shoe-maker. When the shoe-maker opened it, the wicker husband stood there.

     'Lend me some shoes,' he said. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to church barefoot.'

     'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the shoe-maker, and he ran out the back door.

     The shoe-maker's wife came out, her hands trembling.

     'What do you want?' she said.

     'Lend me some shoes,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to my wedding barefoot.'

     The shoe-maker's wife gave him a pair of shoes, and slammed the door in his face. Next, the wicker husband went to the village inn.

     'Give me a drink,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married tomorrow, and I wish to celebrate.'

     'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the inn-keeper and all his customers, and out they ran. The poor wicker husband went behind the bar, and poured himself a drink.

     When the ugly girl got to church in the morning, she was mighty pleased to find her husband so handsome, and so well turned-out.

When the couple had enjoyed their first night of marriage, the wicker husband said to his wife: 'This bed is broken. Bring me a chisel: I will fix it.'

     So like a good husband, he began to fix the bed. The ugly girl went out to gut fish. When she came back at the end of the day, the wicker husband looked at her, and said: 'I was made to be with you.'

     When the couple had enjoyed their second night of marriage, the wicker husband said: 'This roof is leaky. Bring me a ladder: I will fix it.'

     So, like a good husband, he climbed up and began to fix the thatch. The ugly girl went out to gut fish. When she returned in the evening, the wicker husband looked at his wife, and said: 'Without you, I should never have seen the sun on the water, or the clouds in the sky.'

     When the couple had enjoyed their third night of marriage, the ugly girl got ready to out. 'The chimney needs cleaning,' she said, hopefully, 'And the fire could be laid...' But at this, the wicker husband - she was just beginning to learn his expressions - looked completely terrified. From this, the ugly girl came to understand that there are some things you cannot ask a man to do, even if he is very kind.

     Over the weeks, the villagers began to notice a change in the ugly girl. If one of her legs was still shorter than the other, her hips moved with a swing that didn't please them. If she still smelt funny, she sang while she gutted the fish. She bought a new frock and wore flowers in her hair. Even her eyebrows no longer met in the middle: the wicker husband had pulled them out with his strong, withied fingers. When the villagers passed the ugly girl's house, they saw it had been painted anew, the windows sparkled, and the door no longer hung askew. You might think that all these changes pleased the villagers, but oh no. Instead, wives pointed out to husbands that their doors needed fixing, and why didn't they offer? The men retorted that maybe if their wives made an effort with new frocks and flowers in their hair, then maybe they'd feel like fixing the house, and everybody grumbled and cursed each other, but secretly, in their hearts, they blamed the ugly girl and her husband.

     As to the ugly girl, she didn't notice all the jealousy. She was too busy growing accustomed to married life, and was finding that the advantages of a wicker husband outweighed his few shortcomings. The wicker husband didn't eat, and never complained that his dinner was late. He only drank water, the muddier the better. She was a little sad that she could not cook him dinner like an ordinary man, and watch him while he ate. In the cold nights, she hoped they would sit together close to the fire, but he preferred the darkness, far from the flames. The ugly girl got in the habit of calling across the room all the things she had to say to him. As winter turned to spring, and rain pelted down, the wicker husband became a little mouldy, and the ugly girl had to scrub him down with a brush and a bottle of vinegar. Spring turned to summer, and June was very dry. The wicker husband complained of stiffness in his joints, and spent the hottest hour of the day lying in the stream. The ugly girl took her fish-gutting, and sat on the bank, keeping him company.

     Eventually the villagers were too ridden with curiosity to stand it any longer. There was a wedding in the village: the ugly girl and her husband were invited. At the wedding, there was music and dancing, and food and wine. As the musicians struck up, the wicker husband and the ugly girl went to dance. The villagers could not help staring: the wicker husband moved so fine. He lifted his dumpy wife like she was nought but a feather, and swung her round and round. He swayed and shimmered; he was elegant, he was graceful. As for the ugly girl: she was in heaven.

     The women began to whisper behind their hands. Now, the blacksmith's wife was boldest, and she resolved to ask the wicker husband to dance. When the music paused she went towards the couple. The ugly girl was sitting in the wicker husband's lap, so he creaked a little. The blacksmith's wife was about to tap the wicker husband on the shoulder, but his arms were wrapped round the ugly girl.

     'You are the only reason that I live and breathe,' the wicker husband said to his wife.

     The blacksmith's wife heard what he said, and went off, sulking. The next day there were many frayed tempers in the village.

     'You've got two left feet!' shouted the shoe-maker's wife at her husband.

     'You never tell me anything nice!' yelled the blacksmith's wife.

     'All you do is look at other women!' shouted the baker's wife, though how she knew was a mystery, as she'd done nothing but stare at the wicker husband all night. The husbands fled their homes and congregated in the tavern.

     'T'aint right,' they muttered, 'T'isn't natural.'

     'E's showing us up.'

     'Painting doors.'

     'Fixing thatch.'

     'Murmuring sweet nothings.'

     'Dancing!' muttered the blacksmith, and they all spat.

     'He's not really a man,' muttered the baker. 'An abomination!'

     'He don't eat.'

     'He don't grumble.'

     'He don't even fart,' added the tailor, gloomily.

     The men shook their heads, and agreed that it couldn't go on.

     Meanwhile the women congregated in each other's kitchens.

     'It's not right,' they muttered. 'Why does she deserve him?'

     'It's an enchantment,' they whispered. 'She bewitched him.'

     'She'll be onto our husbands next, I expect,' said the baker's wife. 'We should be careful.'

     'She needs to be brought down a peg or two.'

     'Fancies that she's better than the rest of us, I reckon.'

     'Flowers in her hair!!'

     'Did you see her dancing?'

     And they all agreed that it couldn't go on.

     One day the wicker husband was on his way back from checking the fish-traps, when he was accosted by the baker.

     'Hello,' said the baker. The wicker husband was a little surprised: the baker never bothered to speak to him. 'You made an impression the other night.'

     'I did?' said the wicker husband.

     'Oh yes,' continued the baker. 'The women are all aflutter. Don't you ever think - well...'

     'What?' said the wicker husband, completely confused.

     'Man like you,' said the baker. 'Could do well for himself. A lot of opportunities...' He leaned forward, so the wicker husband recoiled. The baker's breath smelt of dough, which he found unpleasant. 'Butcher's wife,' added the baker meaningfully. 'Very taken. I know for a fact that he's not at home. Gone to visit his brother in the city. Why don't you go round?'

     'I can't,' said the wicker husband. 'My wife's waiting for me at home.' And he strode off, up the lane. The baker went home, annoyed.

     Now the wicker husband, who was too trusting, thought less of this of this than he should, and did not warn his wife that trouble was brewing. About a week later, the ugly girl was picking berries in the hedgerow, when the tailor's wife sidled up. Her own basket was empty, which made the ugly girl suspicious.

     'My dear!' cried the tailor's wife, fluttering her hands.

     'What d'you want?' said the ugly girl.

     The tailor's wife wiped away a fake tear, and looked in both directions. 'My dear,' she whispered. 'I'm only here to warn you. Your husband - he's been seen with other women.'

     'What other women?' said the ugly girl.

     The tailor's wife fluttered her hands. This wasn't going as she intended. 'My dear, you can't trust men. They're all the same. And you can't expect - a man like him, and a woman like you - frankly -'

     The ugly girl was so angry that she hit the tailor's wife with her basket, and ran off, up the lane. The ugly girl went home, and - knowing more of cruelty than her husband did - thought on this too much and too long. But she did not want to upset her husband, so she said nothing.

     The tailor's wife came home fuming, with scratches all over her face. That night, the wives and husbands of the village all agreed - for once - that something drastic had to be done.

A few days later the old basket-maker heard a knocking at his door. When he opened it, the villagers stood outside. Right on cue, the tailor's wife began to weep, pitifully.

     'What's the matter?' said the old basket-maker.

     'She's childless,' said the baker's wife, sniffing.

     'Not a son,' said the tailor, sadly.

     'Or a daughter.'

     'No-one to comfort them in their old age,' added the butcher.

     'It's breaking their hearts,' went on the baker.

     'So we've come to ask -'

     'If you'll make us a baby. Out of wicker.'

     And they held out a bag of gold.

     'Very well,' said the old basket-maker. 'Come back in a month.'

     Well, one dusky day in autumn, the ugly girl was sitting by the fire, when there came a knock at the door. The wicker husband opened it. Outside, stood the villagers. The tailor's wife bore a bundle in her arms, and the bundle began to whimper.

     'What's that?' said the ugly girl.

     'This is all your fault,' hissed the butcher, pointing at the wicker husband.

     'Look what you've done!' shouted the baker.

     'It's an abomination,' sneered the inn-keeper. 'Not even human!'

     The tailor pulled away the blanket. The ugly girl saw that the baby was made of wicker. It had the same shaped nose, the same green eyes that her husband did.

     'Tell me it's not true!' she cried.

     But the wicker husband said nothing. He just stared at the baby. He had never seen one of his own kind before, and now - his heart filled up with tenderness. When the ugly girl saw this on his face, a great cloud of bitterness came upon her. She sank to the floor, moaning.

     'Filthy, foul, creature!' cried the tailor. 'I should burn it!' He seized the baby, and made to fling it into the blaze. At this, the wicker husband let out a yell. Forward he leapt.

     The ugly girl let out a terrible cry. She took the lamp, and flung it straight at her husband. The lamp burst in shards of glass. Oil went everywhere. Flames began to lick at the wicker husband's chest, up his neck, into his face. He tried to beat at the flames, but his fingers grew oily, and burst into fire. Out he ran, shrieking, and plunged into the river.

     'Well, that worked well,' said the butcher, in a satisfied manner.

     The villagers did not spare a second glance for the ugly girl, but went home again to their dinners. On the way, the tailor's wife threw the wicker baby in the ditch. She stamped on its face. 'Ugh,' she said. 'Horrible thing.'

     The next day the ugly girl wandered the highways, weeping, her face smeared in ashes.

     'Have you seen my husband?' she asked passing travellers, but they saw madness in her eyes, and spurred their horses on. Dusk fell. Stumbling home, scarce knowing where she was, the ugly girl heard a sound in the ditch. Kneeling, she found the wicker baby. It wailed and thrashed, and held up its hands. The ugly girl saw in its face her husband's eyes, and her husband's nose. She coddled it to her chest and took it home.

     Now, the old basket maker knew nothing of all this. One day, the old man took it into his head to see how his creations were faring. He walked into town, and knocked on the tailor's door. The wife answered.

     'How is the baby?' he said.

     'Oh that,' she said. 'It died.' And she shut the door in his face. The old basket-maker walked on, till he came to the ugly girl's place. The door was closed, the garden untended, and dirt smeared the windows. The old basket-maker knocked on the door. No-one answered, though he waited a very long time.

     The old-basket maker went home, disheartened. He was walking the long dark road into the swamp, when he heard something in the rushes. At first he was afraid: he wrapped his scarf closer round his face. But the thing seemed to follow him. From time to time, it groaned.

     'Who's there?' called the old man.

     Out onto the roadway staggered the most broken and bedraggled, the most pathetic and pitiful thing. The old basket-maker stared at what was left of the wicker husband: his hands consumed by fire, his face equally gone. Dark pits of scorched wood marred his chest. Where he had burnt, he had started to rot.

     'What have they done to my children?' cried the old basket-maker.

     The wicker husband said nothing: he had lost his tongue.

     The old basket-maker took the wicker husband home. As daylight came, the old basket-maker sat down to repair him. But as he worked, his heart grew hot with anger.

     'I made you, but I failed you,' he said. 'I will not send you there again.'

     Eventually, the wicker husband looked as good as new, though the smell of burning still clung. But as the days passed, a damp black mould began to grow on him. The old basket-maker pulled out the rotting withies and replaced them. But it seemed useless: the wicker husband rotted from the inside, outwards.

     At last, the old basket-maker saw there was nothing else to be done. He took up his travelling cloak, set out at night, and passed through the village. He came to the ugly girl's house. In the garden, wreathed in filth, stood the ugly girl, cuddling a child. She was singing the saddest lullaby he had ever heard. The old basket-maker saw that the child was the one he'd made, and his heart softened a little. He stepped out of the shadows.

     'Why do you keep the baby,' he said, 'when you cast your husband from home?'

     The ugly girl cried out, to hear someone speak to her.

     'It is all I have left of my husband,' she said at last. 'Though it is proof he betrayed me, I could not leave it in the ditch to die.'

     'You are a fool,' he said. 'It was I that made the child. Your husband is innocent.'

     At this, the ugly girl let out a cry, and ran towards the river. But old basket-maker caught her arm. 'Wait - I have something to show you,' he said.

     The ugly girl walked behind him, through the swamp where the water sucked and burbled, carrying the baby. As the sun rose, she saw that its features were only those of the old basket-maker, who, like any maker, had passed down his face to his creations.

     When they came to the dwelling, the ugly girl opened the door, and saw her husband, sitting in darkness.

     'It cannot be you,' she said. 'You are dead. I know: I killed you myself.'

     'I was made for you alone,' said the wicker husband, 'But you threw me away.'

     The ugly girl let out a cry so loud, birds surfaced from the marches for miles around, and threw herself at her husband's feet.

A few days later, the villagers were surprised to see the old basket-maker standing outside the church.

     'I have something to say,' he said. 'Soon I will retire. But first, I am making my masterwork - a woman made of wicker. If you want her, you can have her. But you must bring me a gift for my retirement. Whoever brings me the best gift can have the wicker woman.'

     Then he turned round and went back to the swamp.

     Behind him, the villagers began to whisper. Hadn't the wicker husband been tall and graceful? Hadn't he been a hard worker? Hadn't he been handsome, and eager to please his wife?

     Next day, the entire village denied any interest in the wicker lady, but secretly began to plan. Men eyed up prize cows; women sneaked open jewellery boxes.

     'That wicker husband worked like a slave, and never even ate,' said the shoe-maker's wife to her husband. 'Get me the wicker woman as a servant, I'll live like a lady, never lift a finger.'

     'That wicker husband never quarrelled with anyone, never even raised his voice. Not like you, you old fishwife,' the inn-keeper said to his wife.

     'That wicker husband never tired, and never had a headache,' said the butcher to the baker. 'Imagine...!'

     'Lend me a shilling, cousin,' said the shoe-maker's wife. 'I need a new petticoat.'

     'I can't,' lied the blacksmith's wife. 'I spent it on medicine. The child was very sick.'

     'I need that back-rent you owe me,' said the butcher, who owned the tailor's house.

     'Been a very bad season in the tailoring trade,' muttered the tailor. 'You'll get it soon.'

     The butcher went into town, hired a lawyer, and got the tailor evicted from his house. The tailor and his wife had to go and live in the shoe-maker's shed.

     'But what are you going to do with the empty house?' asked the butcher's wife.

     'Nothing,' said the butcher, who thought the place would do admirably to keep a mistress. The butcher's wife and the tailor's wife had a fight in the market, and went home with black eyes. In the tavern, no-one spoke, but only eyed each other, suspiciously. The lawyer was still in town. Rumour had it that the tailor's wife was suing for divorce: the inn-keeper's wife had her husband arrested after she found the stairs had been greased. In short, the fields went uncut, the cows went unmilked, ovens uncleaned: the village was obsessed.

     When the day came, the old basket-maker came to town, and sat on the churchyard wall. The villagers brought their gifts. First the tailor, who'd made a luxurious coat. Next the miller, bringing twelve sacks of grain. The baker made the most extravagant cake; the carpenter brought a table and chairs, the carter a good strong horse. The blacksmith's wife staggered up with a cheese the size of a millwheel. Her cousin, the tailor's wife, arrived with a bag of gold.

     'Where d'you get that, wife?' said her husband, amazed.

     'Never you mind,' she snapped.

     The inn-keeper's wife wasn't there: she'd slipped while climbing the stairs.

     Last to come was the butcher. He'd really outdone the others: two oxen, four cows, and a dozen sheep.

     The old-basket maker looked around him. 'Well,' he said. 'I think the prize goes to... the butcher. I'll just take these and be back, with the wicker lady.'

     The butcher was so pleased, spittle ran from his mouth.

     'Can I have my grain back?' said the miller.

     'No no,' said the old man. 'That wasn't the bargain.' And he began to load all the goods onto the horse. The villagers would have fallen on each other, fighting, but they were so desperate to see the wicker lady, they just stood there, to wait.

     It was dusk by the time the basket-maker returned. The wicker woman was seated on the horse, shrouded in a cloak, veiled like a bride. From under the cloak, white flowers fell. As she passed the villagers, a most marvellous smell drifted down.

     The butcher stood outside the tailor's old house. He'd locked his wife in the coal cellar in preparation.

     The old basket-maker held out a hand, and helped the lady dismount. The butcher smelt her fragrance. From under the veil, he thought he saw her give him a saucy glance. He was so excited, he hopped from foot to foot.

     The wicker lady lifted her veil: she took off her cloak. The butcher stared at her. The wicker lady was short of stature and twisted of limb, her face was dark and rough. But worse than that - from head to foot, she was covered in thorns.

     'What have you done?' shrieked the butcher.

     'Ah,' said the old basket-maker. 'The wicker husband was made of willow. Willow is the kindest of trees: tall, elegant, pliable, of much assistance in easing pain. But I saw that you did not like him. Therefore I made you the wicker lady from blackthorn. Blackthorn is cold, hard, and thorny - it will not be killed, either by fire or frost.'

     The villagers would have fallen on the old basket-maker there and then, had not the wicker lady stepped forward. She seized hold of the butcher and reached up to kiss him. The butcher let out a howl. When he pulled his lips away, they were shredded and tattered: blood ran down his chin. Then, with a bang, the butcher's wife broke out of the coal cellar, and ran down the road. Seeing the wicker lady kissing her husband, she screamed, and fell on her. The two of them rolled in the gutter, howling and scratching.

     Just then, the lawyer piped up. 'Didn't you check the details first?' he said. 'It's very important. You should always check the small print.'

     The men of the village took their butcher's knives and pitchforks and tailoring shears, and chased the lawyer out of town. When they'd run out of breath, they stopped.

     'That old fraud the basket-maker,' said the baker. 'He tricked us.'

     So they turned round and began to go back in the other direction, on the road into the swamp. In the darkness they stumbled and squelched, lost their way and nearly drowned. It was light by the time they came to the old basket-maker's dwelling, but the old basket-maker, the wicker husband, the ugly girl and the baby, as well as all the villagers' goods, had already upped, and gone.



[**Peter de Niverville**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/cgi-bin/read_db.pl?search_field=author_id&search_for=PeterdeNiverville&order_by=author_last,title&page=1)[**The Petting Zoo**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/PettZoo903.shtml) **(HORROR)**

At first Johnson thought it was a joke. Speeding down the country road the crude sign was only a blur. But it was that one word. Slowing down, he swung the Lexus onto the paved shoulder. In the rearview mirror, he could see it clearly. The sign was tacked to a stick that was stuck in the ground just beyond the paved shoulder.

     Shifting the powerful car into reverse, Johnson jammed the accelerator down. The tires squealed and loose gravel flew as he tore back up the road. Screeching to a halt, Johnson stared at the faded handwriting:

ELSWORTH'S FAMOUS
SPIDER PETTING ZOO
5Ms Next RT

     Spiders fascinated Johnson. One summer, when he was eight, a large gold and black spider had taken up residence underneath the shingles by the back door. Every morning, Johnson would gather up ants in a jar from a nest in the scrubby woods behind his house. One by one, he would drop the wriggling insects into the web.

     With lightning speed, the spider would spring from her hiding place and race towards the victim. Sinking her fangs into the ant, she would retreat, waiting for the poison to take effect. When the ant slowly stopped struggling, she would climb back down and delicately wrap her prey in a white shroud.

     This continued until, one day, his mother caught him. "What a cruel little boy you are," she scolded between clenched teeth as she pummeled his backside. He could still feel the shame of being spanked.

     Years later, in a rare moment of remorse, Johnson wondered what it was like for the ant. Trapped…helpless…waiting for the spider to return. Did they know fear or horror? Or was that something only humans experienced? The insect brain was too small he told himself. Or so he hoped.

     *Five miles*, thought Johnson, This side trip might only add another half hour or so to his journey. He would still have time once he got to his motel to have a shower. The dinner meeting with the buyer from the supermarket chain wasn't until 6 o'clock and it was only 4 now.

     Coasting forward, Johnson scanned the road looking for the turnoff. About one hundred yards ahead, he saw a lane that intersected with the highway. Flicking on his turn signal, he shot a quick glance at his watch.

     *If I don't find it in fifteen minutes*, he promised himself, *I'll turn back*.

     Accelerating smoothly, he turned onto a well-paved secondary road with deep ditches on either side. Punching the buttons on the CD player, he stretched his arms, settling back into the soft leather seat. As the throbbing beat of Queen filled the Lexus, his mood lightened - an unexpected adventure in an otherwise boring day.

     Johnson hated his job. Endless meetings with bad food and balding buyers. Too many drinks and too many hangovers. He was packing on the pounds, too. *I have to get back to the gym*, he reminded himself.

     The only redeeming feature of his job was that he was good at it. Top sales rep for the last three years. *I should have been an actor*, he told himself. *Instead I'm selling toilet paper and tampons to these turkeys*.

     As the needle on the speedometer crept higher and higher, the neatly kept fields and freshly painted houses became a blur. Mile after mile slipped by. Johnson felt that he and the car had become one, soaring along like a hawk on a summer breeze.

     But his mood soon soured. The condition of the road deteriorated. Asphalt gave way to chip-seal, which gave way to gravel; and, finally ended up as dirt.

     Johnson jumped on the brakes when a huge pothole emerged in the center of the road. Cursing the delay, he checked his watch again. It was almost 5. The long drive down the country road had dulled his sense of time. *I better turn around*, he cautioned himself.

     As he studied the road ahead looking for a safe place to make a U-turn, he saw it. An old farm house set back from the road. If it hadn't been for the pothole, he would have missed it completely. By the mailbox, a freshly painted sign read:

**ELSWORTH'S FAMOUS
SPIDER PETTING ZOO
OPEN YEAR ROUND
ALL VISITORS WELCOME**

     *This must be the place*, he concluded. Carefully turning up the heavily rutted lane, Johnson wondered what he would find. *Perhaps one of the locals playing a joke on the tourists*, he mused.

     Tall grass slapped at the bottom of the car and rusted barbed wire clung to rotted posts that ran alongside the lane. In the untilled fields, scrubby bushes had sprung up like mushrooms. Johnson tried to imagine what the farm looked like in better days, but it was impossible.

     When he reached the top of the hill, the farmhouse looked even more decrepit. Blistered paint hung from the wooden shingles and there was a disturbing sag in the middle of the roof. What once had been the side garden was now occupied by tall thistles and a mass of tangled timbers indicated the former site of the main barn.

     Except for the glass still being intact in the windows, the house looked abandoned. Where is everybody? thought Johnson. In response to his question, an old woman dressed in a black skirt and a woolen sweater stepped out the side door. She was gnarled and withered like the lone apple tree that stood in the yard. Johnson guessed she must have been at least 70, maybe even 80 years old.

     "What you want?" she spat.

     Turning off the CD player and rolling down the car window, he replied, "Is this the petting zoo?"

     "That's what the sign says, don't it?"

     Ignoring her rudeness, Johnson continued, "Are you open?"

     "I'll git Jake. He out back choppin' wood."

     He watched as she shuffled down a dirt path and disappeared around a corner of the house. *Charming*, thought Johnson.

     Opening the car door, he stepped out. Despite the poverty, the farm had a certain rustic appeal which reminded him of the house that he grew up in in the country.

     But there was something odd. Something missing. *Where are the flies?* thought Johnson. On most farms the low buzz of the black swarms was constant. But here there was none. Except for the moaning of the wind, it was quiet.

     Perhaps it was the lack of animals, he thought. Or maybe it was the stiff breeze at the top of the hill that kept them at bay.

     Glancing at his watch, he frowned. It was after 5 o'clock. If he did not get back on the road soon, he would be late for his appointment. Either that or skip his shower. After driving all day, Johnson did not want to skip the soothing ritual.

     Taking one last look around, he reached for the handle of the car door. Just then the old woman reappeared and behind her an even more wizened up old man wearing faded blue overalls and a nicotine-stained undershirt.

     Stopping at the corner of the house, the old man spat out a long jet of chewing tobacco on the ground. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he paused momentarily to study Johnson.

     Speaking to the old woman, he said in a low tone, "Thought I heard a car come up."

     "Wants to see yer spiders," she said before she turned away and went back into the farmhouse, letting the screen door slam behind her.

     "You wanna see my spiders, young fella?"

     "Sure if you're open. How much?"

     Looking over the Lexus, he scratched his ruddy face and said, "Fifty bucks."

     "Fifty! That's ridiculous!"

     Shrugging his shoulders, the old man said, "Take it or leave it. I got work to do."

     Then he spat out another long jet of chewing tobacco and turned to go.

     *I can't leave now after coming all this way*, thought Johnson. Taking another quick glance at his watch, he said irritably, "All right, all right. But this better be good!"

     The old man smirked and licked his lips as Johnson whipped out a crisp fifty dollar bill from his wallet. Johnson did not like the old man's greedy look and hastily shoved his wallet back in his pants pocket.

     "Thanks," said the old man sarcastically, snatching the bill from Johnson's hand. Looking it over carefully, he folded it up neatly, stuck it in his pocket and said, "Follow me."

     The old man led Johnson down an overgrown path to a shed at the back of the farmhouse. Inside, the dim glow of fluorescent tubes highlighted the dozen plywood shelves that ran along the walls. In contrast to the rest of the farm, the shed was neat, almost antiseptic in appearance. Sitting on each shelve was a glass terrarium filled with twigs and rocks. In the case closest to Johnson, a small garden spider was spinning a web in the corner.

     "That's an orb spider," said the old man.

     "I know," said Johnson, annoyed by the interruption,

     "You know spiders?'

     "A bit," replied Johnson. "I used to study them when I was a kid."

     "I bet you're the type that liked to feed 'em, eh? Catch bugs, drop 'em in. See what happens. Fun, ain't it?"

     Suddenly Johnson was uncomfortable. *How did he guess my secret?* he wondered. Johnson felt the warm rush of blood to his neck and ears as he started to blush.

     "No need to be ashamed, young fella. All kids do it. It's natural."

     Trying to change the topic, Johnson asked, "You been at this long?…keeping spiders?"

     "Yeah, I been at it awhile. Most folks are scared of spiders. Not me. Me and spiders git along real good."

     Johnson turned back to watch a large black spider in another case sucking up the half-digested slurry of its latest victim.

     Trying to be polite, Johnson asked, "Bet you don't get many visitors here…being so far from the highway."

     "Don't need 'em," said the old man. "This is just a sideline." Pausing for effect he added, "I breed 'em."

     Johnson looked puzzled.

     "For the college," explained the old man. "They use 'em for research."

     "Does it pay well?"

     "Good 'nuf…Ah, they don't know squat 'bout spiders!," said the old man, spitting on the floor. Johnson looked down and saw that a streak of the sticky black tobacco had splashed on his shoes.

     "I been doing research of my own," said the old man proudly. "Spiders are jes' like any other critter. Cows, horses, dogs - they're all the same. Breed the best with the best and you git the best…Or the…," the old man's voice trailed off as he started to laugh.

     There was something about his tone that made Johnson uneasy.

     "You wanna see my prize winner?"

     Johnson looked around.

     "Oh, she ain't here. I keep her in the barn. She kinda makes these critters nervous. I can't say, I blames them. Wanna see her?"

     The way the old man said it, the question sounded more like a challenge.

     Johnson hesitated. He wanted to say no, but he could not let the old man see he was afraid.

     "Sure," answered Johnson. *What could it be?* he asked himself. *A tarantula?*

     With the old man in front, they went down a lesser-used path to a small barn behind a stand of trees that made it invisible from the farmhouse. A shiny new lock on a rusted hasp yielded to the old man's key.

     "I don't like kids messin' with my stuff."

     The ancient wooden door swung open. Inside it was pitch black. Johnson hesitated. What was it that made him apprehensive? His mouth felt dry and he tried to swallow.

     "Go on in!" taunted the old man as he shoved Johnson through the door.

     Stumbling on the raised sill, Johnson fell to one knee ripping his pants. *Damnit*, he cursed.

     "There's a light switch ahead of you," the old man reassured him. "Jes' pull the string."

     The stench of moldy hay made Johnson gag.

     "Where is it…the spider?" he called out.

     "She's in the back. You can't miss her."

     "Where's the light?"

     "Right in front of you. Can't you see it?" mocked the old man.

     Johnson stretched out his hand. At first, he could not feel anything. Then slowly groping the air in, he caught hold of it. Johnson's heart leapt in relief. But there was something strange. The line didn't feel like string. It was sticky like a…

     Pulling the line, Johnson knew he had made a mistake. Something rustled in the rafters above him and bits of straw floated down.

     Johnson bolted for the opening.

     "Enjoy yourself!" cackled the old man as he slammed the door and locked it.

     "Let me out! Let me out!" shouted Johnson, pounding on the door. "Let me out, you old buzzard!"

     But it was no use. The dried-out wooden door was like iron. Pausing to catch his breath, his fists throbbing, Johnson looked around. Slowly his eyes grew accustomed to the dark. What appeared to be a black chasm was, in fact, the side entrance to the barn. *There must be another way out*, he thought. *But where?*

     In the gloom, he could see that beyond the entry way there was a large open space. And beyond that a boarded-up window through which thin shafts of sunlight streamed.

     *Great! All I have to do is cross the barn, pull off one or two of those boards and climb out*, thought Johnson. *Then I'll show that old man. Fifty bucks! He'll wish I had never stopped.*

     Then he heard another rustle overhead and more straw floated down.

     "Who is it? Who's there?" he called out.

     *I'll bet it's that old man*, thought Johnson. *He thinks he's going to scare me.*

     "Sure! You just keep that up, old man," Johnson called out again. "Let's see how much laughing you do when I bash your face in."

     *But first, I've got to get to that window. Be careful*, he cautioned himself. *This barn must be full of junk. Don't want to fall down and get hurt.*

     Despite the heat in the barn, he shivered. Licking the sweat off his upper lip, Johnson slowly picked his way across the wide wooden-planked barn floor, being careful not to trip. Shadows of old machinery and tools loomed around him. A leather harness that hung from the wall looked like a hangman's noose.

     There was a peculiar smell, too. It reminded him of a package of chicken that he once left in the trunk of his car on a hot summer day. It was the sickly, sweet scent of rotting meat.

     *Oh, gross!* muttered Johnson. *There's a dead animal in here.*

     In less than a minute he had crossed the barn and was standing in front of the boarded-up window. Blocking his exit were three boards nailed haphazardly into the frame.

     Either the old man was too weak or too lazy to drive them all the way in, concluded Johnson. *I can probably pull them off with my bare hands*, he smiled triumphantly.

     The first board was half-rotted and fell apart in his hands. Light streamed in as it came away from the frame. Then he shifted his attention to the second one - the board in the middle. If he could get this one off, he could easily climb out.

     But this board wouldn't be so easy. It was like the old door of the barn, dried out and as tough as steel.

     Gripping the board with both hands, he began pulling. The nails squealed in protest and the board started to move. *Only a little bit further*, grunted Johnson. The thought of throttling the old man excited him. *Just a bit further....another half inch.* He could almost feel his fingers closing around the old man's scrawny neck...the eyes bulging...the tongue sticking out. *Another half inch...!*

     Then it stopped. Desperately, Johnson yanked at the board, but it was no use. It would not yield.

     *I need more leverage*, he said to himself. Balancing on one foot, he braced his other against the window frame and started pulling again. The muscles in his forearms and back bulged as he strained against the board. Sweat rolled down his forehead and into his eyes. *Come on*, he pleaded with the wood. *Come on.*

     In his frustration, Johnson did not hear the soft tap...tap...tap on the floor behind him. Tap...tap....tap. Like a blind man with his cane. Tap...tap...tap. Then it was too late. It struck.

     The force of the attack rammed him face first up against the wall knocking the wind out of him. Warm blood trickled from his nose and ran down his cheek.

     *What was that?*

     Turning around slowly, he could see, in the light from the window, his attacker. It was crouched inside an empty stall along the opposite wall. The legs tensed ready to spring. It was a spider. No doubt one of the old man's experiments. But this was no ordinary spider. It was huge. About the size of a pit bull, with legs that extended out three or four feet on either side. Its eyes stared coldly at him.

     Johnson did a quick tally of his injuries. Except for his bloody nose, he was unharmed. Perhaps the large size of the creature made it difficult for it to mount an attack, he conjectured. Possibly it did not even recognize him as prey.

     *Spiders normally eat moths and insects*, he reminded himself. *Not human beings.*

     When he was a kid, Johnson liked to throw twigs into a web just to see the spider's reaction. Invariably, after pouncing on the object, the spider would pluck it out of the web, turn it over and drop it on the ground. Johnson hoped this spider would show the same lack of interest.

     From its vantage point at the other end of the barn, the creature seemed puzzled - unsure of itself. *Spiders are cautious*, he told himself. *It's waiting for me to make the next move.* Although every fiber in his body screamed run, his brain told him stay still. The spider was too big and too fast to out-run.

     *I need a weapon*, he told himself. Quickly looking about, he saw the rotten board from the window lying at his feet. It was about two feet long with a jagged point at one end. *It'll have to do*. Slowly, he bent down to pick it up.

     The spider crouched low, like a sprinter, ready to strike again. Johnson froze - his fingers only inches from the board.

     "Easy girl," he whispered softly. "Easy."

     The spider relaxed, but not completely. Deliberately, it began to move forward. Tap...tap...tap. Johnson was amazed by the creature's grace. Like a ballerina tiptoeing in from the darkened wings of a theatre, it was a marvel of beauty and design. The body, covered by fine grey hair, had the look of velvet, while the eight legs that extended from the thorax provided speed and balance.

     As it approached Johnson, the spider carefully extended one foreleg towards him. Johnson quickly knocked it away with his hand. The creature stopped and cocked its plate-sized head to one side. The eight eyes looked like black fists. Then the leg came forward again. At the tip, Johnson could see the spike-like claw for catching prey. It touched his left shoulder. Through his jacket he could feel the sharp point digging into his skin. Johnson winced and stepped backwards into the wall. But there was no place to go. Slowly, the other foreleg came forward. Johnson recoiled, trying to ward off the attack with his free arm. But the creature was too strong. It brushed his arm aside, as if it was a piece of lint, and planted a second claw into his other shoulder. Johnson cried out, "Help! Help!"

     Then the spider reared up on its hind legs, forcing Johnson to his knees. For a brief moment, he and the creature looked into each other's eyes. It was almost like love. Then he saw the six-inch fangs that extended from the head. Drops of venom gleamed in the half-light. He watched in fascination as the cruel daggers arched high over him; then he screamed as they plunged deeply into his chest. Instantly, white hot pain ripped through his body.

     Then it was gone. The spider had retreated back to the stall. Johnson knew that he only had a minute or two before the poison paralyzed him.

     *This is it!* he said to himself. *My only chance.*

     Ignoring his wounds, Johnson turned back to the window. Grabbing at the board, he yanked and pulled, to no avail. Already the venom was having its effect. His hands were numb and his arms felt like lead. Gasping for air, he threw himself at the boards again and again. But it was no use. He was beaten. Great sobs shook his body as he slumped to the floor.

     *This can't be happening to me*, he protested. *It's ridiculous.*

     Looking back at the spider, he could see that it still had not moved. *What is she waiting for?* he wondered. *Why doesn't she finish me off?*

     He soon had his answer. Shimmering like a great overcoat, there was something on the spider's back. It moved and undulated like a small wave flowing back and forth. Then a piece of the wave pulled away and dropped to the floor. It was another spider, only a lot smaller - about the size of a rat. Johnson recalled that some spiders carry their young on their backs. Horrified, he realized that he had stumbled into their nursery and it was feeding time. Another one dropped to the floor and then another. Soon there was a long line of spiders slowly crawling towards him. Through fading eyesight, he saw the first one reach his foot. Tentatively, its foreleg probed the air, until it found his leg and patted it. It was light and delicate like the touch of a child. Johnson opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came. The last thing Johnson saw before he lost consciousness was a spider tearing a piece of flesh from the back of his hand.

     Back at the farmhouse, the old man picked up the whisky bottle from the kitchen table, poured himself another drink and plopped down on the ancient *Lay-z-boy* recliner.

     "How long it take, Jake?" asked the old woman.

     "Not long," he grunted. "They ain't et since Sunday."

     "Git a better sign. Attract mo' folks."

     "Nah, the sign's okay. Anyway, we don't need a crowd," said the old man, taking a long, hard swallow.

     "What yer goin' do with his car?" she asked, standing at the window admiring the now ownerless Lexus.

     "I hear young Dougall needs one for runnin' moonshine. Willin' to pay a good price, too," said the old man.

     "Won't he ask questions?" wondered the old woman, pouring a drink and easing herself down onto a dusty couch.

     "Nah. He don't care," snickered the old man. "I'll talk ta him tomorrow. Meanwhile, pass the remote. Let's see what's on *Dr. Phil*."



[**Fernando Sorrentino**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/cgi-bin/read_db.pl?search_field=author_id&search_for=FernandoSorrentino&order_by=author_last,title&page=1)[**The Library Of Mabel Mogaburu**](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/LibrMabe948.shtml) **(HUMOR)**

1

As a sufferer of a sort of classificatory mania, from adolescence I took great care in cataloguing the books in my library.

     By the fifth year of secondary school, I already possessed, for my age, a very reasonable number of books: almost six hundred volumes.

     I had a rubber stamp with the following legend:

LIBRARY OF FERNANDO SORRENTINO
VOLUME Nº \_\_\_\_\_\_
REGISTERED ON: \_\_\_\_\_\_

     As soon as a new book arrived, I stamped it, always in black ink, on its first page. I gave it its corresponding number, always in blue ink, and wrote its date of acquisition. Then, imitating the old National Library's catalogue, I entered its details on an index card which I filed in alphabetical order.

     My sources of literary information were the editorial catalogues and the *Pequeño Larousse Ilustrado*. An example at random: in many collections from the various editors was *Atala, René and The Adventures of the Last Abencerage*. Motivated by such ubiquity and because the *Larousse* seemed to give Chateaubriand such great importance, I acquired the book in the Colección Austral edition from Espasa-Calpe. In spite of these precautions, those three stories turned out to be as unreadable as they were unmemorable.

     In contrast to these failures, there were also complete successes. In the Robin Hood collection, I was captivated by *David Copperfield* and, in the Biblioteca Mundial Sopena, by *Crime and Punishment*.

     Along the even-numbered side of Santa Fe Avenue, a short distance from Emilio Ravignani Street, was the half-hidden Muñoz bookshop. It was dark, deep, humid and mouldy, with creaking wooden planks. Its owner was a Spanish man about sixty years old, very serious, and somewhat haggard.

     The only sales assistant was the person who used to serve me. He was young, bold and error-prone and had neither knowledge of the books he was asked about nor any idea of where they were located. His name was Horacio.

     When I entered the premises that afternoon, Horacio was rummaging around some shelves looking for heaven-knows-what title. I managed to learn that a tall, thin girl had enquired about it. She was, in the meantime, browsing the wide table where the second hand books were on display.

     From the depths of the shop, the owner's voice was heard:

     'What are you looking for now, Horacio?'

     The adverb *now* indicated a bad mood.

     'I can't find *Don Segundo Sombra*, don Antonio. It is not on the Emecé shelves'.

     'It is a Losada book, not Emecé; look on the shelves of the Contemporánea'.

     Horacio changed the location of his search and, after a great deal of hunting, turned toward the girl and said:

     'No, I am sorry; we have no *Don Segundo* left'.

     The girl expressed disappointment, said she needed it for school and asked where she could find it.

     Horacio, embarrassed in the face of such an insoluble problem, stared at her wide-eyed and raised his eyebrows.

     Luckily, don Antonio had overheard:

     'Around here', he answered, 'it is very hard. There are no good bookshops. You will have to go to the centre of town, to El Ateneo, or somewhere in Florida o Corrientes. Or perhaps near Cabildo and Juramento.'

     The girl's face fell.

     'Forgive me for barging in', I said to her. 'But if you promise to take care of it and return it to me, I can lend you *Don Segundo Sombra*.'

     I felt as if I was blushing, as if I had been inconceivably audacious. At the same time, I felt annoyed with myself for having given in to an impulse that was contrary to how I really felt. I love my books and hate lending them.

     I don't know what exactly the girl answered, but after some squeamishness she ended up accepting my offer.

     'I have to read it immediately for school', she explained, as if to justify herself.

     I learnt that she was in the third year in the women's college at Carranza Street. I suggested that she accompany me home and I would hand over the book. I gave her my full name, and she gave me hers. Her name was Mabel Mogaburu.

     Before starting our journey, I accomplished what had taken me to the Muñoz bookshop. I bought *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. I already had the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* and, with much delight, decided to dive once again into the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe.

     'I don't like him at all', Mabel said. 'He is gruesome and gimmicky, always with those stories of murders, of dead people, of coffins. Cadavers don't appeal to me.'

     While we walked along Carranza toward Costa Rica Street, Mabel spoke enthusiastically and honestly about her interest in or, rather, passion for literature. Because of that, there was a deep affinity between us though, of course, she mentioned authors that differed from as well as matched my own literary loves. Although I was two years older than her, it seemed to me that Mabel had read considerably more books than me.

     She was a brunette, taller and thinner than I had thought in the bookshop. She had a certain diffused elegance about her. The olive shade of her face seemed to hide some deeper paleness. The dark eyes were fixed straight on mine, and I found it hard to withstand the intensity of that steady stare.

     We arrived at my door in Costa Rica Street.

     'Wait for me on the pavement; I'll bring you the book right away.'

     And I did find the book instantly as, for the sake of consistency, I had (and still have) my books grouped by collection. Thus, *Don Segundo Sombra* (Biblioteca Contemporánea, Editorial Losada) was placed between Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Chesterton's *The Innocence of Father Brown*.

     Back in the street, I noticed, although I know nothing about clothes, that Mabel was dressed in a somewhat, shall we say, old-fashioned style, with a greyish blouse and black skirt.

     'As you can see', I told her, 'this book looks brand new, as if I had just bought it a moment ago in don Antonio's bookshop. Please take care of it, put a cover on it, don't fold the pages as a marker and, most importantly, don't even think of writing even a comma on it.'

     She took the book — such long and beautiful hands — with what I thought was a certain mocking respect. The volume, an impeccable orange colour, looked as if it had just left the press. She leafed through the pages for a while.

     'But I see that you do write on your books', she said.

     'Certainly, but I use a pencil, writing very carefully in very small handwriting; those are notes and useful observations to enrich my reading. Besides', I added, slightly irritated, 'the book belongs to me and I can do what I like with it'.

     I immediately regretted my rudeness, as I saw Mabel was mortified.

     'Well, if you don't trust me, I'd prefer not to borrow it.'

     And she handed it back to me.

     'No, not at all, just take care of it, I trust you.'

     'Oh', she was looking at the first page, 'You have your books classified?'

     And she read in loud voice, not jokingly:

     'Library of Fernando Sorrentino. Volume number 232. Registered on: 23/04/1957.'

     'That's right, I bought it when I was in the second year of secondary school. The teacher assigned it for our work in Spanish Lit classes.'

     'I found the few short stories I've read by Güiraldes rather poor. That's why I never thought of getting Don Segundo.'

     'I think you are going to like it, at least there are no coffins or cursed houses or people buried alive. When do you think you'll be returning it?'

     'You'll have it back within a fortnight, as *radiant*' — she emphasised — 'as it is now. And to make you feel less worried, I am giving you my address and telephone number.'

     'That's not necessary,' I said, out of politeness.

     She took out a ballpoint pen and a school notebook from her purse and wrote something on the last page, then she tore it out and I accepted it. To be sure, I gave her my telephone number, too.

     'Well, I am very grateful… I am going home now.'

     She shook my hand (no kisses at that time as is the way now) and she walked toward the Bonpland corner.

     I felt some discomfort. Had I made a mistake, lending my precious book to a complete stranger? Could the information she had given me be made-up?

     The page from the notebook was squared; the ink, green. I searched the phonebook for the name Mogaburu. I sighed with relief: a MOGABURU, HONORIO was listed next to the address written by Mabel.

     I placed a card between *The Metamorphosis* and *The Innocence of Father Brown* with the legend DON SEGUNDO SOMBRA, MISSING, LENT TO MABEL MOGABURU ON TUESDAY 7TH OF JUNE 1960. SHE PROMISED TO RETURN IT, AT THE LATEST, ON WEDNESDAY 22ND OF JUNE. Under it, I added her address and phone number.

     Then, on the page of my agenda for the 22nd of June, I wrote: MABEL. ATTN! *DON SEGUNDO*.

2

That week and the next went by. I continued with my usual, mostly unappreciated, activities as a student in my last year of secondary school.

     It was the afternoon of Thursday the 23rd. As often happens, even to this day, I had written a note in my agenda that I later forgot to read. Mabel had not called me to return the book or to ask me to extend the loan.

     I dialled Honorio Mogaburu's number. At the other end, the bell rang ten times but nobody answered. I hung up but called again many times, at different times, with the same fruitless result.

     This pattern was repeated on Friday afternoon.

     Saturday morning, I went to Mabel's home, on Arévalo Street, between Guatemala and Paraguay.

     Before ringing the bell, I watched the house from across the street. A typical Palermo Viejo construction, the door in the middle of the facade and a window on each side. I could see some light through one of them. Was Mabel in that room, engrossed in her reading…?

     A tall, dark man opened the door. I imagined he must be Mabel's grandfather.

     'What can I do for you…?

     'I beg your pardon. Is this Mabel Mogaburu's home?'

     'Yes, but she is not here right now. I am her father. What do you want her for? Is it something urgent?

     'No, it's nothing urgent or very important. I had lent her a book and… well, I need it now for…' — I searched for a reason — 'a test I have on Monday.'

     'Come in, please.'

     Beyond the hallway, there was a small living room that appeared poor and old-fashioned to me. A certain unpleasant smell of stale tomato sauce mixed with insecticide floated in the air. On a small side table, I could see the newspaper *La Prensa*, and there was a copy of *Mecánica Popular*.

     The man moved extremely slowly. He had a strong resemblance to Mabel, the same olive skin and hard stare.

     'What book did you lend her?'

     '*Don Segundo Sombra*.'

     'Let's go to Mabel's room and see if we can find it'.

     I felt a little ashamed for troubling this elderly man that seemed so down-on-his-luck and who lived in such sad house.

     'Don't bother', I told him. 'I can return some other day when Mabel is here, there is no rush.'

     'But didn't you say that you needed it for Monday…?'

     He was right, so I chose not to say anything.

     Mabel's bed was covered with an embroidered quilt with a faded shine.

     He took me to a tiny bookcase with only three shelves.

     'These are Mabel's books. See if you can find the one you want'.

     I don't think there can have been one hundred books there. There were many from Editorial Tor among which I recognized, because I too had that edition from 1944, *The Phantom of the Opera* with its dreadful cover picture. And I spotted other common titles, always in rather old editions.

     But *Don Segundo* wasn't there.

     'I took you here so you wouldn't worry', said the man. 'But Mabel hasn't brought books to this library for many years. You can see that these are pretty old, right?'

     'Yes, I was surprised not to see more recent books…'

     'If you agree and have the time and the inclination', he fixed his eyes on me which made me lower mine, 'we can settle this matter right now. Let's look for your book in Mabel's library.'

     He put on his glasses and shook a key ring.

     'In my car, we'll be there in less than ten minutes.'

     The car was a huge black DeSoto that I imagined was a '46 or '47 model. Inside, it smelled of stale air and mouldy tobacco.

     Mogaburu went around the corner and entered Dorrego. We soon reached Lacroze, Corrientes, Guzmán and we turned onto the inner roads of the Chacarita cemetery.

     We got out of the car and started walking along the cobbled paths. My blessed or cursed literary curiosity compelled me to follow him without question through an area filled with crypts. At one of them with the name MOGABURU on its facade, he pulled out a key and opened the black iron door.

     'Come on,' he said, 'don't be afraid.'

     Although I didn't want to, I obeyed him, at the same time resenting his allusion to my supposed fear. I entered the crypt and descended a small metal ladder. I saw two coffins.

     'In this box,' the man pointed to the lower one, 'is María Rosa, my wife, who died the same day Frondizi was made president.'

     He tapped the top several times with his knuckles.

     'And this one belongs to my daughter, Mabel. She died, the poor thing, so young. She was barely fifteen when God took her away in May of 1945. Last month was fifteen years since her death. She would be 30 now.'

     He leaned slightly over the coffin and smiled, as if recalling a fond memory.

     'Death in all his unfairness couldn't keep her away from her great passion, literature. She continued restlessly reading book after book. Can you see? Here is Mabel's other library, more complete and up to date than the one at home.'

     It was true - one wall of the crypt was covered almost floor to ceiling, I assume because of lack of space, by hundreds of books, most of them in a horizontal position and in double rows.

     'She was very methodical, filling the shelves from top to bottom and left to right. Therefore, your book, being a recent loan, must be on the half full shelve on the right'.

     A strange force lead me to that shelf, and there it was, my *Don Segundo*.

     'In general', Mogaburu continued, 'not many people come to claim their borrowed books. I can see you love them very much.'

     I had fixed my eyes on the first page of *Don Segundo*. A very large green X blotted out my stamp and my annotation. Under it, in the same ink and with the same careful writing in upper case letters there were three lines:

LIBRARY OF MABEL MOGABURU
VOLUME 5328
7TH OF JUNE OF 1960

     'The bitch!' I thought, 'Even after I told her not to write even a comma.'

     'Well, that's the way things go', the father was saying. 'Are you taking the book or leaving it as a donation to Mabel's library?'

     Angrily and rather abruptly, I replied:

     'Of course I am taking it with me, I'm not in the habit of giving away my books.'

     'You are doing the right thing,' he replied while we climbed the ladder. 'Mabel will soon find another copy.'



"They're made out of meat."

     "Meat?"

     "Meat. They're made out of meat."

     "Meat?"

     "There's no doubt about it. We picked up several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, and probed them all the way through. They're completely meat."

     "That's impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars?"

     "They use the radio waves to talk, but the signals don't come from them. The signals come from machines."

     "So who made the machines? That's who we want to contact."

     "They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines."

     "That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat."

     "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in that sector and they're made out of meat." [photomaxmix](http://photomaxmix.com/)

     "Maybe they're like the orfolei. You know, a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage."

     "Nope. They're born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn't take long. Do you have any idea what's the life span of meat?"

     "Spare me. Okay, maybe they're only part meat. You know, like the weddilei. A meat head with an electron plasma brain inside."

     "Nope. We thought of that, since they do have meat heads, like the weddilei. But I told you, we probed them. They're meat all the way through."

     "No brain?"

     "Oh, there's a brain all right. It's just that the brain is made out of meat! That's what I've been trying to tell you."

     "So ... what does the thinking?"

     "You're not understanding, are you? You're refusing to deal with what I'm telling you. The brain does the thinking. The meat."

     "Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat!"

     "Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you beginning to get the picture or do I have to start all over?"

     "Omigod. You're serious then. They're made out of meat."

     "Thank you. Finally. Yes. They are indeed made out of meat. And they've been trying to get in touch with us for almost a hundred of their years."

     "Omigod. So what does this meat have in mind?"

     "First it wants to talk to us. Then I imagine it wants to explore the Universe, contact other sentiences, swap ideas and information. The usual."

     "We're supposed to talk to meat."

     "That's the idea. That's the message they're sending out by radio. 'Hello. Anyone out there. Anybody home.' That sort of thing."

     "They actually do talk, then. They use words, ideas, concepts?"

     "Oh, yes. Except they do it with meat."

     "I thought you just told me they used radio."

     "They do, but what do you think is on the radio? Meat sounds. You know how when you slap or flap meat, it makes a noise? They talk by flapping their meat at each other. They can even sing by squirting air through their meat."

     "Omigod. Singing meat. This is altogether too much. So what do you advise?"

     "Officially or unofficially?"

     "Both."

     "Officially, we are required to contact, welcome and log in any and all sentient races or multibeings in this quadrant of the Universe, without prejudice, fear or favor. Unofficially, I advise that we erase the records and forget the whole thing."

     "I was hoping you would say that."

     "It seems harsh, but there is a limit. Do we really want to make contact with meat?"

     "I agree one hundred percent. What's there to say? 'Hello, meat. How's it going?' But will this work? How many planets are we dealing with here?"

     "Just one. They can travel to other planets in special meat containers, but they can't live on them. And being meat, they can only travel through C space. Which limits them to the speed of light and makes the possibility of their ever making contact pretty slim. Infinitesimal, in fact."

     "So we just pretend there's no one home in the Universe."

     "That's it."

     "Cruel. But you said it yourself, who wants to meet meat? And the ones who have been aboard our vessels, the ones you probed? You're sure they won't remember?"

     "They'll be considered crackpots if they do. We went into their heads and smoothed out their meat so that we're just a dream to them."

     "A dream to meat! How strangely appropriate, that we should be meat's dream."

     "And we marked the entire sector unoccupied."

     "Good. Agreed, officially and unofficially. Case closed. Any others? Anyone interesting on that side of the galaxy?"

     "Yes, a rather shy but sweet hydrogen core cluster intelligence in a class nine star in G445 zone. Was in contact two galactic rotations ago, wants to be friendly again."

     "They always come around."

     "And why not? Imagine how unbearably, how unutterably cold the Universe would be if one were all alone ..."

     the end

This story originally appeared in Omni April 1991 and was nominated for the Nebula Award. It is taken from the collection 'Bears Discover Fire', available here. You can find out more about Terry Bisson on his website.

**The silent hostages**

The car carrying the two escaped killers, Wylie Rickman and Art Hoser, nosed carefully into the unidentified desert town, its headlights burning blindingly. It was that darkest hour before dawn of a moonless, starlit night.

Rickman driving, small, dapper with cold saurian eyes and bloodless mouth, judged it to be Parumph in lower Nevada. Somehow they had missed the Fairbank Ranch in the dark.

Ever since they had murdered their three hostages, the woman and her twins and shot their way out of Beatty, north-west of Yucca flat, they had been attempting to find their way south-west towards the Mexican border, twisting and turning, driving without lights on back roads and wagon trails, avoiding the glow of towns, fighting the panic of the hunted.

A few hours back they had listened to a news broadcast that caused them to change their plans and begin searching for a settlement where the alarm might not yet have reached. They desperately needed fresh hostages.

Now they approached carefully a brief main street between the small cluster of buildings that mushroomed abruptly out of the desert. They were jumpy, nervous, half drugged by fatigue and deadly dangerous.

Fat Art Hoser who had needlessly killed the policeman the day after they had escaped from the penitentiary at Carson City had turned into a vengeful jelly of cowardice, for he knew what the police did to cop killers. Rickman was more vicious, for he murdered in cold blood and was prepared to sacrifice a human life for every extended hour of his own if necessary.

He was aware that if daylight found them without a shield of living flesh they were finished.

The town was apparently an early riser for many of the buildings were blazing with lights. But this was not surprising. Life in desert communities frequently began before sun-up.

Caught in their headlights the tall saguaries cacti, which with the stunted greasewood shrubs and sagebrush grew right tot he edge of the town, pointed aloft like warning fingers. But as yet there seemed to be no one abroad in the street.

They passed the usual filling station on the outskirts. Rickman drove cautiously, his Magnum .38 on the seat at his left side. Two rifles and a sub-machine-gun were between his partner and himself. Hoser had a double-barrelled shotgun resting on his lap crossing his fat legs and beer belly.

A sedan with its engine running was standing by the pumps. Inside they spotted the white-overalled attendant with another man, apparently making change. It reminded Hoser of the gas station jockey, no more than a kid, they killed and robbed near Tonopah. Rickman thought only of the hostage he wanted. A woman, preferably with another kid or kids.

As they moved by, Rickman sought to assess the buildings of the town. There seemed to be a two-storey brick hotel, a general store, some shops, a livery stable, several frame dwellings, a café, the usual adobe buildings, and at the end of town a small power station with what appeared to be a tall radio mast next to it.

A lounger was apparently asleep on the porch of the hotel, chair leaned back, shovel-shaped Stetson tilted over his eyes. A ranch wagon was parked in front of it and a rancher sat at the wheel.

Hoser nervously moved the shotgun. Rickman picked up his gun and said savagely, ‘You shoot again before I tell you to and you’ll get this across the bridge of your nose.’

They drove quickly by. The rancher did not even bother to turn his head. It was Hoser’s nervous and wanton shooting of the policeman after they had escaped from the prison that had started the hue and cry at their heels prematurely.

Glimpsed through a grimy window the café appeared to be filled, with the counterman at his griddle and the waitress serving coffee across the bar. A juke box bawled from the restaurant. An asphalt-carrying tank truck and a big freighter with trailer were drawn up in front, their drivers apparently breakfasting inside.

As they drove on, voices emerged from several of the houses where radios had been turned on by early risers. In a nearby house a telephone was ringing and there was a thumping noise of some kind of pump or gasoline engine. A window a few houses down showed a family seated at early breakfast. It seemed as though only the first rays of sun were wanted to send the inhabitants of the town spilling out on to the street and about their business.

They passed a frame house with a big sedan parked in front and the blinds up, revealing the occupants. A man in front of a cabinet mirror. In the kitchen, a woman in an apron was bending over a mixing bowl. There was no one in the living-room from which the radio was playing loudly, but in an adjoining bedroom they snatched a view of a cot with a girl of five or six asleep on it and a crib in which there was a baby.

Rickman’s thin mouth curled with satisfaction. This was a prize he had not expected. With the baby they might even reach the border. And there were keys, he noted, in the ignition switch of the sedan. The two-tone maroon and cream car they had taken from the salesman they had kidnapped and shot between Tonopah and Goldfield was marked.

Hours before they had sat in the vehicle, lights and motor shut off and, concealed by a fold in the foothills miles from anywhere, listened to a news round-up from Las Vegas, which was largely devoted to the harrowing story of the murder trail of the two escaped convicts.

Without emotion, coldly and clinically, Rickman had listened to the list of their killings, the guard at the penitentiary, the policeman at Wilson’s Gulch, the boy in the gas station at Tonopah, the salesman at Goldfield, and finally the woman and two children at Beatty where they had snatched them.

And a mile away, a man sitting in a shack by a gate in a barbed wire fence, sick and clammy, listened to the same broadcast over a portable radio, the beads of sweat running from his cheeks and temples as the announcer detailed:

‘As the chase spread out down the highway from Beatty, with the bandits firing from their car, police did not dare to shoot for fear of hitting Mrs. Nellie Bassett and her twins, Tina and Joey, aged seven, kidnapped as hostages an hour earlier by the fleeing pair.

Apparently when police braving the fire attempted to force the fleeing car off the road, Rickman, Hoser or both shot the mother and two children, threw the bodies from the car and escaped as the horrified pursuit ground to a halt. The children were dead, but Nellie Bassett was still alive and rushed to the hospital in critical condition…’

The man in the shack fought and lost his battle between duty and instinct, switched off his portable, entered his car and drove off to the north. The sound of his motor and the glow of his headlights faded in the distance.

Then they had listened to the details of the tri-state police ragnet set for them.
‘We gotta get us another hostage. The Fairbank Ranch ought to be where the car came from. There’d be women there.’

Driving blacked out, they crept to the spot from whence the vanished car appeared to have come. The rutty road continued the other side of the wire fence which to Rickman denoted the ranch he sought.

The gate was open and they drove through past the shack and large property posting sign. By star glow he was able to read the big letters ‘KEEP OUT’. He did not want to show the light necessary to read the rest.

Hoser said, ‘You sure you know what you’re doin’?’ and then added, ‘I’m getting sick of all this killing. ‘

Rickman reached over and hit him on the cheekbone with the barrel of his .38. The fat man stared down at the blood dripping on to his hand and said nothing further. He was afraid of Rickman. They had floundered in the darkness for several hours, but found no ranch. Then shortly before five the lights on the horizon had announced the presence of the town in which they now found themselves.

Rickman drew up behind the parked sedan. ‘Shift the stuff into the car ahead and start her up,‘ he ordered Hoser. ‘When she’s running, come in and grab the kids. I’ll take care of the other two…’. He slid out from under the wheel with a movement that almost obscenely sinuous, shifted the heavy .38 to his right hand and ran into the frame house.

From the entrance inside the unlocked door he could see both the man shaving and at the back the woman at her kitchen table. He threw his gun down on the former saying, ‘Don’t anybody move. This is a snatch. Stay where you are. Do as I say and nobody’s going to get hurt. ‘Then he called to the woman, ‘You in the kitchen ; if you open your yap I let your husband have it.’

The man in the bathroom froze obediently, motionless, his razor at the side of his cheek. The gunman could see his own face reflected over his victim’s shoulder in the mirror. The woman, apparently terrorized, did not stir or utter a sound.

In the next room the radio blatted loudly. Rickman did not listen to it, but was satisfied it provided cover. Seconds ticked by. Hoser should have the rifles, guns, ammunition and their small stock of food transferred to the other car by now. The gunman heard the starter whir, then the sound of the engine catching and turning over with a steady beat. He waited until he heard Hoser’s footsteps on the threshold and then pulled the trigger shooting the man through the back on the left side.

Hoser rushed in howling, ‘For God’s sake, you crazy fool! Are you killing again? You’ll have the whole town on us … ‘

For once Rickman did not turn on his partner, but stood with the already recocked pistol, staring blankly at the round hole that appeared in the back of the man’s shirt in the region of the heart.

The fabric of the garment was smoking slightly but the man, oblivious to the shock of the bullet or the fact that he should be dead, remained standing.

Rickman bawled at Hoser, ‘Grab the two kids in the bedroom!’ Then he raised the heavy gun, aimed it at the back of the man’s head, fired twice and endured the shock of seeing his own plae and deadly vision vanish as the cabinet shaving mirror shattered under the impact of the slugs.

With two holes through his head the man, the razor still grotesquely held at the side of his cheek, yet refused to fall and die like the other had.

With a cry of rage Rickman leaped forward and brought the gun barrel down on the fellow’s skull which split like a melon into a hundred pieces just as Hoser came in from the bedroom calling, ‘Hey! These ain’t no kids. These are dolls. What’s going on here?’ In one hand he held the baby made of bisque, its blue china eyes open and staring innocently. By the other, he dragged the department store window-dressing wax mannequin of a five-year-old girl with dark chestnut curls.

Rickman’s nerve broke. He yelled, ‘What the hell is this, a trap?’

Berserk he pulled over the body of the headless dummy by the broken mirror, kicked it, then knocked down the lifelike wax figure of the woman in the kitchen, swearing incoherently. Then ignoring the shaking Hoser he dashed through the door pulling a heavy automatic from a shoulder holster as he did so.

But there was no police patrol car, or posse or amred citizens converging upon the house. The streets were still empty. It was beginning to grow light. From the house across the street the telephone kept ringing.

Down the block at the filling station the customer and the attendant were still immobile at the cash register. The lounger slept on undisturbed, tipped back in his chair on the hotel porch. None of the figures in the Café and Eatery had stirred. In the near-by station-wagon the rancher remained unmoved at the wheel.

Rickman, his gun held before him, ran over, yanked the door open and pulled at the rancher’s arm. The wax figure obediently slipped out from the wheel and fell to the ground.

The gunman suddenly became appallingly aware that for all the noise that filled the village street there was not the sound of any human voice that did not come from a radio, or a single living thing to be seen or heard. Somehow they had blundered into a settlement populated solely by department store dummies. And still the whole truth did not dawn.

He went back to the charnel house of the murdered waxworks where he came upon Art Hoser kneeling in the living-room before the radio, his whole person quivering abjectly from his buttocks to his belly, chin and lips, the sweat pouring off him in rivulets.

He did not even look up as Rickman came in but stared transfixed at the instrument which he seemed to be praying to as a kind of animate responsible being, mumbling, ‘No, no! Please! You got to wait.

Rickman, clutching his two guns which had decided so much for him but would not ever conclude anything again, now focused his attention to the radio as the announcer was saying tensely: ‘Everything is in readiness now, the tanks are in position three miles from ground zero; the Civil Defense workers are in their places on Media Hill. And in just exactly one minute from now, Survival City, or Doomtown as the newspapermen have called it, the guinea-pig village peopled solely with dummies distributed throughout in human attitutes of daily life will be subjected to the disintegrative force of an Atom blast twice that which levelled Hiroshima… Now I will pick up the time signals to zero hour – twenty seconds – nineteen – eighteen – seventeen – ‘

Rickman ran screaming into the empty street where in the house across the way the telephone bell was still ringing. ‘No, no!’ he bawled.

‘Hey! Wait a minute! Do you hear me? You can’t! We’re here. For God’s sake, wait!’

The last thing he saw was the steel skeleton of what he had thought was a radio mast. But now, Outlined against the dawn a dark, torpedo-shaped package hung from the 500-foot tower top. And the last thing he heard was the unison chant from all the live radios in all the dead, dummy-filled houses. ‘Five seconds – four – three – two – one …’

Some while later, the guard who that same morning had deserted his post at the No.3 Desert Gate of the Restricted Area between Beatty and Mercury, returned alone, a half-hour before his relief was due.

His name wa Joseph Bassett and he was the husband of Nellie Basset and father of the twins, Tina and Joey. He had managed to reach the bedside of his wife and hold her in his arms a scant twenty minutes before she died.

Dazed by the completion of the tragedy he had returned to his duty from force of habit.

Still in state of shock he could not cope with the ominous mystery of the tyre tracks, west toe ast that crossed his post and entering through the open gate went straight as an arrow eastwards towards where the brown mushroom cloud of the recent explosion had begun to lose its shape and drift with the wind.

He stood staring down uneasily at the tracks, wondering who it had been, what had happened tot hem and what it might portend for him – if ever it came out that someone had gone through there during his absence.

The lesson

Chaos ruled OK in the classroom
as bravely the teacher walked in
the nooligans ignored him
his voice was lost in the din

'The theme for today is violence
and homework will be set
I'm going to teach you a lesson
one that you'll never forget'

He picked on a boy who was shouting
and throttled him then and there
then garrotted the girl behind him
(the one with grotty hair)

Then sword in hand he hacked his way
between the chattering rows
'First come, first severed' he declared
'fingers, feet or toes'

He threw the sword at a latecomer
it struck with deadly aim
then pulling out a shotgun
he continued with his game

The first blast cleared the backrow
(where those who skive hang out)
they collapsed like rubber dinghies
when the plug's pulled out

'Please may I leave the room sir? '
a trembling vandal enquired
'Of course you may' said teacher
put the gun to his temple and fired

The Head popped a head round the doorway
to see why a din was being made
nodded understandingly
then tossed in a grenade

And when the ammo was well spent
with blood on every chair
Silence shuffled forward
with its hands up in the air

The teacher surveyed the carnage
the dying and the dead
He waggled a finger severely
'Now let that be a lesson' he said