

ASIMOV'S

Isaac

SCIENCE FICTION

1.75 JULY 1983

MAGAZINE

LA REINE BLANCHE
TANITH LEE

URSULA K. LE GUIN

GEORGE
ZEBROWSKI

SCOTT
SANDERS

VIEWPOINT

MARTIN
GARDNER ON
PSEUDOSCIENCE





Petrified

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Maybe if I watch it happen enough times, I can make it real inside me. Eyes meet eyes over the round red bowls of candles, hands meet hands between dirty ashtrays and glasses, intentions meet and match and bodies rise and leave together. I go on playing lounge piano and watch people drift in singly and depart doubly.

I've always had the looks, but I lack the tactics. Now that I'm nineteen and allowed in bars, I can observe the way other people do it. That's why I got this job. Mum doesn't know what to make of it. I worry her. In my mind I've raised great walls with only a few gates in them, protecting myself from the threatening touch of hurtful caring, mine or anybody else's, the slashing, uncertain weather I get when I leave myself open to elemental feelings. That last hurricane I had at thirteen, when Dad died, was enough. I let Mum inside the gates. She's the only one now. I'd rather live inside walls than wait under the open sky for the rough lick of the wind.

So I've saved myself for years, and now I wonder what for. Maybe for her. She's watching me with icy pale eyes. I press out some more syrupy stupid music, then look at her again. She's still staring. I think I'll take my break now.

They give me free drinks since they don't have to pay me. I work for contributions, and the crowd is too poor and thin tonight to make it worth my staying at the piano full time. I go to the bar and get a Tom Collins, then look over at her. She's watching me.

I've been here for three weeks and I've never responded, even though some of them had invitation in their eyes before. But tonight . . . her eyes are light through the dimness, like moonstones. I take my glass and go to her table, sitting down into silence. Doubts surface. Me? She can't mean me. What do I say? What if she refuses? What if she . . . what if she doesn't?

Her face is beautiful, glowing pale and tranquil, like the face of a drowned person against the gentle dark sea of her hair. A smile lights the lower half of her face. Her lips are pale and full. Her skin is so translucent I think if I dropped a spot of blood in each cheek it would instantly diffuse outward, like ink dropped in clear water.

"Your playing," she says, "so..."

I smile a little and wait for the smashy feel of deserved criticism.

It is so full of emotion," she says, and her voice is a pure tone, stripped of half the harmonic overtones, what you get when you rub a wet finger around the lip of a crystal glass. Beautiful and empty, with no fuzziness to blur what she's saying, so it stands unmasked in its incredible stupidity.

I smile a little more. If she's really an imbecile, none of my worries are relevant. I can accept her accolades and dismiss her from my mind and get back to watching the others.

She sees she's said something wrong. "It's not the songs," she says and makes a little face. "It's the subtext, the undercurrent. You are very talented. Your feelings project. "

She's so wrong it's funny. My professors are always faulting me for soulless playing. "Technically excellent, as always, Drew, but can't you put a little more heart into it?"

"I played the dynamics. "

"Exactly as marked," they say, disappointed. "Stick with Bach. At least your precision is flawless. "

"Yes?" I say to this drowned madonna.

She grants me another smile, half a one anyway, and says, "Who are you?"

I don't intend to talk to her—she's a musical illiterate—but words come out anyway. I tell her all the facade stuff first, since it's a prepared speech and requires neither effort nor thought. Sophomore, majoring in music at SUI, live at home with Mum, saves rent (I don't tell her it's also because I love Mum. Nobody believes that. It goes against nature), and my name: Andrew Warren. That's one of my warding devices. People I know I'll get along with almost instantly call me Drew, as if they can see or grasp the me within the me.

She calls me Andrew.

All things thus conspiring to drive me back to my piano (sorry, break's over, I've got to get back to work, thanks for the kind words), I am surprised to find my glass empty, two hours gone, and myself still talking. When I tune in to myself, I find I am telling her the story of my life, from infancy on. I have reached the tonsillectomy at age five. "What am I saying?" I say. "I must be boring you to tears. "

"Not at all," she says, her moonstone eyes intent, cloudy-clear with flat backs that reflect light. Someone has dripped a drop of blood in the center of each of her cheeks, and it diffused outward, just as I thought. She doesn't look quite so drowned any more.

I feel warm and comfortable and relaxed. There's a smile on my face, I can feel it, wide and sappy. She can call me Andrew and like idiots' delight music; I don't care any more. I think I'm in love. I look at her and those pale eyes look back, and her pale lips shape a smile in answer to mine.

"Last call for drinks," says the waitress, Cassie. She drifts off before we respond. I look around. Everyone else has gone.

I look back at her. I don't even know her name.

"Come home with me," she says.

My impulses teeter toward accepting her invitation. Then the gates close in my mind and I am standing, shaking my head. "Not tonight," I say, wanting comfort instead of adventure, feeling cowardly instead of courageous. I want home, sleep, breakfast with Mum in the morning, nothing new, no threats. I'm not ready to go from sparks to a bonfire.

She lays her long pale hand on mine. It's very cold. I feel goose-bumps rise in a tide up my arm. "Come home with me," she whispers, sliding to her feet. She tucks her arm in mine, and we leave together.

She lives in the woods, far from a leaf-scattered street light; once she turns off the car lights, we sit under starry darkness. I wonder if we will do it in the car. Fear tremors through me; then desire chases it away. I have lost all feeling of control. We wait for a moment in forest-noise-filled silence. She pulls the car door handle up and slides out, the sudden light interrupting the settling dark. I get out too.

Crickets and frogs still their mating calls as she crosses the gravel and steps onto the porch. She opens the screen door and hits the light switch just inside. Once she's in the cabin, the animals start the night chorus again. I lean against the car, struggling with something, feeling that my warding devices have failed, that someone has picked the locks on all my gates and pulled me outside to stand defenseless under a stormy sky.

"Andrew?" She stands, a dark shadow in the doorway with light spilling round her edges to splash on the porch.

Where is that warm frothy feeling I had in the bar? I tell myself that's why I'm here, to recapture the pleasure I felt tonight for the first time. If that's what happens even before I kiss her, maybe afterward my walls will fall and I'll learn to weather everything, sunshine, lightning, hail.

"Andrew, come in. I'll make you some coffee. I'd like you to meet my little brother."

Coffee. The warmth draws me in. My arm is cold where she touched it. I'd like to cup my hand around a warm mug of coffee. I let the screen door slam behind me and stand blinking in the light of the front room. A boy is curled on the sofa. He yawns, stretches with the unconscious grace of a cat. A very scrawny cat. He opens his eyes and looks at me. His eyes reflect light like his sister's. He smiles: little baby teeth with gaps in between.

"Andrew, this is Micah. Micah, Andrew." She drifts across the room like smoke. Her slate-gray dress covers her from neck to wrists and ankles, leaving only her alabaster hands and face revealed.

"Yes," I say to Micah as she vanishes through a door, "but who is she?"

"You couldn't pronounce it," says Micah. "None of them could. Call her Allie."

For a minute I feel like arguing. I'm good at languages. Then I decide to skip it.

"Please have a seat," Micah says, waving at a comfortable-looking chair. I bite my lip (a warding device) and wake up enough to wonder what I'm doing here. She didn't bring me home to neck, not with a little brother in the room. Not unless she's weird. Just my luck to get stuck with a weirdo my first try.

Micah stares at me, silver-eyed. I feel a sort of flush pass over me. "Have a seat," he says again, and I jerk my way over to the chair and collapse in it. "Talk to me," he says.

"I was in the children's ward," I say. "Bunch of other kids there and it was scary, because some of them were really sick. Some would never leave the hospital. We had jello for dinner. Mum sent me an etch-a-sketch to play with, and Dad a stuffed elephant..."

It's the night before the operation and the nurse has just waked me to give me a shot in the rear when Allie comes back with the coffee. I don't notice until she screams, "You twit!" at Micah and throws coffee on him. "Couldn't wait, could you?"

I rub my eyes, then open them again. Where—who? What on earth? Where are my safe walls? Maybe this is what it's like when you take drugs. Instant total confusion. Go to sleep at the piano in a bar and wake to see two strangers fighting in a strange land.

"There, you see that, you little idiot? You disengaged wrong and mixed him up!" They look at me with clinical interest. I smile feebly.

"You shocked me out of it," says the boy.

"I can fix it this time, but don't do that again. It's too late. We waited too long. We need this one badly." She walks to me and touches my forehead with two fingers. They tingle against my skin, and I remember. Allie. Micah. Pleasure. Mmmm.

"Andrew, I'm going to take you home now," she says, taking away her hand. "But you've had a nice time tonight, haven't you?"

"Mmm," I say, smiling wide and sappy.

"You'll come back tomorrow night, won't you?"

"Mmm."

"Good boy." She gives me another of those half-smiles. Then she drives me home.

What on earth did I say to them? I wonder as I brush my teeth. God, I was stupid. I can't remember what I said, but I'm sure it was stupid. I won't see her again. I won't give her the opportunity to learn how much stupider I can be. I won't let myself feel one way or the other about her. Uncharted weather that way.

I'm all wrought up. Got to pour it out of my system the only way possible. Chopin attack with Gershwin thrown in. This is the stuff my professors never hear at school. I hit too many wrong notes. I can't stand messing up in front of people, making them feel sorry for me. But when I'm all knotted up inside, when I know Mum's at the other end of the house and won't wake, I let the music pound through me, draining off whatever the energy is and straightening me out. The "Raindrop" prelude, a good one for washing out gloom, with the sunshine edge at the end. I slap the book open and sit down, flex my fingers twice, and attack.

Madness. Chaos. The furious energy flows down my arms only to dam at my fingertips. My fingers are frozen, chunky, unresponsive. I pound my way through some warmups. It takes more effort than it did when I first started learning piano. What's wrong with me? What am I going to do with myself? I won't let it be true. I go over the warm-ups again and again and finally loosen up enough to play the prelude. Then I do bits from "Rhapsody in Blue," the octave parts, so I can make a lot of sound and fury. At last the seething in me settles and, exhausted, I fall asleep.

I've lost my flawless precision. They notice. They think I'm just tired, and they like that because it almost makes me human. I can't remember the answers in theory class. Dr. Davis gives me the first real smile I've had from him all semester.

I'm not going to the bar tonight. I think of Allie and get hot, but I'll just go on thinking about her, I guess. I'm not going to see her again.

Mum and I are eating dinner when she drives up. I hoped if I didn't seek her out, she'd stay away, but she won't, so I introduce her to Mum. Mum invites her to join us for dessert, but Allie says she's on a diet. She looks at me when she says this. Mum gets distressed for a moment, thinks about it, then almost smiles at me. She has hoped for years that I'd find someone besides her to like. How can I tell her I don't like Allie?

"What are your interests, Allie?" Mum asks.

"I sculpt," says Allie. "Marble. Frozen motion. Poetry pinned down for eons. I'm hoping to do Andrew' soon."

"Oh?" Mum notices the Andrew. She frowns.

"Wouldn't you like having him immortalized in stone? My work is representational—I mean, it imitates life. None of this abstract trash."

How dare she define representational to Mum?

"You don't believe in making statements?" Mum says. She likes modern art. She can even look at a Jackson Pollock without getting an unsmotherable urge to laugh.

"I think art ought to be accessible to everyone," says Allie.

"Like TV," Mum says. "Shoot for the lowest common denominator."

"Absolutely. Democratic art," says Allie. "Finished, Andrew? Come on."

Having listened to her again and having decided rationally that I really don't like her, I see no reason to go with her. But she stares at me with those flat-backed silver eyes, and I feel heat prickles. I rise to my feet. "Bye, Mum," I say. Mum touches my arm, and I look down at her eyes. Maple syrup brown with no metal in them. For a second I'm struggling again. Allie touches my hand. I trot out of the house at her heels.

Tonight Micah makes the coffee. Allie sits and pins me to the chair with her eyes until he gets back. Then she prompts me and I start talking to them. At them. For them. I can't switch myself off. Hours slide away, as I sink into the flow of my own story, reliving bits of life I thought I'd lost, warmth spreading through me because two people are uncritically fascinated by everything I have to say.

"That's enough for tonight," Allie says at last when I have finished telling them about my comic-book file. She smiles at me, this time a real smile, full of sweetness. Micah looks different too. His cheeks are rosy, and he's fleshed out a bit. He's almost attractive.

When she drops me off, I stand and watch her tail-lights retreat. Click click click. Gates try to lock inside me. Too late, I think, too late, not much left to guard now. I shiver and wonder where that thought came from.

Going through the house I keep quiet, but in my room I sit on the bed, take off my shoes, and throw them at the wall. What's happening to me? Why are they interested? What the hell will they do with the information when they've got it? What have I told them? I can't remember. I search and search, and I can't remember a word I've said to them.

I sit down at the piano, ready to knock out some scary Scott Joplin, a bit from Bink's Waltz. I start. At least, I try to start. My fingers feel like pieces of chalk, blocky, unbendable. They crash down on the keys. Discords crash back, unchords, nonchords. I turn my palms up and bend my fingers. They all move together. Panic floods me. Sweat starts to come, slicking my palms. All right. Index finger, bend NOW.

It bends. So do all the others.

Drugs. They must be drugging my coffee. Maybe I'm paralyzed. Arthritis, like that kid in the rocking chair in the TV commercial.

My hands don't hurt. They just don't work.

Should I wake Mum? Only scare her. Nothing I can do tonight. Tomorrow I'll see a doctor.

How can I lose my piano playing? It's the only place where I open the gates...

The alarm goes off and I don't want to hear it. Mum wakes me on her way to the kitchen. It's her turn to make breakfast. I get up, shower. Warm water feels good. I've been very cold recently. The soap makes lots of lather. I check it. It's still Ivory, but it's acting funny. It scrapes off on my chest. That can't be right. I touch my chest. Muscles harder than when I flex them to lift weights. Weird.

I yawn and dismiss it, then climb out and towel off. It's too soon to shave again, I decide, looking in the mirror. My jaw looks very firm. No stubble yet.

The buttons on my shirt keep squirting out between my fingers like watermelon seeds. I throw the shirt on the floor and get out a tee shirt.

Mum watches me while I try to eat. The fork keeps getting away, and when it doesn't, the eggs slide off it. I grasp it firmly and make progress, but Mum's still watching. "What is it?" I say. I know my wearing a tee shirt to school is unusual, but it's not worth this kind of scrutiny.

"It's your hands," she says.

"Hands?" I wave them at her, scooping air, enjoying the fluid feel, all fingers synchronized. They twist and cup air like birds' wings.

"I couldn't sleep last night. I was reading in the living room. I heard you practicing," she says.

I try to remember. Last night. Allie. Mmmm. But no practicing. I was too tired when I got home. I didn't even want to wake up today. Wait . . . practicing? Wait.

"It sounded awful, Drew. What's wrong?"

Wait. Where are the gates? I can't even get inside them myself today. Practicing?"Nothing's wrong," I hear myself say. "I was just banging, Mum. I think I'm going to take up drums. Piano is too hard to get hold of. You can't make it loud enough." Did I say that? Maybe it's true. Piano's like pinball: get your adrenaline rushing, fill you with pent-up energy, and there you are, stuck with finger exercises. Drums are like baseball. Swing that bat. Run like hell. Use up that energy. What am I going on about?

"Drew," says Mum, knocking on my head, "anybody home in there?"

"No," I say, and grin. What? Somebody's home, but I don't think it's me. "I gotta go now."

Classes wash over me as I try to concentrate, marshal facts, figure out what's happened to me. Who am I? I am Drew, a very secret person, try to cut through the frosting and you hit the walls outside me and bounce back. Who is Allie? Don't know who. She's more of a what: tall and built, with beautiful silver-blue eyes and lips full and red as the inside of a pomegranate. I've never heard her laugh. I think I've met her twice. I can't remember what we did. Why do I get this weird hungry feeling when I think about her? I feel colder now than I ever did before. Her smile last night promised things. But she was rude to Mum. I don't want to see her again. There are other people.

It's impossible to take notes today. My hand won't hold a pen. It's worse than the time I broke my arm and had to write right-handed. Or was that the second time? When I was eight... When I was eight... I was never eight.

I sit up with a jolt. I was never six or seven or any age up til twelve. Total blank. Twelve. My first memory: Dad and me trying to fly a kite up at the elementary school. Trees catch it. We laugh about it. Mum, who has been watching, says it's free now to build a nest, maybe next spring little kites will come down on strings like baby spiders. We all run home to cocoa, books, the piano, the fireplace. Mark, my best friend next door, is too sick to come over; it has to be real flu since this is a weekend.

I got inside my own gates far enough to dredge up that memory. I look around the classroom. I'm alone with the chalk dust. Theory class ended half an hour ago. I have to go home right now and find out if I was dropped on the planet as a twelve-year-old or if there's evidence I actually grew up here.

The house is empty when I get there. Mum's off librarianing, but I know where she keeps the photo albums. I pull out an old red one. My stomach rumbles, warning me to back off, but I ignore it and lift the cover. Inside there's an eight-by-ten color picture of a kid, eight or so, summer-bleached red-geld hair (grandfather's color, Mum told me), brown eyes, staring up at me with the same mournful concentration as the jowly buff-colored dog he's got his arm around. I don't remember that dog, but the kid has to be me. I don't remember that dog...

She knows where I live. What am I going to do?

I sit down on the couch and hug myself. Gates, where were you when I needed you? She and her brother have burgled me. They've been skimming off my memories, all the things that make me *me*. Pretty soon they'll hit Dad's death and all the good parts will be gone, leaving the ruins of the past six years when I haven't done any growing, when I've been too preoccupied with building walls instead...

How do I know that?

—I told you, says Dad's memory. —Somewhere inside you there's a piece of me. Think harder, Drew. Save yourself. Save me. Get out of this and come back to life. Ellen needs you.

How can I fight a thing like Allie? I don't even know what she is. I hold out my hands and look at them. Index, bend, I command. All the fingers bend. She's taken my memories, and she's taken my only release. If she takes the rest of me, nobody will be here for Mum. Now that I think of it, I've been more ghost than person since I lost Dad, but I'm sure Mum would rather have me than nobody.

—Think, Drew.

Allie and Micah are siphoning me. Slowly. I wonder what their intake levels are?

What win they do with a flood?

Tonight she doesn't sit me down in the chair. She lights an oil lamp instead. I see the light through the edges of her fingers. Red. The color of life. Life she stole from me.

"I want to show you my sculptures," she says. "They're out back."

This is a distraction when I'm so keyed up. I'm ready to spring my trap, and here she is taking me on a detour. But I'll have to follow her lead. I don't want her getting suspicious.

Micah follows us through the kitchen. There's a jar of instant coffee on the counter, and a mug. A tea kettle sits on the stove. There are no other dishes.

We go through the back door and step out into the night. Instant silence. The crickets don't like her either.

In the grove the light falls over three statues. No marble chips on the ground, though. Either she moved them here after she finished making them, or she's incredibly tidy. She introduces them to me. "Dennis," she says.

Dennis is a stocky young tough. He wears half a sneer, as if he started a good one and then got shocked out of it. He stands there in his marble with his hands out a little.

"Leonard," says Allie, leading me to the next one. He has the same look of surprised dismay. He also has an athlete's build but he's not doing a thing with it. He just stands there.

"Bruce," she says. Bruce is spindly. She did well by his glasses. He has one hand up, reaching to push the glasses back up his nose. His eyebrows are up in astonishment.

"Well?" says Allie, smiling at me.

"You call this art?" I say. "Why on earth didn't you do anything with them? The technique is flawless, but the result is... the result—" God, listen to me. I'm telling her what everyone always tells me. "The result is soulless. Boring."

She's shocked at first. Then interest creeps in. "What do you mean?" she asks.

"Well, hell, you spend all this effort on getting them to look real, yet in the end they aren't even compelling. Suppose you got Bruce holding a book and looking like he's a giant despite his build because knowledge makes him that way. I mean, it's a cliché, but it's better than this—"

"This isn't important," says Micah. I'd forgotten him. I look down at him. He looks hungry.

The trap. I must remember.

Allie takes my hand and leads me to a gap between two trees. "Show me, Andrew. Strike a pose that means You."

"Huh?" Micah smiles up at me and touches my leg. Oh, god. So that's it. Of course they've fed before, but not on flesh. Ashes to ashes, and dust—to marble. "All right," I say, poisoning my trap. I take a deep breath, turn my face to the leaves overhead, and throw out my arms. Allie touches my hand. They're both in position. No talking this time. Let it rain. Let it pour. Let the floodgates open.

A trickle. Then a torrent. All the rage and fear, the fury and horror, the anger and hate and despair I felt when I lost him. Every hurricane and typhoon I can find. I haven't been keeping the weather out all these years. I've been locking it in. It's huge and fierce and awesome. It lasts for ages.

I'm crying. Statues can't cry. I lift my hand away from Allie's touch to rub my eyes. Then I look at them.

She and Micah are very, very pale.

My dog's name was Georgia. No. My dog's name was Sparks. Naw. King. A German shepherd, he was. Nonsense. I have a calico cat I call Amanuensis.

"I had a bloodhound named Georgia," I say aloud, and "who the hell are you?"

"Leonard."

"Dennis."

"Bruce. The residuals. That was fascinating. What happened?" I look carefully at Allie. I touch her cheek. Stone. She and Micah are both twisted in agony, their faces midway between ecstasy and horror. Art. I breathe hard and wipe my eyes again. "I think I overloaded them," I say, swallowing a last sob. I look at my fingers. They've gotten back their individuality. I'm going to play such passionate music I'll drive my profs crazy.

"Why have you got such wiry forearms and such poor chest development?" asks Leonard. "I'm going to put us in training."

"Are you taking any biology this semester?" Bruce asks.

"You got a car? You can have mine," says Dennis.

"Wait a minute," I say. Dad's dead and I'm alive and now I have to figure out what to do with strange people inside my head? Much too close. How can I shut the gates and keep them out? They can ooze through the walls.

Damn. I just knocked down all the walls, anyhow.

Mum isn't used to having much of a me around the house. Now there's Us. What will she do with a flood?

Her being Mum, I bet she knows where the sandbags are.●