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COVER PAINTING BY CHESLEY BONESTELL

(1380 miles out from earth on the way to Mars. Ships in plane of ecliptic. South America below. Isthmus of Panama in upper distance.)
Painting from "The Exploration of Mars," by Werner von Braun, Willy Ley, and Chesley Bonestell. To be published soon by The Viking Press.

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Stories by Rachel Maddux have appeared in Collier's, Harper's and Story, but never before in a fantasy magazine. She can, with luck, write a short story in a day — and has been working on a four-volume novel for 18 years. Her great good fortune, she says, is that she is "married to a man who understands writers": but the good fortune must be partly his as well, since his wife is a writer who understands marriage — as she demonstrates simply and touchingly in this peculiarly contemporary ghost story of a revenant who could return only in the 1950's.

Final Clearance

by RACHEL MADDUX

"HELLO. OH, EVVIE? NICE OF YOU to call. Oh, I was just trying to get some of these sympathy notes acknowledged. You and Ed have been swell, but honestly, you don't need to worry about me. As a matter of fact, I'm going to turn in very soon. Yes, I have my sleeping pill and my glass of brandy and my book all laid out beside the bed. I'll call you tomorrow, Evvie.

"The notes? Well, I don't see how you could help, really. It isn't anything anyone else can do for you very well. Evvie, you'd be amazed. Do you know there are at least a dozen from people I never even heard of? There's one (I must show it to you) so very touching, in the most labored handwriting, from a man who owns a fruit store where Tom used to stop on his way home.

Tom never even mentioned him and this Tony what's-his-name must have poured out all his troubles. . . .

"What? Yes, he was. The most wonderful. I can see him so clearly standing there chewing on an apple, giving this little man that vague smile he had and nodding his . . . nodding . . . Evvie, I'm slopping over again. Sorry. Call you in the morning."

Madeline replaced the receiver carefully and pressed the back of her hand against her lips. This treacherous blubbering that sneaked upon her without warning served no purpose. It neither assuaged grief nor eased bitterness; it did nothing but choke up her mouth and bring on another spell of vomiting.

"I won't have it," she said aloud. She reached for a cigarette and

finally got the match flame aligned with the end of it. Every handkerchief she owned was a small hard ball lying in the laundry hamper. Even all of Tom's were used up now. The thing was she had to wash tomorrow, absolutely. She got up from the desk and walked into the bathroom. Even the kleenex was gone. This very afternoon she'd been in a drugstore and hadn't remembered. She blew her nose on a piece of toilet paper and missed the wastebasket when she tried to throw the paper into it. With a grotesque kind of patience she bent over slowly to pick up the toilet paper, holding on to the wash basin against her dizziness. When the phone rang again she straightened up slowly and limited herself to a deep sigh. Against the ringing she told herself to remember that somewhere she had left a cigarette burning.

"Hello? Hello? Oh, yes, Uncle George. Why, I'm all right. How are you?"

The cigarette, she saw, was safely here in the ash tray on the desk and she reached for it gratefully.

"That's very kind of you and Aunt Emily, but really I'd rather be here. I'm just more comfortable in my own place, you know. Oh *no*. Don't come. I mean, I wouldn't think of it. No, please. Why, you'd have to get the car out and everything and it's so late. Really, I'm all right. I'm fine. Certainly. I'm keeping busy, as you suggested."

That emergency frustrated, Made-

line leaned back in her chair and discovered that, at a certain angle, it would produce a squeak. Now, by moving forward and back only a little, she could punctuate Uncle George's endless talk with little squeaks.

"Yes, I know you did, Uncle George (*squeak, squeak*). Tom was so fond of you both (*squeak*). Oh, you did? That's very kind of you. I'm so stupid about things like insurance (*squeak, squeak*). I know Tom would appreciate . . ."

She sat through two more cigarettes saying yes, saying no, saying thank you and squeaking the chair. It sounded exactly like a pig and for a while she played with the picture of having turned the phone over to a small, white pig. She could see Uncle George talking pompously on and on, Aunt Emily hovering nearby, while at the other end of the line the neat, white pig squeaked back appropriate responses.

Even this came to an end at last and now she sat at the desk too worn out to tackle the notes of sympathy. The big thing was, did it really matter if she washed her teeth or not? If she just fell on the bed, for once, and didn't carry on, what would happen?

"What?" Tom had said after the Anderson's party. "You mean your pores aren't cleansed? You're going to leave them clogged up all night, choking, like it says in the ads?"

Suddenly a picture of her proper little mother came into Madeline's

mind and filled her with such warmth and affection that she actually smiled. Relatives had swarmed over the house after her father's death so that her mother, in order to escape them for a moment, had walked into the bathroom while she was lying in a hot tub. Her mother had closed the door firmly and, with a sigh, had let her very proper widowhood slip from her. "If cousin Norma asks me one more time what I'm going to do now, I'll spit in her eye," she said. The two of them had started giggling there in that house of death. Madeline had crawled out of the tub and put her arms around her little mother while they tried to stop the sound of their giggling lest they shock one of the relatives. She had started to shiver and they had seen then that her mother was all wet from the bath water.

Cutting as it did through so many years and such a distance the phone's ring frightened her so that she knocked her elbow against the edge of the desk and, cradling the sharp pain of it, she let the phone ring twice again before she could answer. But that fright had been as nothing to the fear which, at the sound of the voice on the telephone, had her at once on her feet. She was electrified with fear and she put out one hand to hold onto the desk while, with the other, she carefully moved the receiver away from her ear and laid it upside down on the desk. Her knees simply fell away from her and she sank into the chair staring

with horror at the receiver which went on calling her name: "Madeline, darling, are you there? Muffin, are you all right? Look, it's Tom. I was afraid to walk in on you without warning. Muffin, Muffin, please say something. . . ."

The first shock over, she quickly found a furious strength to pick up the receiver. "What kind of horrible joke is this?" she said. "Who would do such a thing? What kind of person? Who is it? I said. Tell me who it is."

The voice became quieter suddenly, almost a murmur, and Madeline closed her eyes and succumbed to it. Slowly the tears slid down her cheeks and at last she held the phone against her breast and bent over it in caress until it gave a clicking sound and then the dial tone began like some huge insect caught against a windowpane.

It would stop of course if she replaced it on the cradle and, what's more, her mouth was open and she was aware of it. That was a good sign if she was aware of it, surely? After all, it was perhaps a very common thing. Anybody might have such an experience in a state of shock. Perfectly understandable. Funny, she couldn't remember the doctor's number. Well, was that a crime?

She began to thumb through the pages of the address book. There it was. Now she must dial it carefully. Might as well get it right the first time. While she listened to the

ringing, she tried to think what time it was and whether she couldn't wait until morning.

"Hello, hello," she said. "Is this the exchange? I'm trying to reach Doctor Morse. Sorry to disturb him but . . . but it's rather an emergency. What? Out? How long? Oh, I suppose so. Thirty minutes? All right. Yes, I'll give you the number."

It was printed right there before her. All she had to do was read it off.

But the footsteps. They couldn't be anyone else's. They couldn't.

She put down the phone and walked out of the room and down the hall and all the time she kept thinking: I'm not frightened at all, isn't that strange? And then, tentatively, as she heard the door open, she called, "Tom? Tom, is that you?"

At last he held her away from him and looked at her. "God, darling," he said, "you look awful. Did you really have a wretched time of it?"

"Well, naturally," she said. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've been so busy filling out the questionnaires I guess I haven't thought."

"Questionnaires?"

"Yes. That reminds me, Muffin. What county was your mother born in?"

"Pasquotink. Why?"

"I couldn't remember, he said. 'I've been beating my brains out trying to remember. How do you spell it?'"

"Tom, stop. Wait a minute. What difference does it make how you spell Pasquotink?"

"Of course. You don't understand, do you, Muffin? Poor baby. Let's sit down. I've got quite a lot to explain."

It tore her heart the way he looked, as though somehow he had done something naughty, and she went to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Darling," she said, "I . . . I don't mean to be indelicate or anything, but do the . . . I mean, can you still drink coffee . . . and all that?"

"Sure," he said. "You make some, huh?"

While she was in the kitchen she could hear him walking around the living room.

"Any fruit in the house?" he called out to her.

"On the coffee table," she said. "Your Uncle George sent it."

"How is the reactionary old bastard? Giving you a bad time?"

She saw him reach for an apple and bite into it with great relish. This is silly, she thought. The dead don't eat apples.

"Your uncle is driving me mad," she said. "That insufferable bore calls me every morning and every night. He's disturbed about my being bitter."

"Are you bitter, Muffin?"

"Oh, well, at first, you know. I guess I got pretty hysterical. He kept telling me about all the young men who had died of heart attacks

and I blew a fuse and said you hadn't di —"

"Died, darling. You're not being indelicate. It's all right. You said I hadn't died of a heart attack. Yes?"

"I said you had been worried and tormented to death by their god-damned security system and . . . I don't know. I probably was going to blow up the State Department with a bomb, or something. I don't know what I said."

"Anyhow, it bothered Uncle George, I see. It's his government and the worst his government could be responsible for is an unfortunate misunderstanding, if it takes every last nephew he's got."

"You *are* the last nephew. He keeps telling me you're all *he* had."

"The water's boiling over, Muffin."

When she came back with the coffee and the cups on a tray, Tom was standing by the pile of sympathy notes.

"What's all this?" he said.

"Just letters, darling. You know. From people."

"About me?" He sat down and began to go through them in the most natural way. "Well, what do you know?" he said. "Old Tony."

"I haven't answered it yet. It's so touching. How does it happen you never mentioned him, Tom?"

"Tony? Didn't I ever tell you about Tony?"

"Tom, listen. I don't know if you ever told me about Tony or not.

That's not what I want to hear about."

"Of course, Muffin. I'm sorry. It's just that I'm used to it already, you know, and . . . I keep forgetting."

"Tom," she said, "*please help me.*"

Instantly he was beside her, holding her, stroking her hair.

"This doesn't happen to other people, does it, Tom? Why *us*?"

"It's because of the delay, Muffin."

"The delay?"

"The delay in my clearance. You know how poor my memory is. I couldn't remember where your mother was born and —"

"Tom, are you telling me you have to be cleared for *death*?"

"Sure, Muffin. Look, let's sit down, huh? It's not really so hard to accept. Don't you remember when I was trying to get clearance before and every time I'd go to a new place to get a job we'd be so surprised that we had it to do all over again?"

"Yes, and I'd say, just the way I'm going to say right now: *but surely not here, too?*"

"That's right. We were always surprised. Well, it's just another step, you know. Just an extension of the same thing."

"Everything that comes in my mind to say, I've said before. I can remember not believing before. I can remember saying *but it's fantastic*, just like I want to say it now."

"I know exactly how you feel," he said. "That's exactly how it was with me."

"But, Tom . . ."

"Yes, Muffin?"

"Tom, if you're not . . . well, if you aren't cleared for death, then you must be alive."

"Well, no, Muffin. Not exactly. You see, I'm in Uncertainty."

"You mean they've got a cold storage room there, *too*?"

"Sort of. Yeah, come to think of it, it's quite a bit like that place in Connecticut. Remember? Guys sitting around waiting and beefing. Say, look there; it's almost light. I've got to get out of here. Write that name down for me, will you?"

"Why?"

"Why? So I won't forget it, that's why."

"I mean why do you have to get out? What does it matter if it's light or not?"

"Because I might be seen."

"Well, what if you were?"

"You don't understand. You get seen, you get questions started, and that puts you back to the beginning again, because it all goes in your file."

"What do you care?"

"Because I was already through the first six interviews before the IBM belched up that blank natal county, mother-in-law."

"Tom. *Listen to me*. What's the hurry? Why would you want to hurry it? It's death, isn't it, after all?"

He sat and looked at her for a long time. "I don't know, Muffin," he said. "I don't know why everybody

there wants it, but they all seem to."

"All?" she said. "There are lots of them?"

"Sure. And they're all impatient. I don't know why. I never thought about it. They just want to get it over with, I guess. Some of them blow their tops and they get a phony notice all of a sudden. Man, they're so proud. They made it. They're really dead. Those sorry bastards. They give everybody the big handshake, see, and they go through this door and it just leads back to the beginning again. Pretty soon they show up at the first desk again, very quiet-type fellows all of a sudden."

She had never really been crafty before and she was surprised how easily it came to her. She began to chatter about Ed and Evvie and about the sympathy notes, and all the time she was moving about the room, pulling the cords on the venetian blinds, turning up the lights a little, silently flipping the night locks on the doors. Meanwhile, as she had hoped, Tom had got distracted by the sympathy notes.

"Hey," he said. "This one. Have you answered this one?"

"Which one, darling?"

"That sanctimonious hypocrite."

"Oh, him. No, I haven't."

"Good. This is one I want to answer myself. The opportunity of a —"

She had known the phone would ring as soon as Uncle George had had breakfast. He was so firm about

believing one should get up out of bed and get the day started. Keep busy, that was the way.

"Tom, dear," she said, "would you mind? I know that's Uncle George and I really can't."

"Sure, honey," he said absent-mindedly. "I'll get it."

She stuffed a napkin in her mouth, knowing exactly how it would be.

"Hello? Uncle George? This is Tom. Hey, Uncle George? Are you there?"

She turned her head away and tried to control herself when Tom walked back in the room.

"Funny thing," he said. "Must have got cut off. Say, is the coffee still hot?"

"I'll make some fresh. Why, what happened?"

"There was a thud, sort of, and then — *My God, I forgot.*"

"Did you, dear?"

"This will cost me a thousand years in Uncertainty," he said.

"Well, was it worth it?" she asked.

He turned to her in anger and then it began to sneak out of him, that reluctant, devilish laugh that he had. Suddenly they were both of them howling like fools.

They had hold of something. Not that they knew what it was or understood it yet, but they were holding tight to it. They laughed

until tears rolled down their cheeks and they fell down weakly on the couch and tumbled against one another like two rag dolls.

"God," Tom said. "I'm bushed. You know? I'm really beat."

"Of course you are, darling. Tell you what. Why don't you lie down right here for a little nap? I'll get a blanket for you."

When she came back he was lying on the couch and he mumbled sleepily while she took off his shoes. She put the blanket over him and hovered there a minute and then carefully tiptoed into the room where the telephone was. She had the tip of her tongue between her teeth while she eased the door shut so it would make no sound and then stealthily she dialed long distance.

"Mamma?" she said at last. "No, I'm all right. No, I don't care what time it is in Connecticut. Listen, Mamma. Would you do something for me absolutely and no questions asked? Mamma, do you promise? Well, promise. All right. I knew I could count on you. Now listen, Mamma. It's a matter of life and . . . It's important, Mamma. Now listen. No matter who asks you, you understand. No matter how many times. You were *not* born in Pasquotink County. Have you got it straight?"

