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*The Listening Child, the first story published by Idris Seabright (F&SF, December, 1950), was chosen by Martha Foley for her list of distinguished American short stories of the year, and is still often mentioned by our readers for its evocative and haunting quality. Later Seabrights have been no less popular; and this new one, we hope, may prove her most memorable yet. The New Barbarism of a future post-war world has been treated often and at great length; but this brief vignette carries more meaning and poetry than the most detailed extensive studies. As with so much Seabright, you may find it running through your head like an unforgettable minor melody.*

## *The Hole in the Moon*

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

THE MOON, not quite full, was coming up over the Berkeley hills in yellow splendor. There was a big black hole, a flaw, against the bright part, where the first lunar explosion had driven a pit miles deep into the sterile rock. Hovey sat on the doorstep of his shack in the junk yard and watched the moon rising. He was smoking — he had found a dozen cartons of cigarettes in a drugstore on Wednesday — and enjoying it. He was feeling good.

He was lonesome, of course, but that he was used to. He had grown so familiar with the hollow feeling in his chest that he no longer bothered to name it. Besides, what difference did it make? There was nothing for him to do except wait.

And keep on waiting. After the incandescent horror of the first few months of war there had come more subtle thrusts, and then a long, mutual, exhausted silence. Hovey had made his way down the coast from Canada, where he had been stationed, to the junk yard. It had seemed like a place to go to. He had worked there once, in the days when the Eastshore highway had been crowded with traffic, and he had always liked it. On the junk yard side of the fence the huge cubes of compressed, rust-red metal and the corded bundles of newsprint and magazines; on the other side, the highway, with the cars shooting smoothly past all day and the big diesel trucks slipping along at night. Why shouldn't he like the junk yard? It had been something to come back to, a home, homelike. Now the highway was cracked and grass was coming up in the cracks.

Hovey shifted his position and lit another cigarette. He blew smoke out through his nose. Tomorrow, if he could spare the time from food-hunting, he'd carry a couple of bundles of magazines across the highway and throw them into the water of the bay. Then he'd bring in those fenders from the two cars further down the road. He liked to do things like that. It kept the junkyard from seeming too stagnant. Of course, there was really nothing to do except hunt food and wait.

The night was windless and silent. Somewhere in the yard he heard a scratching of claws that might have been made by a rat. It probably wasn't. Rats rarely came to the junk yard, where there was little to attract them. And besides, there weren't many rats now. They had died from the plagues of which they had been carriers.

The plagues. Were there any women anywhere who weren't infected? Hovey thought not; they had all caught it, every woman; he didn't want to think of it. He sighed and rubbed one hand over his eyes. But that had been the enemy's masterstroke, surely, as good as anything Hovey's own people had ever delivered. To scatter an infection that fastened only on the female half of humanity, an infection that drove them, young or old, modest or wanton, irresistibly toward the male, urged by the inward fire of the disease. . . . Nothing else could so have poisoned human life, could so have maimed the human race.

In women the plague smouldered quietly. It betrayed itself only in their pitted skins, their roughened voices, their cracked lips. But the men who received the virus from them, transmuted by its incubation in their bodies, died quite quickly and, Hovey thought, quite unpleasantly. There was a gangrenous rotting and a smell. No doubt of it, that plague had been the enemy's masterpiece.

Hovey put his cigarette out against the wood of the doorstep. It was time for him to go to bed.

A voice somewhere in front of him said softly, "Dear, are you there, dear?"

Hovey jumped to his feet. His heart was pounding. He felt a horrible fear and a horrible longing. A woman. He picked up a piece of rusted angle iron from the ground and hefted it. He'd kill her if she came near him. He must drive her away. She . . . It had been so many years.

The woman was suddenly visible, stepping, it seemed, into the moonlight from shadow. She had coppery hair, and her skin was white and shining. He had not known she was so near him.

Hovey was trembling. He bit his lips and swallowed. He said, "Go away, you devil. Do you hear me? I'll kill you. Go away." He made a motion with the piece of iron at her.

She lowered her head, smoothing the skirt of her white print dress. She was wearing high-heeled slippers. She said, in a voice as smooth as cream, "Dear, isn't it really you?"

Hovey panted, "Go away!"

She said, "Oh, no." She moved toward him lightly, floating. He looked into her eyes. He thought — but could you tell colors in the moonlight? — he thought they were blue.

"Oh, no," she repeated softly. "Don't drive me away. I couldn't come back. And you love me, don't you? You want me to stay." Her voice was soft and sweet, almost cooing. He had heard voices like hers, women's voices, years ago on the radio.

Hovey was puzzled. Trembling, he let the iron bar drop on the ground. He stared at her. She smiled at him. Her skin looked smooth and cool and inviting.

"Then you're re — not —"

"Not what, dear? I'm whatever you made me."

He gaped at her a moment more, longing, believing, disbelieving. Then he took her in his arms.

Her skin was cool and glazed as paper. He couldn't hear her breathing; he liked that. The infected women always panted. Under the light print dress her body was young and thin.

When he let her go, he was dizzy. He wanted to hold on to something, to sink down on the doorstep. It had been so many years.

He took her smooth hand and pulled her toward the cabin. In a moment he would cry, make a fool of himself. "Come in," he said, "please come in with me."

She hung back, smiling a little. "You do want me? Really? You love me, dear?"

"Oh, yes." For an instant the storm of desire abated. He breathed deeply. "Who are you? Where did you come from?" he asked.

She shook her head. "You wouldn't understand."

At once he was suspicious and afraid. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded harshly.

"Well," she answered reasonably, "I came from the yard, the junk yard." She was twisting a copper bangle around one wrist. "Partly the place made me, the way hills and big trees make people. And partly you made me, because you were lonesome. You didn't make me very much, though. That's why I'm not strong. I'm not like my sisters. I told you you wouldn't understand."

She was a little crazy, he thought in relief, just a little crazy. She had a right to be, didn't she? Anybody — everybody — did.

He put his arm around her. At the touch of her body under the thin fabric he felt the fire leap in him again. "Come in the cabin, dear," he said, "please."

She leaned back against his arm and smiled at him. She put her white hands against his chest amorously. "Do you think I am beautiful?" she asked.

"Very. Yes." Again the sweet fire.

"Oh, you should see my sisters!" she replied, laughing. "If you saw them, you would not care for me."

"I only want you. *Please* come in the cabin with me." He pulled at her arm.

"They are really beautiful," she said, as if dreaming. "They are strong, because they come from strong places, and because so many men have loved them. They live in the ruined cities. Their hair is as red as fire, and their skin is rough and pitted like masonry. Or they are black all over, dressed in charcoal, and their hair is coils of oily smoke. They are more beautiful than I. I am jealous. But we are of the same stock."

His arm was still around her, but he no longer felt the contact. His thoughts were coming in pulsations, wild and confused. She was crazy. Her sisters, who had pitted flesh and lived in cities. Many men had loved them. The plague. All women had it. She was crazy, she didn't know what she was saying. What was she trying to say? Who were the sisters she was talking about?

His arm dropped away from her waist. Abruptly he was wild with frustration, with desire and anger and hate. "So it was only a trap?" he said in a breaking voice. "You put cosmetic on your skin, you thought you'd fool me? Make me want you so much I couldn't let you go?"

She did not seem to have heard him. She slipped one hand inside his shirt and caressed the muscles of his chest. "Let's go to the cabin now, dear. I want to. You must love me and make me strong."

He wanted to cry, to hit himself, to throw himself down on the ground. He picked up the angle iron. He said, "Go away. Or I'll kill you. I can do it. Right here, like this."

"No! You mustn't make me go away. You mustn't. I couldn't come back."

He struck at her. She slipped away, into the shadows, and he ran after her. She was hiding; he'd find her, he'd kill her. He wanted to kill her because he wanted her so much.

Her dress fluttered at him from a corded bundle. He ran toward it, weeping, and found a scrap of blotched magazine cover moving on top of the bale. It had looked like the pattern of her dress.

He stood, shaking and blubbing, trying to think. She must be hiding. She was cruel. He'd get her yet.

Her white hand waved at him from behind a heap of metal. But when he reached it, it was white paper, glinting in the light of the moon. He touched it, unable to believe. It felt cool and glazed.

Her mop of copper-colored hair winked and beckoned. It was here, it was there, no, over there. He ran after it, sobbing and rubbing his eyes. The moon tricked him; when he put out his hand to touch her hair, it was always one of the cubes of rust-red metal that he touched.

He stopped at last, in the middle of the junk yard, sinking down on his knees in fatigue.

He was so filled with bitterness he did not see how he could possibly continue to breathe.

Next day he hunted through the drugstores (the liquor stores had been looted long ago) until he found a carboy of grain alcohol. He brought it back to the shack and drank it, mixed with vanilla extract and water, all that day. He lay on his back on his cot, sipping the mixture and smoking. He did not understand anything. Who she had been, where she had come from, who her sisters were, even whether she had been real — the more he tried to understand these things, the more he was conscious of his corroding, unbecarable loneliness.

On the third night the moon was full. It rose higher and higher, a big yellow globe with a black hole in the lower part, like a bite taken out of an apple. Hovey sat on his doorstep in the moonlight, drinking the last of his alcohol and humming an old tune to himself. *Juanita*, its name was. He heard footsteps coming down the highway toward him.

He got up and went to the fence around the junk yard. It was a woman, and when she caught sight of him, she began to talk and gesture. Her voice rasped like oiled metal, and even from that distance he could see the pitting of her skin.

He opened the gate with a flourish. "Come in," he said to her as she joggled and posed in the moonlight. "Do come in. You're real, anyhow. I won't hurt you. You can stay."

