



ROBERT HUNTER WHITWORTH

HOW WE PARTED, HOW WE MET

I saw you first, before the earth had cooled fully, and stray matter was still flowing across the cosmos like steam on a mirror. All of us come from exploded stars, did you know that? The carbon inside us was flung out into space from the massive detonations of enormous balls of gas. I'm afraid I don't remember what color your eyes were, but I remember everything about your hair.

The swirls of material that would become the planets that would become our homes were just starting to form, and still there are people who say that the process was not creative enough. I took a nap for a millennium during all of this, and when I woke up there was a man on my toe asking me what to do. I wondered briefly if I had somehow created him, or if it was possible that he had been there the whole time, and I just hadn't noticed.

I explained to him how to make a mint julip, how to boil the simple syrup and crush the mint, but he forgot to put a straw in mine so I had him die for a hundred thousand years. Without the straw mint gets all over your teeth. I suppose it's always something, though.

People think of space as dark, but that's only because of the distance between sources of light. For a while there at the beginning I was broad enough that space was wholly bright to me.

When I revived my little bartender, I asked him how long he thought he had been here. 'A day,' he said, 'or part of a day.'

Then my eyes met yours across the spastic heavens of a solar system that was already dying, and I told my little bartender to make you an Old Fashioned. By that time he had deduced that I killed him, and he snarkily asked if I was sure he hadn't outlived his usefulness.

'You have outlived the usefulness of several billion life forms,' I said.

He forgot to put a citrus rind in the drink and you promptly vanished. I shook my head and thought about how difficult it is to find good help. But to his credit my little bartender seemed legitimately sorry.

The rings of Saturn were crooked, so I adjusted them, and it was then that I began

shrinking. Although I suppose it's possible that I had been shrinking all along, and was only now noticing since objects had begun to form that I could compare my size with. Saturn was one of them, and it was fairly beautiful, and it deserved straight rings. Your eyes might have resembled Saturn, but they also might not have. This was when I began to experience darkness for the first time.

Because of the way I was drifting, half of my body was always shrouded in darkness, and I began to rotate in compensation for this. My little bartender began to make small (to me) pilgrimages from one end of my foot to the other in order to maximize his time in the light. He began to mix drinks of his own concoction, outside of my direction.

He mixed one and began to bring it up to my head, which was a journey that would take him a very long time. He had made it to my knee after a great while, and so I had him die again and picked him up and set him on my chin, to save him time. He was sore with me when I brought him back to life.

'I wish,' he said, 'that you would let me do things on my own.'

He began the trek down my body to his home on my foot. The beverage was delicious, but it made my face hurt. I called down to him and asked him what it was called, and he said 'corn whiskey, moonshine.'

This all happened while you weren't there.

I prevented some danger from befalling my little bartender, but I did it without him noticing. He led a full and interesting life, and even became quite wise by some standards. But then he was gone. I was only about the size of a dwarf sun by then, and I suppose it's possible that I'd become too small for him to live on. I tell you, it takes a robustness to be comfortably inhabitable, and I was losing mine.

I thought for a millennium about where you'd gone to, and then I thought for another hundred million years about what I would say when we met again. It seemed possible that we would, even though the universe was, at that time, infinite.

Before I knew it I was only about as big as a moon. Moons had become all the rage, and an unassuming little blue-green planet had acquired a very nice one, so I hid behind it. The size of the planet had begun to intimidate me.

I stayed there, with the moon between us for a while (of course, I did not know you were there until much later). I determined one day, though, that of all the places in the expanding universe, this planet was one of them, and had to per basic logic be one of the places you could have gone to. I clung to my side of the moon until it had rotated around and I was facing the planet. I squatted down and then pushed off forcefully towards the

blue. I was only just big enough for that to work.

I found myself in an ocean, surrounded by other creatures who were also made of stars but who could not breathe dry air. I watched over a long period of time as the creatures advanced.

The advancement of that species hiccupped, though. Groups of several dozen of these creatures would obtain a stage of evolution wherein they no longer breathed water, but would not know to crawl onto the land, and would drown. They did not know that there was anything besides the water, you see. The rest of the species, afraid, fled to the deeper parts of the ocean. They did not know that they were dooming their whole race.

For the good of these creatures, I intervened, and when a group of them became too advanced to survive in their environment, I would clap my hands forcefully and this would make large waves to push them out of the water, to a world they never knew existed.

With so many objects to measure myself against it became very easy to tell that I was diminishing. After only a few hundred millennia, I was roughly the same size as the planet's dominant species.

I exited the ocean and found myself near a lighthouse. It was black and white, and had served for a while to guide the vessels that trafficked above me while I had lived in the water.

I thought I saw the tail-end of your hair, catching the sunlight, and I followed the glint into a tavern not far from the lighthouse, but you were not inside.

'So this is where you ended up,' said the man behind the bar to me.

I greeted my little bartender.

He explained how he had gotten here, 'I began by selling my moonshine in the mountains, and now I find myself peddling my wares near the beach. Funny how life works.' Although that didn't actually explain anything, and it wasn't really funny.

'Let's share a drink,' I said. I was only a couple of inches taller than the bartender now.

'She never comes here anymore,' says the bartender, in anticipation of my next question. 'She used to, but now you may have better luck in the city.'

'I'm sorry I made you die without asking.'

'Don't mention it,' he said, sipping his beer. 'Not a big deal. I'm not even positive that you killed me. You might have just put me to sleep. I say that because I think I dreamed.'

'Maybe so,' I said.

I had another beer, and ate some of the peanuts off of the bar.

'Anyway, try the city,' he said, and when I stood up I was shorter than he was.

So I forced my way through large crowds in the city searching for a sign of you. At one point in my interminable life I had reached from one end of existence to the other, and now I was below-average height.

I was remembering the time I saw you in space, and you'd briefly passed between me and the closest, brightest sun, you had come between my eyes and a very bright light and were outlined by it, up there. You cast a tremendous shadow on me.

I knew to look for hair that took ambient light and transformed it into gleaming. I scoured the city for weeks and couldn't find you, and by the time I was ready to give up my search I was barely bigger than a fire hydrant.

I spent one last day in search, navigating a jungle of legs and dangling purses, but I still couldn't find you. If it had not been you I was looking for, if I could have broadened the parameters of my search, I would have been successful. If you were not you, I could have chosen someone else to look for.

I hoisted myself up onto the bar stool and my little bartender made a remark about how I was losing my stature.

I asked for a beer, but he handed me instead a jar of the moonshine. 'This will serve you better, I think,' he said. 'No luck?'

I took a sip off of the stuff and felt myself loosen.

'It is possible that she doesn't want to be found,' I said.

'Do you know when you might stop shrinking?' asked my bartender.

'I do not.'

'Then may I make a suggestion?'

We drove through the night, my bartender and I, until we came to a huge marsh. He had one of the jars in the car and we passed it back and forth as he drove.

'This seems,' he said, holding me up so that I could look out across the sticky swampland, 'like a more exciting place to be very small in. This will be better for you than the city.'

I asked him if he would like to stand on my foot, for old times' sake.

'I don't think so,' he said.

I continued to grow smaller, but the jar stayed the same size. By virtue of this it was not unlike my supply replenishing every day. Eventually I constructed a ladder that I could use to climb to the mouth of the jar. I would reach down and gather enough moonshine for a couple of sips in my hands. I developed a method for telling time, inexact at best, based on the flight patterns of dust particles.

Over the next few thousand years (I guess) I continued to lose mass until I was no longer big enough to break the surface tension of the liquid, and instead could slip in and out of the jar between the particles that made it up. The world spread out away from me as I continued to shrink. This sensation, of floating in a colossal environment as it expanded, stirred memories in me from when I had been enormous. The particles of fire and water that made up the moonshine were now big enough that I could make out their nuances, and I played a game at grabbing and repositioning them, like I used to do with planets and suns.

Then, turning, I experienced this unmistakable sensation of light striking something and having its direction changed, reflecting off a pleasing surface out into the rest of everything, and of your shadow being cast on me again.

Tell me everything about yourself.