Scientists, Joan felt, were fanciful and easily controlled; poets, on the other hand, went to the roots of reality, and this might make for trouble . . . . True Love, of course, has special, enduring properties of its own, of which even Joan was not fully aware.

OH I'LL TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

by Stephen Barr

TRUE LOVE, ACCORDING TO some people, never fades. According to others—dusty-minded and clinical—it doesn't even exist, but both poets and scientists agree that whether it exists or not, whether it fades or remains forever in an improbable bloom, Love is around.

John Dougal was a scientist and he was also a poet, and these two qualities can exist simultaneously in one man with a degree of mutual confidence, until he falls in love. When this happens the two sides of himself, Scientist (the man of fact) and Poet (the man of fancy) which had been so happy together before, will curdle into a strange and disparate mass: rather like an unsuccessful coloid. It becomes as though one had left the milk out in freezing weather—the cream is no longer on the top: it is uselessly separated from the water into congealed droplets, and the top of the bottle has been pushed up. Who can have perpetrated this senseless vandalism? Why, Love of course! The small chap with the eye-patch and the bottle opener!

John Dougal was in love with a girl he had met at a scientific tea: that is to say a tea party of scientists, by scientists and for scientists. She was the daughter of the host and she was trying to be polite to everyone. The host was a scientist (rockets) but not a poet, and the guests were also rocket men: all, that is, except John Dougal. He didn't know why, but he disliked the idea of rockets intensely—they went too high and they went much too fast. The truth of the matter is that he was brave as a sheep, which is surely the bravest of all creatures because it will face up to a wolf if it becomes necessary—it is easy for the wolf to be brave with all those teeth.

But John feared height and more than height he feared speed. Joan, the daughter of his host, was a girl with a mind—and a car—of her own, and later on when she had got to know John better she would take him for drives. He could not drive, and she would have to hold onto his arm when they went around curves. She thought this was very funny, but he was ashamed.

At this scientific tea the other men, who were working with their host Merton on the same project, had firmly decided to avoid talking shop but their wives overruled this, and so when John arrived they were all discussing fuels and cosmic radiation, and limiting velocities and maximum acceleration, while the ladies for various obscure reasons were listening avidly. Then he realized that the pretty girl with the green eyes was not really listening at all. When the tea consumption began to fall off he sat down next her. "I don't think you are interested in rockets, are you, Miss Merton?" he said.

"No, and I don't think you are, either," she answered. "It's all Father ever talks about: he doesn't seem to mind that I don't understand a word he's saying—he keeps on anyway." She smiled sadly. "Mother was a mathematician and he used to tell her everything he was doing, and now he tells it all to me, poor darling."

The poor darling came up to them. "I think some of the guests might like a drink, Joan," he said. "So if you will remind me where the whiskey is I'll— Oh, hello, Dougal—make some."

"I'll get it, Father," she said, and left them. Professor Merton sat down and looked at John Dougal over the top of the glasses he thought he had on.

"Well," he said. "Well, well!"

John blinked several times and said, "Quite so." There was a silence following which Professor Merton tried again.

"How's the work coming?"

"Oh, all right. Still in the theoretical stage."

"Ah. And you still think you are going to reach another galaxy in less than a lifetime?"

"Well . . ." John looked uncomfortable; he knew he was a heretic. "I don't say *I* will. It's just that I believe it can be done, and much faster than that."

The professor shrugged (all poets are mad). He himself, with his associates, were planning a trip across space but to one of the planets—practically in Earth's suburbs. And they would go in a rocket—what could be saner than that?

"But even if you went at the speed of light," he said, "your trip would take you a millennium of lifetimes. Surely you do not question Einstein's equation showing —"

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it," John said hurriedly.

"—that nothing can travel faster than light?"

John blinked and said nothing. Professor Merton looked at him thoughtfully. "Hm," he said, after a while. "Been writing any more poetry lately?"

Before John Dougal could answer him Joan came back with the whiskey, and on his catching her eye she winked at him. The wink, of course, was intended as a kind of sympathetic comment, and referred to her father and rocket talk, but for some reason John Dougal fell in love with her at that moment. Joan saw this at once, and he realized that she saw it. Women, he knew, were equipped with a form of love-radar.

I wonder, she thought to herself, if I ought to marry a poet?

She gave no mind to the scientist in him: she was used to scientists—she regarded them as fanciful and easily controlled. Poets, on the other hand, she felt dealt in facts. They went to the roots of reality, and this might make for trouble.

She was still thinking about this a few days later when he took her to his house to see where he worked. It was a large sunny room with an open fireplace and a great many books. There seemed to be two desks, one for poetry and one for . . . for what? She looked around, but apart from papers, all the apparatus she could see was a slide-rule lying on the non-poetic desk.

"Well, there it is," he said proudly. He was a small wiry man with pale hair.

"It is?" she replied. "I don't see it. Where's the machine, or whatever it is?"

He smiled at her. "Oh, I haven't bothered with that yet. There may not even have to be a machine."

This was reassuring. This was more like what she would expect from a scientist. A poet, on the other hand, wouldn't be so absurd: if he had an idea for a poem he would go ahead and do it, at once, right away. She looked at him carefully: he has a dear smile, she told herself, and smiled back at him.

John's heart stepped up its activity. "Joan," he said, "Joan . . . I . . ." The radar developed herringbone patterns and jammed up.

"Yes, dear," she said, "yes, I know." This, she thought, is True Love, and it will outlive us.

Spring came. John Dougal's powers of concentration fell to a new low, and he made the discovery that love is no help to poetic inspiration: it leads to cliché and over-obvious rhymes. And of course it is ruination to science.

"When are we going to get married?" he asked her.

"When are you going to travel

to the stars?" she said. They were in her car, and he had come to the point where he almost didn't mind the speed, so love has its uses. It was half-past eight in the evening.

"Would you dare to come with me?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, sensibly. "And we'd better put on warm things—it looks very cold up there. Will we be able to get back all right?"

"If we can go we can return." He looked up at the soft May sky where Orion stood in his glittering belt, his bright dog Sirius at his side. "You asked me once why I had built no machine, Joan, and I said that perhaps there would be no machine. Well, there is none."

"What is it then, dear?"

"It's a diagram. If an idea is complete within itself, then it is real."

"But, John, dear: just a *diagram?*"

"It was just an equation that split the atom. In the beginning was the Word."

"It sounds like some kind of magic."

"Not half so magical as your father's rocket. You went past the gate."

"So I did—oh dear."

"Let's go on driving, Joan."

"All right, darling."

When they got back to her father's house, he welcomed them in and they sat around the living-room fire and had hot toddy. Professor Merton was very excited. "We leave tomorrow," he said. "And then in another day we take off." He turned to John Dougal. "Mars! Not the moon, but Mars direct! How's that, my boy? Of course it'll take several months—not like you with the distant galaxies." He smiled a professorial smile—poets always dream of the stars: nothing so prosaic as a planet will suit them. He liked John very much: what a pity he wrote such good poetry. He was a fine mathematician wasted, but perhaps Joan would knock a little sense into him. Professor Merton had his own rather dim and faulty male radar. It never occurred to him to wonder how his daughter might be during the half year that he would be gone. She had since her mother's death always taken care of him, and he was confident that she could take good care of herself.

"Father," Joan said, "will you try and remember everything I told you? I know you and the whole group have worked it all out, but will you take your pills every day after breakfast?"

"Yes, Joan, I will. I'll remember everything you've ever told me, only there won't be any day or night, or anything like that. I'll take 'em though. I'll be taking others, too: ones that have to do with space-sickness." He smiled at

John. "You won't be bothered with that, will you?"

"Hell, no . . ." John said. "You see, I'll be—"

"Because," Professor Merton went on, "it'll all be in the mind, I think you said."

"No, sir. I said I won't be travelling *physically* in the ordinary accepted sense. I'll be going faster than light, yes, but as if I were going in a negative direction . . ."

"Then I'd think you'd stay right here," Professor Merton said.

"No, Father," Joan said. "It means we'll be facing the wrong way, is all. And what do you mean?" she added to John, *'I'll* be doing this and *I'll* be travelling that?' I thought it was us—both of us."

For the first time Professor Merton realized what was afoot. If John liked to talk moonshine about an impossible journey, that was one thing, but if Joan said she was going too, why then she was. Still, he reflected, it was only on paper as yet. Time enough to talk about it when he got back from Mars. In a way his assumption was wrong, and yet his intuition was right.

"Oh," he said, looking at John in a new way. "I see. Well. Well, well."

"Quite so," said John.

John Dougal and Joan were married the next day, for, as he pointed out, it would not be proper to go on a trip together singly. "You know what I mean," he added. "Go singly, together."

"Yes, dear," she said. "You're perfectly right. It wouldn't do, even in a diagram."

They said goodby to Professor Merton, who was taking a later, faster plane, because of the wedding. He shook hands with John rather solemnly. "I suppose you'll be passing us on the way," he said. All trace of the professorial smile had vanished. "I believe you said you were going to the Andromeda nebula—that's in the same direction, isn't it?"

"Well, sir," John looked embarrassed, "we'll be there first, but . . ."

"We'll be travelling in the opposite direction!" Joan finished for him. She was beginning to catch on: she had a quick mind.

"Well . . . sort of," John admitted.

"I see," his father-in-law said, but he didn't at all. They'll be going around the long way, he thought to himself, the full circuit of the finite universe. . . . He kissed Joan and left, and Mr. and Mrs. Dougal went home to the diagram.

When they got to the workroom she said, "What do we do? Just look at it or stand on it?"

John shook his head. "Understand it. Sit closer to me and I'll explain it to you."

"But how can we be going fast-

er than light?" she asked. "Father says nothing can."

"The Einstein equation," John said patiently, "merely shows that at the velocity of light, the mass equals infinity. It doesn't actually say you *can't* go faster—just that you'd have a negative mass if you did."

"How would that feel?"

"I don't know—I don't think we'll be travelling in the ordinary physical sense . . . Oh, I said that yesterday, didn't I?"

"Yes; to Father, and he didn't follow you. D'you mean it's only our minds that'll be going?"

John frowned—he wasn't quite sure what the diagram meant when it was taken out of its mathematical context. He searched for the right words. "Well . . . would you say that your mind was an attribute of your body, or the other way about?"

"I never gave it a thought, John."

"I think it's fifty-fifty," he said. "And if our consciousness is the most important thing in us, that's what'll be going. And I think it will sort of pull our bodies along with it."

Joan stared at the diagram in silence.

"Whatever is most important in us," John repeated, "is what will go."

She thought about this—but she didn't have to think very hard. She knew what was the most imperishable thing in her now, as she sat closer to him . . .

"Will we see anything on the way? I never read when I'm on a train—I like to look out of the window."

"I don't think we'll see, until we land," John said. "Except perhaps out of the window of the mind. I shall be thinking of your green eyes, Joan, and how you look."

"How do we know we'll land on a planet?"

"If there isn't one quite like this we'll come around full circle and be right back where we started. If there is we'll land on it."

"Mightn't there be a fearful bump?"

"Inertia won't affect us. Sit closer."

Joan remembered that when she was in school one of the teachers had said to her, "The trouble with you is you don't *want* to understand." This was no help, because you cannot make yourself want something. But now she found that she could understand very well, although it was very difficult. Why, even her father had not been able to, so perhaps love helps here, too.

"It's a very small diagram, John," she said, "to take us on such a journey."

"Einstein's equation of mass and velocity is still smaller."

He looked at her face and it faded from his view, and he knew that they had started.

Nothing times nothing, times nothing . . . forever . . .

Einstein said the universe is not endless—it comes back to itself like the oceans of the world, and if you point you are pointing at your own back. The ancients thought that of the four Elements, Earth and Water were heavy, and that Air had no weight. But Fire . . . what did Fire have? Unweight? And what did they think of un-direction? Would it be inward . . . in to the inner-mind?

That was where he felt himself to be—but when you know that you are dreaming, in that instant you are awake. John looked about him.

It was summer on this planet: and that was the way it should be—and quite like Earth, but the diagram would see to that, so it was no coincidence. All the four Elements were there: the ground beneath his feet, a brook that ran beside him, and air all about him, and above in the blue sky he saw the fiery sun of this planet. Everywhere were those things the ancients believed to be compounded of all four elements together: live things, grass and plants, and in the distance trees. Birds flew in the sky and animals ate the grass but was that number really four? He tried to count and found that he had forgotten how, or perhaps he could not remember how many legs they had at home. He felt dizzy and sat down.

"I have a physical body again, at all events," he said. There was no answer, and he realized for the first time that he was alone. He looked around him again and stood up, swaying from side to side.

Joan, Joan, he called, and it echoed in his mind, but there was no answer. Only the birds twittering and the wind in the bushes.

From over a nearby heath-covered rise in the ground some people came toward him, and when they saw him they ran up and looked at him with distress and compassion. Where can she be? he thought. Why isn't she with me? Perhaps she is still in the workroom—but no, she had *understood*. Had she gone by some dreadful mistake to a different and distant planet?

Sit down, the people said to him, and take this food—it will make you feel better. He thanked them, but no: it was all impossible. The diagram could lead only to one planet—the one most like the Earth. She *must* be here somewhere. Miles away perhaps, but here on this planet. He would have to start looking immediately. Maybe these people would know.

He looked at their faces: how could this be—they were human! Well, on a planet very like Earth, human beings might evolve, but they spoke to him in English! No—not in English. They are not really speaking, so this must be

telepathy; yet surely it takes two to make telepathy. Evidently not: it was very strange.

Where have you just come from? one of them asked him. Who are you? This man was tall and about forty years old to look at him, and he wore clothes that seemed familiar—John felt that he had seen a picture of clothes like that long ago, but he could not remember.

I came from Earth, he began, and realized that it could mean nothing to these people. I am . . . he began again, but stopped in confusion: he was naked as a newborn child. The tall man smiled and so did the others.

Come back with us and we'll give you some clothes.

They began to lead him across the heather the way they had come.

I was with someone, he said, holding back. I must find her: have you seen her? Have you seen Joan?

They were puzzled. We saw no one else; is she your companion?

He nodded.

What is *your* name? asked the tall man.

My name is John Dougal. How absurd it sounded! How foolish this is, he thought. What can our names mean to them? What's in a name, and what does Mary mean? Well, that depends who Mary is.

What is *your* name? he asked the tall man.

Michael. Now, come along with us—we will help you find your friend. (Michael? Yes, of course: that was a familiar and rather encouraging name.)

When they got to the rise of ground he saw where they lived: a long street, sunny yet mournful—like a Chirico painting. But the people were not mournful, and very soon he became used to the style of their houses: everything is association. He put on the clothes they gave him, which felt unfamiliar and therefore uncomfortable, but he knew he would get used to them, too. At first all the people seemed alike—except for Michael who was older—the way people of an exotic race do until you have lived with them and grown to know them, but in a few hours John had passed that point. Some of them at first could not understand when he tried to tell them that he had come from another planet, remote beyond imagining. When he called it Earth they thought that Earth meant planet, and they were on a planet; right here; this one. This *is* Earth, they said. But at length the others explained it to them and they looked at John with astonishment and admiration. Also he thought they were laughing at him a little.

How long is a day here? he asked.

About twenty-five hours, said a

girl whose name seemed to him to be Mary. So, then it was much like Earth in this respect also.

And this is summer?

Summer? Oh, yes, the season: we have no seasons now—they changed all that a long time ago. Well, perhaps a little of seasons; spring leading through this to a golden fall so the trees can renew themselves, and then spring again.

What bliss, thought John, who hated cold, but then he thought, what a pity. No snow—no fire to sit around. But that, over there, must be a fireplace: perhaps the nights were cold. Where was Joan? Would she be cold tonight? He stood up. I must find her *now!*

Yes, they said. We will help you find her.

But I cannot wait! I must start at once—it will be night soon!

It is already night, Michael said. Mary will guide you. She knows best of all of us how to look for things.

How shall we go? he asked her. Can you fly, here?

Yes, some of us can. See: he can.

She held up her hand and a small bird flew to it from the rafters. He hopped along her arm and seemed to say something into her ear and she laughed and he flew in a spiral, and went back to his rafter. All right, she said. Come along.

She led him outside, and he looked up at the clear sky where the stars gleamed in unfamiliar patterns. Too bad he knew so little of astronomy—they were all higgledy-piggledy, but no astronomer back at home on Earth could possibly tell how the stars would look in the cloudy mass of this far-off nebula.

Perhaps, then, we had better fly, she said. How did you come here?

John explained, but when he told it, it sounded like a pentagram and medieval incantations. Also he could not remember it very well, but he'd be able to work it out later . . . when he found Joan.

You know, Mary said, it reminds me of the way we fly.

No flying machine? John asked.

No flying machine.

It roused an echo. She took his hand and looked at him steadily. You're much too heavy for me to carry, so you must help. I'll try and explain how to do it. She smiled. Are most of the people on your Earth your size?

Most of the men are a little larger.

Then it will be easier for you, she said.

He looked down and saw their village was below them: but he was no longer afraid of height. They began to drift away from it, and then faster and faster until they were going in a rush through the cool air, but he was not afraid of the speed. Who minds speed

and height if they will help him the quicker to find Joan?

If we go too far away mightn't we miss her? She may be close by so perhaps we ought to circle.

We are circling, Mary said.

How will we see her? John said. I know the moon is very bright but she may be under a tree.

I'm calling, Mary said. Can't you hear? *She* will, and she'll come out and look up.

Suppose she's asleep?

She will hear.

They went together in ever-widening circles as the full moon rose higher. It shone into a valley beneath them making one side brilliant with white rocks casting black shadows on the pale grass, and leaving the other side in darkness picked out in yellow sparkles of light from people's windows.

How do you get your light?

From lamps—or the sun, she said.

Where do you get your heat?

From the woods.

And your food?

From the fields and the sea.

Have you towns?

Many.

Where are all the children?

Asleep.

But I saw none.

A pity . . . You will.

The old people?

They die.

Are you never sick?

What is that?

And war . . . are there no wars?

Once there used to be war, they say, among a certain kind, but they all went to the next planet and blew it up and themselves, too. Never again for us—no, never again. Anyway, now there is no reason.

Does no one want to be leader?

There is nothing to be gained by being a leader. Children play at it, and sometimes when they grow up they still play at it; then they go back to the nursery for a while. Everyone tries to talk them out of it, but they insist on going back to the nursery. Then they get over it.

Have you machines?

Machines? Oh, you mean, like a spade?

No: I mean . . . Well, have you Science?

Mary was puzzled. You mean what it is that teaches us how to live, I suppose. Yes, of course.

Well, yes: that. But science for finding out things, and science for making things?

For finding out, yes. But is the other also science?

Then what do you call it?

John could not hear the answer. These are the children of a played-out technology! he thought angrily.

She laughed. No, we are not, John. And we work very hard when we want to.

Work? At what? In the fields and cutting wood, I suppose!

Mary was still laughing. Yes, of course, and other things, too. Some work at finding out things —like Michael—and some like to make things: enormously difficult things that others stand around and admire. And I know of one man who spent a summer finding some flowers of a certain kind and shape. He made it into a necklace and it only lasted a day. No one saw it but he.

Suddenly John cried out. There she is! He pointed at someone standing in a field looking up.

No: that isn't your companion.

I tell you it is!!

Then we'll go down and talk to her, but I know who she is.

When they were close enough John saw that it was not Joan.

I'm walking in my sleep, the girl in the field said. She seemed very much awake, though. Tonight I want to walk and look at everything by moonlight: I'm in love, and tomorrow everything will look strange to me.

When they rose again into the sky John saw that dawn was coming. It lighted the horizon of the distant sea and the air was colder. Near to the water he saw many lights close together, and Mary said, Look—there is a town.

Are those boats in the harbor beyond? Why do you need boats?

Yes, those are boats. Don't you like to sail?

(But where was Joan? He must find her—she must be somewhere, she must.) Aren't you tired? he said.

No, but you are. We'll go to the town and rest. You have come a long way and you are worried and frightened. You are in love with her. What is she like, John?

She . . . I cannot describe her to you. She has green eyes, and she came with me and she must be here. I can't rest till we find her—what will happen to her if I don't find her?

Nothing, John. She will be looked after.

Suppose she lands in a desert?

Did you land in a desert?

No, but . . . (Did the diagram also see to that? Yes, of course it did.) I am not tired, he said, I cannot sleep. I'm like that girl in the field . . .

He fell asleep as they were still flying.

When he awoke it was the middle of the day, and it was almost hot. The sun shone into the windows of the room where he had slept, the bed was like any bed—when you are exhausted. He threw back the cover—it was a single smooth blanket—and went to the windows. Outside in the street below were a number of people, dressed in variations of the clothes he himself had worn. Then he remembered everything and his heart sank.

A man came into the room and stopped when he saw him. I'm sor-

ry—I thought you must be still asleep. Come and have something to eat with us.

Where is Mary? I must start at once . . .

Mary is downstairs. She told us about you and everyone will help you to look.

But how can you? You don't know what my wife looks like.

He dressed and went with the man into a room downstairs where there was Mary with another woman—a little older. He thought Mary looked tired. No, she said, I'm not. It's just that I was unhappy and I'm beginning to get over it.

Then the people here are not happy here all the time?

Mary frowned. Of course not. Lots of things make one unhappy. I have been terribly jealous—I know the man the girl in the field loves: but he cannot love both of us. It has left me feeling empty . . . (The empty shall be filled.) Yes, Mary said, looking out of the window, I think that . . . already . . . She smiled at him. I don't know what I feel. Are you hungry now?

After they had eaten he said, We must make a plan. We can't just go on flying around in ever-widening circles. Haven't you something like . . . well, like radio? I'm sure you know what I mean.

Yes, said the man. That's for people who can't hear very well, or are very far away.

Well then, John said with exasperation, we must send out an alarm!

We did, the man's wife said, as soon as you got here.

John looked around the sunny room in which there were unfamiliar and beautiful plants growing in boxes. On the wall was a tapestry with a strange, tragical design woven into it, but he could not tell what it was. Nowhere did he see anything that resembled a radio.

It's down the street, the man's wife said. Just a few doors away in a small house.

Oh? Are all the houses like this one? I mean, are there no tall buildings?

Mary looked surprised. Why, wasn't the view we had last night good enough for you? I suppose you mean something like the ancient monuments. As for flying around in circles, I don't think Joan can be very far away. When you were explaining how you came here Michael said that your diagram would bring her close to you. Michael works at that sort of thing.

But, John said, it was after we had left that I explained about the diagram to you!

She smiled. You weren't attending.

Oh, John thought to himself, but very quietly, if Joan and I had only arrived together—what excitement this would be. How we would love it all, or even be fright-

ened together; but he couldn't imagine Joan frightened of anything—only indignant. I was the coward of the two. He looked at the others: the man seemed kind but a little stupid—no, not stupid, but could he be trusted to help them? It would take imagination—he and his wife were oddly incurious about where he had come from. But perhaps they were only being polite. Mary, though . . . She was very different, yet she, too, asked few questions. It must be the right way to behave here.

A spotted house cat came into the room and rubbed against the man's leg. When will we hear from the alarm you sent out? John asked.

That's hard to say, said the man's wife. Particularly if your companion—or, your wife, isn't it?—could be anywhere in the whole world.

Michael said she would be close by, Mary said.

But she might not, John said unhappily. Perhaps she fell into the sea!

Michael didn't think so.

Then perhaps she is lost and her mind is wandering.

Where would it wander to? Mary looked at him. (She has green eyes, too—no, they just seem green. Unworthy John.)

At all events, John said, I can't sit here and discuss it all day

Then we can look again, Mary said. I think now you want to go back and look in the country about the village, but—

I don't care where we look, he interrupted, just so long as we go on looking, and start now! He got up, and the spotted cat moved out of sight behind a piece of furniture: it evidently was not accustomed to such a display. Where had he seen a spotted cat before? It was not a small leopard—just a cat. Egyptian tomb-paintings, he decided. Things were not quite like Earth after all.

Mary got up also and they went out onto the street, and now everything had as strange a look as does a man's face when after a fever he looks in a mirror. The air had a strange tang. The people moved more slowly.

He's a pretty cat—the one they have, Mary said, isn't he?

Yes.

All right. I know you don't want to talk about cats. You know, John, you were wrong in thinking I was not curious about you. I've been learning all the time. You seem very familiar to me now.

So do you to me, he said. But that man and his wife—they're very kind of course, but are we to go back and look in the fields and leave the rest of the world to them?

She nodded. I'm afraid you insulted him, John. But I know you didn't mean to.

I did? How?

You didn't trust him. And you insulted Michael, too. You were

ashamed of being naked. Don't you consider it an insult if people are ashamed on your Earth?

No: I'm afraid we are very primitive.

You aren't, at any rate.

A new thought came to him. I must go on looking, Mary, but there is no reason you should spend so much time. Go back to your home—I can manage by myself. It isn't fair to you.

You think I am reluctant, but you are wrong—I like to help you, John. She smiled happily at him.

Will you mind, he said, if I find her?

No, I shall not mind, John, when you find her. I think you don't believe she is near—I think you want to look in a desert, in spite of what Michael says.

Yes. I want to look in the deserts first—while there is time. If she is where there are people, as you say, she will be cared for. Or look first where it is cold, and all ice and snow.

There are no places like that anymore, she said, but there is the Old Desert.

Well, then.

It is across the sea. It's quite far, John, and we shall have to fly too fast to show you anything on the way. Take my hand and think as I do . . .

Mary was right—the town was gone in an instant, and the ships in the harbor streaked past under them without detail. They rose high in the air, higher and higher until John's head swam and his ears were ringing. He looked down and the sea was so far below that the waves appeared as the sheen of stain. He looked back and the coast was already out of sight. He felt cold at first from the rush of air but then he grew warmer.

He could not think and time lost its meaning between the endless sea and sky. After a while on the horizon in front of them he saw a hazy purple line.

The coast, Mary said, but we are not going right—we must turn more to the south a little.

As they turned in the sky Mary put out her hand and held onto his arm. Then they were over the land and in a short while he could see stretching out before them to the horizon, which was very far because of their height, a desert, sandy, and endless like the ocean. But the nearer parts were crossed by irrigation canals, and dotted with green. As they drew lower he saw a few people.

Have they radios here? John asked. If not they may not have heard of our search.

They will have heard, Mary said. There's always one somewhere around. The real desert is further off, but I think you should rest for a moment.

They stood on the ground together, by the bank of a canal. On the other side were tall palm-like

trees and beyond them he could vaguely see some immense mounds that he had not noticed before from above: perhaps they had been too foreshortened. She looked at him seriously. You think I am holding you back, she said.

(Her eyes were green—he was sure they were . . . or almost.)

But I know, she went on, I *know* that you will find her.

They rested for a while and walked a little to stretch their legs, and the mounds came into view as they got beyond the clump of trees. There were three of these mounds—vast and triangular, and not of earth, but stone. Something stirred in John's memory.

Mary, he said, I want to look . . . to look on the other side of those . . . He pointed.

She turned. Oh, those? They are the ancient monuments, and there's nothing on the other side: only the lion. What is the matter?

But he didn't answer, and they flew across, and then around, and John saw in front of him, preserved by a glassy coat of silica, the Sphynx: and he knew where he was.

She put an arm around him to steady him. Sit down, sit down; now tell me.

We . . . I have come around full circle! I missed the planets, so there is no planet like Earth but the Earth itself, and I am back where I started! Where is Joan? A million million years have passed! Where is she? He looked up at Mary and she knelt down in front of him.

She left with you, John?

If she didn't she's a million years in the past! A million million . . . Einstein said the faster you go the faster goes time . . . for the others! When I looked at the stars I recognized nothing—the very stars have moved.

I know she left with you, John.

He looked at her again, closely. (Green eyes . . .)

I don't know. I left all at once—in a flash, but perhaps she left gradually . . .

Or perhaps, Mary said, she didn't *all* leave—only the part that counts. (Green eyes—loving eyes.)

I think . . . John said.

Yes?

I think my search is over.

So is mine, John, and I have been searching all my life.

But I got here only yesterday.

Yes, she said sensibly, I began living only yesterday.

John Dougal's house had burned to the ground in the intense flash of their going, and all that remained of him and his Joan were their white bones. All, that is, that doth fade: all that remains in this nowaday and unkind present. But in the far future that awaited them they were together, for as some people will have it, True Love never fades.