

The Plinktonians

by Jim Nichols

Brian had spent the morning filling out applications all over Knox County, and by noon he was more than ready to call it a day. But apparently there was one last squirt of virtue in him, because heading home he saw a Help Wanted sign in the window of the town's newest restaurant, and after only a slight hesitation he pulled to the curb and ambled inside. His reward for that impulse was a half-hour in a cluttered little office, listening to a fellow ten years his junior expound on *The Harbour View Way*. The guy had it all figured out. He told Brian that business was like war, and he was the General whom the troops — his bartenders and waitresses — must follow. Brian thought he'd probably never been in a fight in his soft little life. "Sir, yes Sir!" he couldn't help saying, but fortunately the General was not listening at the moment.

On his way out Brian stopped to check out the bar.

It was set up okay except for the glasses rack directly over the ice sink. As he stood there shaking his head, the kitchen door bumped open and the bartender came out with a tray of wine glasses. He set the tray down, gave Brian a nod and began slipping the glasses stem-first into the rack.

"Don't drop one," Brian said.

The bartender shot him a look.

Brian held up his hands. "I've been there, brother."

The bartender grinned: he knew what Brian was saying. If you broke one, it would fall into the sink, and after you'd picked out the shards you'd have to replace all the ice. You scooped out what you could, and then you used buckets of hot water. And naturally this only happened when you were already in the weeds, with drink orders piled up to the ceiling and waitresses spitting nails.

"I'm betting it was the manager's own design," Brian said.

“Bingo.” The barkeep put the last glass away. “How'd it go in there, anyway?”

“I learned that business was like war.”

The bartender rolled his eyes, reached for the Pale Ale lever, poured off a glass and set it on the bar. “On me,” he said. Then he took the cork-bottomed tray back to the kitchen. Brian watched little bubbles rising through the ale. He was supposed to be back on the wagon. But Sally was at work, and the boys wouldn't be home from school for a couple of hours, and it would be rude to just walk out. You could even make the case that it might compromise his chances for the job. So he drank down the ale, which obliged him — when the bartender returned — to purchase another. Then a clam digger he knew came in, checking the place out, and when he swung up beside Brian, noticed his near-empty glass and ordered him a refill, Brian thought, all right, just this one more. Well, two more, so he could return the favor. But then he'd head home. He asked the clam digger how things were on the flats these days, and found it hadn't changed much. Brian and the clam digger swapped stories about falling out of skiffs, stepping into honey pots, dodging the Clam Cops. The bartender laughed and set them up with fresh pints of ale. Then the clam digger related his hair-raising theft of an outboard from a guy who owed him for ten pecks of clams. It had turned out the victim had another outboard, and he'd come after the clam digger and had actually fired a shot at him. It was a long, well-told tale, and by the time it was over they'd switched to Bacardi, but Brian was careful to dilute each drink by eating the ice at the bottom of the glass. By now he'd forgotten all about keeping track of the time, and when, a bit later, the clam digger looked at his watch and said, “Holy old shit,” Brian was shocked to discover how late it had grown. Then he remembered the school bus; his kids.

“Yikes,” he said, and slid off the stool.

“Somebody's in hot soup,” the clam digger grinned.

“You don't know the half of it,” Brian said.

Outside he looked in disbelief at the lowering sun. He realized he was tipsy and should walk; it was only a few blocks. But then he'd have to explain why he hadn't driven. So he got in the pickup, jammed three pieces of Juicy Fruit into his mouth, turned right at the big flagpole and headed circumspectly down Knox Street toward the river. A cold lump had formed in his stomach, as if all the Bacardi-flavored ice had reconstituted itself. He had no idea what he was going to tell Sally this time. He'd already used all the obvious excuses: had a flat tire, met an old friend. He wished he'd saved one or two. He wished he could still charm his way out of trouble, like the old days when he could get away with almost anything. Sally had a weakness for him back then. He'd apologize abjectly, be meek and attentive for a spell and then turn on the magic. He wasn't proud of working her that way, but it was only because he loved her and didn't want her to be angry. Once he'd claimed to be an extraterrestrial, who couldn't be expected to understand earthling ways, a reference to a ludicrous Sci-fi movie they'd seen together. "*Pushtek* sorry!" he'd said, following Sally robotically around the house, his imitation so dead-on that eventually she'd had to smirk. After that he'd used the routine shamelessly. He'd remembered the name of the planet — Plinktonia — and had embroidered the tale. It became a family joke that included the kids. They'd be heading south to visit Sally's parents, and to pass the time he'd tell them Plinktonian stories. One trip he told them about his escape to Earth in a ship fueled by *astro-poop*, and the boys made faces from their car seats in back and kicked their feet and said, "Da-aaad!" Then he told them how he'd spent one hundred and forty-six years on the moon, spying down to earth, looking for the perfect mate. And how he'd finally found their Mom.

"Lucky me," Sally said.

There was a little something in her voice, because it hadn't been all that long since Brian had come home at two in the morning with blood on his knuckles — sometimes he made a *lousy* human being — but he ignored it and pressed on.

"Pushtek happy now!" he exclaimed, and they rolled down Route 1, through small towns, past hayfields and into miles of pine woods, and he kept at it until Sally was snickering helplessly along with the kids.

Brian drove slowly down Water Street toward his house. It was spring and the water black and high as it swept past the town and curved toward the ocean, carrying handfuls of broken-up light from the long-necked street lamps. Their house sat on a high bank. It looked dark from the street and for a moment he was frightened that Sally had taken the kids and left. She'd threatened to before. Then he saw the light in the kitchen. He wormed up the driveway and got his feet tangled on the pedals and managed to bump lightly into Sally's Subaru. But he didn't see any damage when he got out: thank God for small favors.

He spat his wad of Juicy Fruit over the neighbor's fence, sucked the cool air in and stepped to the door. Sally's poppies, in the garden to the left of the door, had closed up with evening and sat blindly at the end of their long necks. When he opened the door on the kitchen, Sally was at the sink, hand-washing her plate. Her back stiffened, but she didn't turn as he clicked the door shut. His son Aleck looked at him from the table, drumstick in hand.

"Hey, Smart Aleck," Brian said.

"You're home," Aleck said.

Sally turned and gave him a look. Brian admired the way her dark hair lay on her neck. He wanted to kiss her neck and beg forgiveness, but that was another thing he'd done too often. He tried to look cheerful. "Might have found something," he said. "That new restaurant needs a bartender. I filled out an application and the manager gave me an interview on the spot." He tried to breathe shallowly, tried not to slur. But then he had to put a hand to the wall. It's hard to stand still in one spot when you've had a few and somebody's staring at you.

Sally dropped her dish cloth onto the counter and stalked out of the room. Brian put his hand back on the wall and looked at his son. The ice in his gut grew edges and spires.

"Erick got sent home from school," Aleck said.

"How come?" Brian said.

"He got in another fight."

"Perfect," Brian said. He went into the living room, where Sally sat with the newspaper, collapsing it to turn the pages in a kind of controlled fury. Brian told her he was sorry he'd come home late, but the manager of the restaurant had asked if he could buy him a beer after the interview, and he'd thought it wise to accept.

"What time was that, Brian?"

"I didn't look."

She collapsed the paper, transferred a page.

"I didn't drink that much. Mostly we just talked about the job."

"Go look in the mirror," Sally said.

They had a long, framed mirror on the wall above the register in the little hallway that led to the front door. Brian went over and took a look. He stood there a while, and then he went back. In the living room he said, "I guess I did it again."

Sally closed the newspaper, captured a page.

"I'm sorry," Brian said. "I should have been here when Erick came home."

"But you weren't," she said, without looking at him.

"I'll go up and see him."

"Better chew some more gum."

Brian walked over to the stairway, jogged up the stairs. He ducked into the bathroom to brush his teeth, then knocked on Erick's door. After a moment, he pushed it open. Erick was sitting on his bed, facing the window in the dark. Brian shuffled over past the Star Trek posters and sat down beside him. Erick glanced at him, but didn't speak. Brian felt the quilt under his hands, remembered his son's former bedspread with its bright yellow stars, moons and planets. He missed the old bedspread and he missed the little kid

Erick had been. He'd had a hard time even then, but Brian could always jostle him out of his miserable moods. He'd swoop down on him and cry, "Plinktonian Death Match!" and Erick would try to run away, but Brian would catch him and sling him up on his shoulder and spin him around and toss him up in the air. Finally Erick would laugh despite himself and say, "Stop! I give!" and then he'd be happy, at least for a spell.

"Don't you want any dinner?" Brian said now.

Erick shook his head, hid his face in the pillow.

Brian looked at him helplessly. Then he said, "Screw it, eating's for earthlings."

Erick didn't laugh or speak.

"Plinktonians don't need to eat," Brian said. "We just synthesize nutrients out of the air. You remember, I'm sure. Of course it takes some concentration, and I've been living on earth quite a while, I've gotten used to eating, so maybe it isn't as easy as it once was, and I suppose if I wait too long there's the danger I might forget altogether..."

"Shut up, Dad," Erick said into the pillow.

Brian shut up. Outside, cars ripped past their driveway and shot around the corner out of sight. The Cushing Speedway, they called it, because everybody from that town across the river used their street to cut up to Route 1. They crossed the iron bridge to Water Street, hung a right and were off to the races.

Erick sat up, face in his hands.

Brian looked at his shaggy blond hair, his lean arms, and said, "They pestering you at school again?" This was the third fight he'd heard about, and Erick had also been kicked out for a week for swearing at the Principal.

Erick clenched his fists and held onto himself tight. Then he jumped up, grabbed his jacket off the bedpost and took off down the stairs. He ran out of the house and slammed the door shut behind him.

Brian trudged downstairs and into the living room. Sally hadn't moved. Aleck came out of the kitchen with a heaping bowl of ice cream, looked at him and went on up to his room opposite Erick's. In a couple of minutes the ceiling began to vibrate.

Brian grinned weakly at Sally. "He calls it music."

Sally got purposefully to her feet and marched down to their bedroom off the front hallway. She went in and shut the door. Brian sighed, shuffled into the kitchen and looked at the chicken and the bowl of peas and the mashed potatoes. None of it was very appetizing. He might as well have been a real Plinktonian for all the interest he had in that food.

It was muddy along the street, and Brian could see Erick's deep footprints running toward the bridge. He zipped his jacket up and set off to follow. Erick had run all the way down to the Mom and Pop at the corner, and then his footprints changed: he was walking. Brian imagined ducking into the market and grabbing a beer. But even *he* couldn't be that much of a loser. He was already stepping on his own feet. He walked past the store. The bridge stretched gracefully ahead. He tracked Erick onto the pedestrian footbridge and looked down at the water as he made his way across. Nothing there on the other side, no footprints, and he turned, worried.

Almost back to Water Street he heard a choked sob. It came again, and he listened intently to the silence and then looked over the railing to see his son sitting low, on a cross-girder, with his back against one of the posts that went down into the cement footings of the bridge. Erick had his head in his hands and the bridge arced over him and the water eddied past just a few feet away. His shoulders shook and he made the sound again.

Brian tiptoed off the bridge, then turned and walked back, stomping his feet, clapping his hands and howling an old Plinktonian ditty he'd sung to Erick and his brother many times:

*Mister Pushtek came to earth,
From the planet of his birth,
Full of beauty, brains and grace*

Hoping to improve the race!

Erick popped up above the railing. He looked at Brian, swung lightly up and over. He hocked and spit into the river, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Brian grinned, held out his arms and started into the second verse.

Erick said, "Stop! I'll come back. No more."

"Killjoy," Brian said, "You've never accepted your Plinktonian blood."

"Just shut up, Dad." Erick stuffed his hands into his pockets and they started back to the house. It was quiet enough to hear the streetlight buzzing at the corner when they turned onto Water Street.

They walked silently for two blocks. Erick had his head down and every now and then he let out a big, shaky sigh. They walked along and the river came up close to the street and splashed and danced along under the streetlights.

"That's a pretty good spot," Brian said, finally.

Erick kicked at the mud.

"I used to hide in the boot closet," Brian said. "We didn't live near a bridge. But the boot closet wasn't bad." Brian remembered the dark closet, the smooth rubber boots, holding his breath as the footsteps passed unevenly by in the hall.

"So why were you hiding?" Erick said then.

"Oh, the old man," Brian said. "Sometimes he'd have a few and get mean."

"My grandfather?"

"Technically speaking," Brian said.

A couple of steps along, Erick said, "Well, at least you're not mean."

At first Brian took that as a compliment. It was another whole block before the truth could sink in. Then it dropped all the way down and smashed on the ice. He felt it like glass, and for a moment he couldn't speak.

Oh my, he thought then, and looked at his son.

They walked past close-set homes with dark windows and the blue light of TVs, past the little machine shop with the satellite disk over its front door. Near home they heard Aleck's music thumping, and they kept going and stopped and looked across the street at the house, sitting on its high bank, stars glinting over its roof, lights on in all the downstairs rooms. Erick started to cross, but it was just at that moment that a pickup came thumping off the bridge, and Brian grabbed his arm and pulled him on back.

"I could have made it," Aleck said, but then the pickup was on them, rocketing so close they had to pinch back against the guard rail to let it go by. They watched its taillights go around the curve and heard the squawk of its tires as it went out of sight.

"Idiot!" Erick yelled.

"It's a dangerous place," Brian said, "this planet of yours."

There was another loud squeal from far down the street.

"It's not my planet, Dad," Erick said then.

Brian reached out his other arm and pulled his son close.

"I'm so sorry," he said, and when his son didn't struggle, he held on tight. It took until his son's hand hooked up onto his elbow, to feel the ice thaw. Then he was hungry. He let go of his son and patted his skinny ass. He looked toward the bridge, saw no sign of trouble.

"Let's go!" he said, and stepped into the street.

"Let's run!" Erick said. He started to sprint.

Brian gave chase, laughing and gasping. They flew across the Cushing Speedway and jumped onto the sidewalk. Then they zoomed up the bank toward the well-lighted house.

