

Prom Date

by Joe Alan Artz

The dump smelled of the chaos of creation, of rusting metal and burned glass, chemicals and rancid rainwater, wet cardboard and rotting wood, paint slaking off clapboards and drums. Junk from the farm spilled down the sides of the oblong hole. Car bodies rolled to the middle. Anything we could imagine, there was something in the dump to help the story along.

Picking my way to the bottom, careful of upturned nails, I saw my brother playing in the burned out shell of a pick up truck. Isabel was wrestling a tube metal chair from under some crunched-up chicken wire. Looking down, I saw flowers under my feet, and reached through the gap in a spill of white clapboards, plucking a plastic peony from a cast off graveyard wreath.

With a bent, blackened spoon, my brother ladled cold cream from a cracked Pond's jar into two fire-blistered tumblers, side by side on the dashboard, each half full of thick, green liquid. The liquid gulped each scoop from sight. Picking up one tumbler, my brother worked it up and down under an imaginary milk shake mixer, electric motor sounds humming between his teeth.

Isabel set two chairs at a three legged table propped up with a scrap of downspout, reupholstering the seats with scraps of 1 x 12. She plunked down in her patched, plaid slacks and gave me a sitcom smile.

"Come have a drink, Buzz," she said.

I said, "Here's your corsage," and laid the peony on the table. "The limo will be here at six."

"Whatcha have, mister?" my brother called from behind the dashboard. Voice pitched low, face drawn, he pulled the charred stub of a carpenter's pencil from behind his ear and set its tip to the smooth side of a shake shingle.

"Cherry Seven-up for me and my date, and we'll order from the menu," I said.

Isabel furrowed her brow. She did that when she got annoyed. The

way it lowered her bangs down to her eyebrows was a bit scary.

"Heck with that," she snapped. "He's drinking bourbon, same as me. Straight up, four fingers."

She wrinkled her nose at me. It made the middle of her face look like wadded-up tin foil off a TV dinner.

"Buzz, you know astronauts don't drink pop," she said.

"Did you get your gown at Dillard's?" I asked.

"A moon rock!" she said, picking up the corsage. "What a specimen!"

My brother brought the two tumblers wobbling on a banged-up garbage can lid, an acid-tattered red grease rag over his arm. "Chocolate mint malteds," he announced, setting the tumblers on the table. He slipped a bent, soot-crusting, aluminum tube into each one.

"Enjoy, and pay as you leave." I didn't like the way he walked as he returned to the pickup. He was spending too much time with his friends in town.

Isabel swirled the contents of her tumbler with the aluminum tube. The green stuff, caught between lumps of cold cream and the side of the tumbler, turned yellow and let go some bubbles. Isabel leaned across the table. Up close, Isabel's eyelashes looked longer, and when her fingers touched my arm, I almost imagined make up.

"How about that docking maneuver, Buzz?" Isabel said.

"What about it?" I asked, my throat so dry I had to will my hand off my drink.

"You know, the way the command module just slides up into the lunar lander's tunnel, so nice and...."

We jerked apart, like we'd touched a hot wire fence. Her face turned red, and mine must have gone as green as the stuff in the tumblers. The mixer behind the dashboard stopped.

My prom date was shot, but with a little laugh, Isabel got back to where she'd been.

"Oh, Buzz," she said, "you astronauts are such prudes!"

She lifted the tumbler, cheeks dimpling as her lips tightened on the aluminum tube.

"Isabel! No!" my brother and I shouted.

The next day, tending the edges of the fire with rakes and wet sacks, our fathers looked tiny and dull against the black smoke rolling up in clouds from the pit. My brother and I got out of the car and watched from the yard.

"You think about what's happened," our mother said.

Isabel had gotten a ride to the hospital in an ambulance. They'd pumped her stomach. Her face was ashy, but her eyes got bright when she saw my brother and me come in. "They used the siren!" she croaked. It hurt her throat to talk.

Sparks swooshed up from the flames in big whirls. An ember drifted from the sky. I caught it, glowing but heatless, the last story to ever cross that field, losing its fire like every story we'd tried to bring home from that dump. Isabel's ambulance ride was the only kid's dream the dump ever let come true.

