

# Sam and the Planets

*by* Josh Cook

Sam hated sales.

No, she hated the vain, overweight, pathetic, glass-of-merlot-a-day, SUV piloting, Carmen-cell-phone-ring-toned, housewives and consumer sluts that charged through the store like starving hyenas through the fallen, decaying, putrid, corpses of a plague-ridden antelope herd; circling the racks and bargain bins, hands snatching like jaws at the exposed flanks and frail ankles and diseased tails of the straggling weak; like the sale flyer found its way to the Oort which cloud realized it needed a new outfit and descended as an army of American woman; their double-chins wobbling in discount delirium; their silicone implants jiggling in bargain ebullience; burdening themselves like spice road camels transporting Mughal vaults to the Taj Ma-dressing rooms so they could twist their hips back and forth trying to see their ass in the mirrors; leaving mountains of pieces labeled "Well, it's a good deal, but I think it makes my ass look fat," flicking them into great piles like dry skin scratched off forearms; sweat-stained discards stretched by their fat thighs and quivering triceps, as if Sam didn't have to skip her break and run herself exhausted for \$6.75 per hour of degrading, humiliating, alienating, exhausting, work to clean up their mess. And the cheap bitches! They tried to pass expired coupons they knew were expired, whining to some retarded Goddess of Justice that the expiration date was too small for any intelligent human being to ever even rationally think to read, before appealing to some licentious Idol of Charity for a neighborly break, then claiming they found 15% off shirts on the 40% rack, then getting angry when Sam showed them the clear discount label, in font ten times the size of the microscopic coupon expiration dates, which is why the computer automatically took off the correct discount when Sam scanned the tag. And if they still disbelieved the digital rationale, there was a

sale day floor plan--a polka-dotted laminated sheet of card stock with limpid labels of species and discounts and size ranges (and yes I'm sure our size 7 runs smaller than everyone else's and our size 13 is really its equivalent and no matter what you cover your ass-cheeks with they still shudder in your jeans when you walk)--and these mix-ups wouldn't happen if all the penny-pinching, flyer-strangling, poodle-perm-wagging, stretch-pant-exhausting, black holes of American consumerism, didn't shop like infants eating spaghetti-o's.

But the torrent was over. They'd gone home to pick the stray labels out of their teeth and the odd hangers from under their nails. When Sam turned away from the floor a gegenschein floated in her exhausted eyes. Only a few people killing time—some teenagers waiting to be picked up, an old woman fruitlessly foraging for her frail size, a couple that looked at the end of a long day of shopping—circled the skeletal racks. The floor sighed. Sam threw her hair, like a bouquet, into a sloppy bun. Jane looked over at her, "Goin' in?"

"I'll let you know if there's any structural damage."

"You do that."

There was a lurching, limping, Jabberwocky in the dressing room area threatening all who approach its Roche's limit; a vindictive Hutt of a pile; a Dresden debris jumble; a mound of hats and armor pulled from the Blood Meridian Indian charge; a patchwork work monster dripping bits from all departments, like saliva sliding down fangs, stuffing its cubist mouth with time, time Time! Sam would never get back, ever. She'd learned after one destructive invasion that it was far easier to get all the sizes together of what was left on the racks before refilling them with the waste pile of sale-junky's size delusions.

The floor was a system of planets waiting for satellite Sam to reach her perigee, her sunlight fingers reflecting at the albedo from sphere to sphere, her ordering presence separating the food from the trash, the black from the white, the clean from the dirty; her precession tipping her across to the next world where she orbited until something mysterious created her escape velocity and she moved on to the next—there was an algorithm for this to, and you could include the stragglers who also orbit, and the volume of their conversation and figure out every time Sam became an eavesdropper.

The teenagers were next to her on the first rack she went to repair. One was on her cell phone. "No, way. Tom said that?" About me?" Sam huffed. The sizes had been shuffled as if for a mind reading trick. She ordered, humming to herself some muzac that had looped a few times during the day; the black dwarf of some song her mom loved.

This was Sam's fourth sale day. Habit eased the challenge. The couple quietly revolved past her. Their posture told Sam they were one item away from crossing off the last line of the day's list and heading home for some take-out Chinese and Readymade sex before TV, sleep, and laundry the next day. The man's shoulders bent into a parabola, the weight a big long day of shopping curving them to the extremes of an impatient ten-year-old.

"How the hell did this get here?" Sam exclaimed to a refugee from the men's slack section. The cycle of the teenagers again aligned with Sam's as she collected another set of galactic refugees from Men's Wear across her crooked arm. Sam learned that Tom was so totally the maturest guy in the whole entire high school, one of those rare and wondrous teenagers who deserved the vote more than his parents, who could stand on the curb with arms folded, the twelve car pile-up carnaging the street in front of him, and give clear concise directions for the fleeing panicked, who could give a speech

in front of the whole entire school committee and pound his fist on the podium once at the perfect moment, who really knew how girls were supposed to be treated instead of like all like immature like Derek. Sam's arm reached capacity and she broke her orbit and hurtled towards desk, missing the final cadence in the praise of Tom's maturity. She dropped the load of the de-patriated with an eye-roll behind the counter. "I'll be back for these dears later," she snided. Jane shrugged.

"It's just that you can't ever seem to let anything go," the woman said, as Sam passed them to her nearly ordered rack.

Sam was the last tooth left in the gears of some great dead machine; a machine that opened dams, turned sluices, rolled boulders, lifted platforms, alerted elders, struck gongs, started the great festivals where all other work would stop and the cooks would set to cooking, the dancers to dancing, the musicians to playing, and everyone else would become artisans of the tapestry or the pottery or the house decorating or the wall painting and the boys on the verge of adulthood would uniform themselves for the athletic contest where their manhood would be affirmed; the great machine that permitted life to continue as it had for thousands of years, changing the season or inaugurating the harvest, until some European nation colonized the hell out of the culture, labeling the technology primitive superstition, destroying what items they found sacrilegious and leaving the rest to disintegrate until, Sam, the last spectral tooth circled each denture-needing gear like an old friend with a little more mobility than the rest and, also, nothing else to live for.

There was one world put right after the cataclysm. She whirled to the next. "Do people pay any attention to what they do?" Sam muttered.

"Yes, I'm saying sometimes you should just keep it to yourself."

"I'm just trying to improve things," the man said before their trajectory pulled Sam from under their eaves.

Sam wanted to be back in London.

No. Sam wanted to be in a parallel universe, one of the ones where she wasn't born in America. She wanted to be the London Sam; the one who was born in Britain, who had worked in Camden Market for years, traveled to the continent on Holiday, shacked up with a Czech photographer. The one who didn't feel trapped leading women to clothes that would make them look good. The one who saved up for a trip to New Zealand and spoke Spanish and carried a cheap sketchbook in her bag and fasted three times a year and asked boys if they would have sex with her when she wanted to have sex with them and sometimes went to work without wearing make-up and filled empty weekends by taking trains to cities she's never been and was happy just listening at a party and took empty Saturday nights to public parks where she laid down on the grass, and waited for the void to fill itself; and who. Sam wanted to always be the Sam over Thanksgiving break who convinced four of her British friends to join her for a Thanksgiving buffet, where they showed up after all the food was gone and there was only champagne left and they decided to go to the pubs right from there, empty of food but full of champagne, and Sam was as willing to dance as she was to talk, as willing to fight as she was to sing, and somehow she woke up in her bathtub sick as a dog and light as a let-go balloon.

"I'm sorry, I just don't see myself ever forming some kind of strong bond with your mother," the man said as the couple hurtled by Sam again. The woman sucked air through her nose like it was the last bit of flavor in her Slurpee. Sam raised her eyebrows. "That's not the end of that conversation," she thought as she circled one last time the rack she was on, assuring beyond doubt that logic

did, in fact, reign. It did. She twirled to the next world, barely conscious of anything beyond the tips of her fingers that were operating on shadows of information. They are the pheromones we can't smell that make us turn our heads and look through the crowd to the person leaning into a corner deciding for us that we were already in love, so that our legs walk without thought and our fingers make assumptions until all the size 11's end up together, like dust, gravitated into to a spinning clump that drew dust and dust and dust and suddenly there was Sam, a snotty cell-phoned teenager banshee laughing right in her ear and the smoke curl of an elderly woman mincing her way towards the counter, a pair of beige slacks folded over her arms, barely aware that.

"It's never been about your mother! It's always been..." the man hushed into ellipsis and followed the woman around another outer quadrant planet. They were going round. The teenagers going round. Sam going round. All seen by the fluorescent lights.

Sam walked back behind the counter and dropped off another load of orphans. "We'll be here till 10," Jane said as she watched Sam set the pile down. "Have you had a chance to get to the dressing rooms at all?" Sam asked. "No. There's been just enough stragglers to keep me here." "Alright," Sam said. A sunspot revealed the 83 times in her life someone else categorized her as a "straggler," a solar wind showed her the 277 times someone identified her as one of "those people," and the dust of a comet's tail sprinkled the 834 times someone wondered "what's her deal," about Sam but she was already pulling a 5 from the 7s.

"This is about respect," the woman hissed as the couple passed Sam again, "something that you don't..." and they were gone again. "Don't they have a better place for this discussion," Sam thought as the 7's became pure.

"You don't ask for respect," the man said, "you demand telepathy," and they were whispering before Sam could hear the woman's response. Then she wondered what made Tom so mature, which made her wonder what she thought made Brian so mature. Brian had an older brother in college who told him what music to buy. His dad was a film professor so he had the coolest movie collection. He had a way of shrugging in class when he didn't get an answer quite right that said, "Yeah, well, this is just high school after all and there's a much bigger world out there than in this American History classroom, so alright I got this answer a little wrong, but there will be other questions and I'll have other answers so it's all right." Or he just looked old. He could buy beer with a fake ID. That was probably it.

There was still another 15 minutes before they could lock the doors and start kicking people out. She glanced at the counter. Jane was checking out a gigantic man, whose body blocked his entire purchase from Sam's view; which meant Jane hadn't collected the discards from the dressing rooms, which meant that it would be an hour plus closing, which meant that Sam was going to get home cranky and exhausted and not go out, which meant that she would watch a movie she'd seen a hundred times before, which meant that she would probably eat Cheez-Its and pretzels with hummus for dinner, which meant she would get in bed with eight layers of guilt on top of her covers, which meant she would wake up the next morning feeling like she wasted another night in her young life, which meant she would spend the day playing catch-up, which meant she would make a list of a dozen activities to accomplish, which meant she'd only finish half of her list when she went out with her friends, which meant she'd spend most of her time with them complaining about the day at work with the sale and how she didn't get home until late and was cranky so she didn't go out so another night of her young life passed wasted, which meant she would break another promise.

"It takes more than just saying you love me!" the woman shouted; she furiously fumbled through the rack in front of her, a perfectly ordered set of blouses, had at least two colors that matched the skirt she'd already picked out for her sister's birthday, each completing an outfit that would perfectly express the middle ground between her sense of fashion and her sister's unstoppable conservatism so that no one was offended and everyone understood and the party would be perfect, but what could she see? What could she do? Sam and Jane rolled their eyes both thinking, "Is this really the time or the place to have this fight?"

Sam circled a new planet. She pictured the floor plan in her head, saw herself as a tiny dot circling a circle, and the teenagers as dots circling circles and the couple as dots circling circles. She was somewhere else as she ordered. It wasn't London or Paris or Alex's tree-house or Piedmont or Vancouver or the woods behind her uncle's house or Madeline's party or Clarke...

"Their relationship just collapsed," Sam thought as the man calmly dropped the bags and walked out of the store.

