

JACK THE BODILESS

VOLUME I OF THE
GALACTIC MILIEU TRILOGY

JULIAN MAY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

Marc Remillard whirled about, his heart pounding. He had been aware of no one ~~approaching him, sensed no aura. But standing behind him was a very tall elderly man with a neatly trimmed white beard and a patriarchal halo of snowy hair. His eyes had a preternatural brightness, set deep within dark sockets.~~

Marc suspected immediately that he was not human. The mental signature was totally absent, even to a third-level probe delivered at point-blank range. But what kind of exotic was he?

Marc turned, his mental screen strengthened to the maximum. “Do—do I know you?”

The tall man laughed but did not answer the question.

By Julian May

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THE GALACTIC MILIEU TRILOGY

Volume I: Jack the Bodiless

Volume II: Diamond Mask*

Volume III: Magnificat*

**Forthcoming*

Aux les bons copains—enfin!

JACK THE BODILESS

A Novel By
Julian May

Volume I
Of The Galactic Milieu Trilogy



A Del Rey Book
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A Del Rey Book

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Remillard Family Tree

About the Author

I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!

My soul knows how marvelous are your works.

You were aware when my very bones were formed,

Growing secretly inside my mother's body

As a plant's root grows beneath the earth.

You knew me before I was born.

The days of my life were all written in your book

Before they had ever begun.

PSALM 139

Whereas in the familiar closed systems of physics the final state is determined by the initial conditions, in open systems, as far as they attain a steady state, this state can be reached from different initial conditions and in different ways.

LUDWIG VON BERTALANFFY, *A Systems View of Man*

God writes straight with crooked lines.

SPANISH PROVERB

PROLOGUE

SNOW GROTTO PLANETARY PARK, KANNERNARKTOK TERRITORY

SECTOR 14: STAR 14-661-329 [SIKRINERK] PLANET 6 [DENALI]

GALACTIC YEAR: LA PRIME 1-400-644 [17 MAY 2113]

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT, AS SO MANY NIGHTS WERE on Denali, where topography and climate conspired to produce some of the Galaxy's worst weather. Worst from a human point of view, of course, unless that human was addicted to Nordic skiing ...

The mind of the supervising Lylmik entity named Atoning Unifex smiled as Its material essence hovered above the blizzard-lashed park. Denali was a rugged planet, winter throughout most of its year, the veritable haunt of the Great White Cold celebrated in a certain Earth song that was very familiar to the First Supervisor. On most of Denali's continents, glaciers and permanent snowfields spread wide amidst a fantastic landscape of dazzling peaks, black precipices, and crags that thrust up like the broken tusks of primordial monsters. Denali had no sapient indigenous lifeform. No rational creatures had as yet evolved on it when it was assigned to the Human Polity by the world evaluators of the Galactic Milieu. Its most famous honorary native son, Saint Jack the Bodiless, was conceived before the first Earth settlers arrived.

The hardy people who originally colonized Denali in the mid-2000s had hailed from Alaska and other parts of the United States having severe winters. They were quickly joined by Canadians, Siberians, Samoyeds, Lapps, and a host of others who craved a life of challenge that could be lived in a setting of wild natural beauty. The World-Mind thought those human colonists engendered might have been expected to be as dark and moody as Denali's weather; but for some reason the very opposite mental climate prevailed, and Denali was an invigorating place with an aether that fairly glowed with friendliness and verve. The original rationale for establishing the colony had been the planet's deposits of valuable gallium ore, and this was still a major economic resource. But Denali had also become a popular vacation resort, first appealing mainly to Human Polity winter-sports fans (including the famous Remillard clan of New Hampshire) and later attracting hordes of like-minded Poltroyans as well.

Atoning Unifex let memories crowd to the fore of Its consciousness, recollections that had been repressed for aeons. This small planet had been loved by both of them ...

She, of course, had been born here, living and working in the colony's capital city of Iditarod until a fateful tragedy had taken her to Earth, where the two of them had so improbably met. On the very brink of their great adventure she had spoken casually of her own experiences as a native of Denali, and they had laughed together over the unexpected mutual reminiscences. The shared laughter had come to an end long ago, but the memories remained in a deep level of the Lylmik's ancient mind, guarded and cherished and eventually becoming almost too precious to contemplate. The pain that had once darkened their memories had long since faded, and their scrutiny at this particular time was now actually appropriate.

And so Atoning Unifex lingered there in the middle of the storm, Its mind in a state that a human being would have recognized as part reverie and part prayer, thinking of a person

who had once been a woman, who had twice loved deeply, and who had mothered Unity
countless nonhuman minds in a distant Galaxy.

Finally the Lylmik uttered the mental equivalent of a deep sigh. The epilogue of the comedy was nearly complete, but One waited upon the inimitable Uncle Rogi, who kicked the goad as usual, dawdling while cosmic destiny hung suspended.

Unifex focused Its mind narrowly on the subsurface snow cavern that sheltered Rogatien Remillard from the raging snowstorm. It saw a hunched, lanky man sitting beside a tiny tent taking off his ski boots. Like other members of his famous family, Uncle Rogi possessed the genes for self-rejuvenation. His face was that of a raddled fifty-year-old, belying his actual age of 167 Earth years. His gaunt cheeks were frost-reddened, and his nose and eyes watered a little when he forgot to mop them with the red bandanna handkerchief he carried up the cuff of his old L. L. Bean Penobscot parka. He had tossed aside his knitted toque, and sweat-silver curls straggled over his forehead and ears. He was whistling as he peeled off the archaic twentieth-century ski garb and stripped faded red long johns from a pale and sinewy body. Then he lowered himself with exquisite care into a geothermal pool in the center of the small snow cave. The telepathic emanations from his ever obstinate and uncoadunate mind were happy ones.

Uncle Rogi said to himself: If the storm lasts, I'll forget about the final leg of my trek and call the park's shuttlebug and go wallow for a week in the lodge's après-ski entertainment casino cabaret string quartets Lucullan food good company perhaps a new science fiction novel savored in the Wintergarden while the bar waitrons keep the drinks coming and I cheer out the snowbunny crop!

The old man settled deeper into the steaming water, smiling.

Poor Uncle Rogi! Unifex had other plans for him. But Rogi had had a good enough holiday ski-touring more than 200 kilometers throughout the beautiful park during an unusual three-week spell of calm bright days. Now the weather pattern had changed, and whether Rogi was willing to admit it or not, he was adequately refreshed and recreated after his first stint of journalistic labors. It was time for both of them to get back to work.

Unifex descended toward the planetary surface. The negligible physical substance of the Lylmik mind-receptacle deflected only the tiniest of the hard-driven snowflakes and easily penetrated the three-meter-thick crust of ice and snow above the grotto where Rogi had elected to camp. The place was typical of the subnivean hollows that gave the Denali planetary park its name: an irregular cave as big as a good-sized room, melted from the permanent icefield by the heat of a small geothermal spring. The walls and ceiling were ice but the rocky floor was cushioned with a dense lichenoid carpet of tough gray and lavender saprophytes. Close to the shallow burbling pool grew larger and more fragile exotic lifeforms sessile animals that resembled scarlet onions with peculiar flowers that gave off a pungent sulfurous scent if they were bruised. As the mildly carnivorous blossoms of the onion-creatures bent toward Rogi's exposed shoulders, he flicked hot water at them by way of discouragement.

The walls of the grotto were cupped and dripping near the ground and glittering with crystals of hoarfrost in the cold upper reaches. There thin tendrils of vapor coiled golden in the light of Rogi's antiquated electric lantern before disappearing into a natural flue. Tourist skis were propped against one wall, and a backpack lay near the little tent. On the far side of

the chamber was the closed entry door, fashioned of harmonious translucent glass, that led to the enclosed surface-access tunnel and modern latrine. (Park visitors were strictly forbidden to dig down into the snow grottoes directly, or to camp in undesignated “virgin” caves except in emergency situations.)

Here and there on the nacreous walls were circular openings, not quite large enough to admit a human hand. From several of these, and from a larger hole at ground level where runoff water from the spring exited, came a glitter of tiny eyes and an occasional peevish hiss. The natural inhabitants of the grotto, hotblooded eight-centimeter “ice crabs” temporarily displaced by the human who had come to spend the night, were keeping a close watch on developments. The crabs considered these alien invaders to be a great nuisance, in spite of the fact that they usually brought along something worth stealing.

A determined onion flower began to nibble experimentally on Rogi’s wet shoulder blade. He reached for his backpack, unzipped a compartment, and brought out a battered leatherbound flask. A stiff tot of Armagnac and a guided puff of alcoholic breath caused the lifeform to shrink back from the poisonous exhalation, blanch to a muddy mauve color, and broadcast its disgust on a primitive telepathic mode. The entire plantation of scarlet carnivores desisted from snack attacks forthwith.

Rogi nodded in satisfaction, took another snort, and sank more deeply into the hot spring. Up on the planetary surface the hurricane wind roared in the darkness, and there was a distant rumble as an avalanche let loose somewhere. The grotto trembled slightly. Ice spicules sifted down toward the bather, glittering until they melted just above his head. Rogi began to sing softly:

*“For the wolf wind is wailing at the doorways,
And the snow drifts deep along the road,
And the ice gnomes are marching from their Norways—”*

Unifex joined in:

“And the Great White Cold walks abroad!”

The old man in the pool leapt like a speared sturgeon. “Bordel de merde!”

It’s only me, Uncle Rogi.

“Dammit! One of these days you’re going to give me cardiac arrest doing that!”

[Laughter.] I apologize. It was the old college song. I had been thinking of it myself just when I arrived. It brought back all kinds of memories.

“Now look what you made me do.” Rogi was accusing. His eruption had splashed hot water over the onion animals and they were flailing in wild distress, the tiny teeth of the flowers chattering like elfin castanets. “You know the park rules about disturbing the native lifeforms! These little chompers are sensitive. If any of ’em decide to croak, I could be blamed and end up paying a helluva fine—”

Calm yourself. Look. I’ve restored them.

“Damn good thing,” Rogi muttered, climbing out onto the not-quite-lichens. The clumps of red onions were swaying luxuriously now, and a delicate humming sound filled the grotto. “Don’t often hear *that*. It’s their full-tummy serenade.”

It was the least I could do.

Rogi chuckled. Naked and steaming, he retrieved the brandy flask, which fortunately hadn't spilled, and tucked it into a safe place. "I'm feeling pretty hungry myself. Want to share some chili cagado with me, mon fantôme?"

Thank you. But no.

"Too substantial for your Lylmik guts, eh? You used to love it."

Unifex's thought was wistful: I don't suppose you brought along any Habitant pea soup ...

"Ate the last of it two days ago."

The Lylmik's mind sighed.

Rogi squatted and set up a small microwave campstove. He dipped a pot of water from the spring, peered into it, and extracted a black gelatinous blob and a glass-shrimp that were swimming languidly about the container's bottom. The invertebrates were returned to the pool and the pot set inside the stove to boil. Rogi had tossed in two Aqua Pura tablets for seasoning, since Denali bred tough microorganisms as well as tough colonials.

"So you couldn't resist coming after me." The old man dried himself with a diminutive towel and put his long johns and socks back on.

Unifex said: It was a species of sentimental journey. I had felt compelled to avoid Denali during her first-cycle sojourn here.

Rogi hesitated. "You want to tell me about the two of you? All I know is the little bit Cloudie and Hagen told me—and they didn't know all that much."

Not now. Perhaps later.

"M'mm." Rogi took the seething pot out of the stove and filled two bowls and a large cup, adding a different-colored cube to each container of water. After four seconds of effervescence, the highly compressed food reconstituted and the pungent aroma of chili rose from the first bowl, and the smell of cinnamon-apple cobbler from the second. The cup was full of black coffee. Rogi added five lumps of sugar and a shot of Armagnac to the latter, and sprinkled almost 200 grams of grated natural-state Tillamook cheddar onto the chili.

A sibilant, yearning chorus came from the crab holes, and there was a frantic blinking of eyes. Rogi chuckled wickedly. "Cheeky little bastards. Remember how they used to eat Adidas if you left 'em outside the tent in these snow caves?"

Unifex laughed. It said: I note that you wear inedible Salomon ski boots now. Very comfortable-looking. I like the new Rossi boards, too. But isn't it rather imprudent of you not to wear an environmental suit?

"For sissies! I been skiing my brains out for a hundred fifty years in this outfit and I haven't froze my bizoune off yet. You'll notice that my wrist-com's modern enough. Keeps me alerted to weather changes. And if I get snowed in or come a cropper or even run outta coffee or munchies, the Ski Patrol or a robot monitor'll home in on its transponder-locator and take care of me. I knew this storm was on the way. I figure to spend the night here, then call for a shuttlebug to fly me back to the park lodge tomorrow if she don't blow out as per forecast. Wouldn't mind at all spending the last week of my vacation lolling around in style—"

I'm sorry, Uncle Rogi. I've come to collect you.

"I'm booked for seven more days, dammit!"

You are well rested and quite able to begin work on your Memoirs again—as am I. Take your time finishing your meal, but tonight you'll sleep in your own bed back home in New Hampshire.

“Back to Earth *tonight*—? That’ll mean hopping the hype at maximum displacement factor. I’ll be a nervous wreck!”

I’ll take you myself ... more gently.

Rogi’s eyes narrowed and he squinted at the portion of air from which his invisible companion’s thoughts appeared to emanate. “So! You Lylmik *do* have a mitigator for the pain of hyperspatial translation—just like Ti-Jean always said you did.”

Yes. Jack was perceptive as always. But the device is not yet appropriate for general use among our client races in the Galactic Milieu. You will make no mention of it.

Rogi spooned down chili and drank coffee. “I wouldn’t dream of violating the glorious Lylmik master scheme ... But what’s the damn rush to get me humping again on the Memoirs?”

One has one’s reasons.

Rogi rolled his eyes hopelessly. Then for some time he ate in silence, his mind idly recapitulating the things he had already written and shuffling through what would come next in the period following the Great Intervention. “Gonna take another book, big as the last one, to cover the thirty-eight years of the Simbiari Proctorship. Be a pain in the ass for me to go through all those family shenanigans sorted out, too.”

Unifex said: I want you to skip over most of that and begin immediately on Jack’s early life and disincarnation, and the growing threat of human opposition to Galactic citizenship. Then you will describe Dorothea’s part in the earlier drama, and finish up with your view of the Metapsychic Rebellion, making a Milieu Trilogy. The events of the painful Proctorship years, the time before the Human Polity was admitted to the Galactic Concilium, have been covered well enough by Philip and Lucille in their own autobiographies. But they never knew Jack’s full story, or Diamond’s—

“Or yours, mon cher fantôme.”

Or mine.

“I’ll have to backtrack some to make it hang together, you know. Start out with a kind of retrospective digression. And I’ll still need a lot of fill-in help from you to give a proper overall picture.”

I realize that.

“Is that why—” Rogi paused. He swallowed hard, banishing a certain thought before it could be formulated, even subvocally. “Eh bien, mon fils. I reckon you know what you’re doing by now.”

Beyond a doubt. To paraphrase one of your favorite fantasy writers, even the most moderate intellect can hardly help learning a thing or two after six million years.

The old man grinned with forced cheerfulness at the vaporous air. “Six million ... Ah, those self-rejuvenating Remillard genes! A real drag, immortality, eh? Not that I’m ready to know it myself yet, you understand. Um ... do you know ... can you foresee when I’m ...”

Not really. *Moi, je ne suis pas le bon dieu, j’t’assure!* But I do intend to see to it that you survive at least long enough to finish the family chronicle.

“Well, thanks all to hell for small favors.”

Rogi licked the last of the apple cobbler from his spoon and drank the dregs of the coffee. Then he switched the stove to the dishwashing mode and thrust the tableware inside. A moment later, he began to pack everything away, singing the chorus of Dartmouth College

“Winter Song” under his breath.

At length the Remillard Family Ghost said: Are you ready, Uncle Rogi? The trip home will take only a moment. There will be none of the usual discomfort of hyperspatial translation experienced in a starship.

“Not in my underwear, dammit!”

The old man began to throw his clothes back on. He managed his pants and shirt before he disappeared abruptly from the snow grotto, and all his gear with him.

The lichenoid cast a faint phosphorescent glow about the newly darkened chamber. There was a rustling sound, then a medley of plops as the crablike exotic animals came rushing from their burrows to scavenge leftover bits of Earth cheese. Outside the snow grotto, the Denard blizzard wind howled.

FROM THE MEMOIRS OF ROGATIEN REMILLARD

I STILL HAVE THE NIGHTMARE SOMETIMES. I HAD IT ON THE night that I was unceremoniously translated from the planet Denali to Earth at the truncated end of my skiing holiday and commanded to resume writing these Memoirs.

As always, the dream played itself out in a weird, accelerating time-lapse mode. There is nothing terrifying about the scene at first. A beautiful mother holds an infant, completely wrapped in a blanket, and she looks up from the baby as a fourteen-year-old boy approaches. This older child of hers has a strangely ominous aura about him. He has come hurriedly home from his classes at Dartmouth College on a blustery day, and he wears black turbocycle leathers and carries a much-modified visored helmet tucked under his arm. His eyes are gray and his mind opaque, and his smile is tentative and quirkily one-sided as he accepts his mother's invitation to open the blanket and see his new little brother for the first time ... the flesh.

The black-gloved hands are trembling slightly with an emotion that the older boy despises and tries vainly to check. And then the baby lies revealed, unclothed, perfect. And the minds of Marc and Teresa mingle in joy:

Mama he's all right!

YesyesYES!!

Papa was wrong the genetic assay was wrong—Yes dear wrong wrong wrong little Jack's body is normal and his mind *his mind ...!*

Mind?

Oh Marc dear his mind just speak to him it's wonderful don't be afraid to wake him ...

The baby's delicate eyelids open.

And in my dream, there are no eyes.

I hear laughter, and I recognize the voice of Victor. But it can't be Victor because he died twelve years before Jack was born; and for nearly twenty-seven years before that he was helpless, disembodied as Jack would be but unlike Jack deprived of all metafunction, a physical and mental contact with the world outside himself. In my dream, the devilish laughter fades in a smell of pine and a cataract of pain. Tears pour down Marc's face for the first time in his austere young life. The eyeless infant smiles at us—

And suddenly the *real* nightmare takes charge.

No eyes. Only a void, a starless darkness that is somehow alive with fearsome knowledge. My dream races on, and Teresa and young Marc are gone. There is only a pathetic little child shackled to complex life-supportive equipment, and while I watch in horror, his human form begins to disintegrate.

I try to tear my gaze away from the awful sight, but I cannot. Faster and faster, the self-destructive process programmed by his own body proceeds.

The child's despairing mother blames her own hubris for his suffering. His father, Paul, countering his own pain with clinical detachment, finds the disincarnation bleakly fascinating. Marc sees his first glimpse of Mental Man. Denis Remillard and Colette Roy and the other scientists of the Human Polity call the child a prochronistic mutant, an anomaly born out of proper time, too early in the scheme of biological evolution, a throw-forward in the pattern of orderly human development. Four of the exotic races of the Galactic Milieu, pitying, call the little boy pathetic and doomed. The enigmatic Lylmik refuse to discuss his case at all, except for flatly prohibiting his euthanasia.

In the dream, my mind is shrieking: No no Ti-Jean no God no how can you let his body die while his brain lives the brain the wonderful potent superbrain God why why—

Then I see the brain naked.

I plead: Let it die too let the poor thing die stop the machines the genetic engineering attempts the futile meddling let him go in peace let him go!

A monster that does not know its self sees the brain as the Great Enemy, and in a cataclysm of flame the machines are stopped.

I hear the laughter of the dead fiend again as Victor savors the hideous irony of the situation. For the brain that is Jack the Bodiless does *not* die, but lives. Impossibly, it lives impervious, sustaining itself in some arcane psychoreductive fashion, nourished by the atmosphere and by photons, enduring and adapting and learning and growing in wisdom and grace and dieu de dieu I am so afraid of it paralyzed with dread even as it tries to reassure me and in my dream I call its name:

Ti-Jean! Jack!

This horrifying mutant, this *thing*, is still my dear little great-grandnephew Jon Remillard, brilliant and vibrant little human person only three years old, trapped in 1.7 kilograms of unsupported humanoid encephalic protoplasm.

None of Jack's eventual triumph penetrates my nightmare. I know only my own fear and revulsion and a demonic whisper: *Who will be the next to disincarnate? Perhaps you, Rogi?...*

Then Marc is at my side again, much older. This time his dark armor is the glistening whole-body-monitoring coverall of a cerebroenergetic enhancer, the perilous mind-boosting device outlawed by the Galactic Milieu. Marc studies the bodiless thing that is his mutant brother with open admiration. And a paradoxical envy.

I see a warning reflected from eyeless depths, and Marc sees it, too.

Jack's mind tells us: No. Human is better. For you, Marc. For all of you.

Marc smiles and shakes his head, denying. Mental Man is the inevitable, the culmination of all rational being—and there is no need to wait upon evolution's laggard pace for His coming. He can be summoned—

Suddenly I see three persons suspended in interstellar space: a faceless woman clad in a suit of diamonds, a blazing plasma that enfolds the first Mental Man, and a black armored shape leading an interstellar armada in opposition to the other two. The Metapsychic Rebellion of humanity against the Galactic Milieu has begun.

At my dream's climax, a blue-and-white planet explodes, haloed by a mass death-shower. And in that terrible moment the Galactic Milieu, the benevolent confederation that saved the human race from its own folly and gave us the stars as a playground, itself begins to die ...

The dream always ends at this point, before the final resolution, and I return to

consciousness freezing and paralyzed, with a half-strangled scream caught in my throat.

Peace! T'en fais pas, Rogi! Calm yourself and relax. It all happened long ago, and now last in the writing of this personal chronicle you have a way of exorcising the nightmare once and for all.

Perhaps you already know me from the introductory volume of these Memoirs. If you do not, let me introduce myself briefly. My name is Rogatien Remillard, and I am sometimes called Roger but more often simply Uncle Rogi (pronounced, appropriately enough, as “rogue he” by those who find my Christian name impossibly ethnic. It is of French origin, and the Remillards are a sizable family who originally were colonists in Quebec and later migrated to the northeastern United States, where there was a large but unobtrusive Franco-American population.

I have for most of my life been a bookseller in the college town of Hanover, New Hampshire. I have a small antiquarian bookshop, The Eloquent Page, where rare or twentieth-century fantasy and science fiction books printed on carefully conserved paper are offered to connoisseurs at atrocious prices. Although I belong to a family of acknowledged mental giants, my own intellectual and metapsychic functions are meager. This has not prevented me from being caught up in the chequered careers of my more illustrious relatives. On the contrary, I have played at times a rather significant role in the family’s machinations—something that Milieu historians have seen fit to ignore—and I have witnessed from my worm’s-eye view the rise and fall of many a Galactic worthy and villain, including two saints and one notorious individual whose misdeeds were so appalling that he was known as the Angel of the Abyss.

I have never married, but I have loved unwisely several times. I have faced imminent death on quite a few occasions and survived through improbable happenstance. I have killed three persons in cold blood, even though I am the most easygoing and peaceable of men, and one of them was a person I loved deeply.

My fraternal twin brother, Donatien, and I were born in the year 1945, in the New England mill town of Berlin, New Hampshire. Our young father had already been killed during World War II, and our mother died giving birth to us, so we orphans were raised by our kindly aunt and uncle, who had six children of their own.

But no members of the Remillard clan except my brother and I had the “immortality genes, whose existence was not confirmed until after the Intervention, nor did they possess the genes for higher mindpowers. (It was many years before my twin brother and I discovered that we were not unique in our metapsychic operancy.) How we two responded to our more frightening metafunctions is a story that I have already related at some length. In brief, I learned to live with such powers as telepathy, psychokinesis, and metacoercion, which Don was ultimately destroyed by them, tragically killed when he was only forty-four.

I was rendered sterile by a childhood illness. Don had ten offspring, and all of them inherited the genes for high metafunction and self-rejuvenation; but only the two oldest children were able to utilize their extraordinary mindpowers. Circumstances made Don’s oldest child, Denis, become a foster son to me; and it was he who founded with his opera wife Lucille Cartier the so-called Remillard Dynasty, which eventually included many of the most powerful minds the human race has ever known. Don’s second son, Victor, was not a

intellectually brilliant as his older brother; but his metapsychic mindpowers were probably even more formidable, and he used them ruthlessly for his own self-aggrandizement until he was finally struck down, immediately prior to the Great Intervention, either by me or by the mysterious being I had learned to call the Family Ghost.

From time to time, especially when I am drunk and morose and seized with the melancholy feeling of inescapable doom that francophones call *malheur*, I have been tempted to believe that the Family Ghost is nothing more than a construct of my own imagination. But if that is true, then by default *I* am responsible not only for the Great Intervention but for the Metapsychic Rebellion as well, and ultimately for the even more momentous events that came afterward, bringing the long story full cycle.

But that would be too farfetched a practical joke, even for *le bon dieu*, who is so full of them.

So let me begin this Galactic Milieu Trilogy without further maunderings, first with retrospective.

A RETROSPECTIVE DIGRESSION BERLIN, NEW HAMPSHIRE, EARTH 30 MARCH 2040

ROGI DROVE INTO THE TOWN OF HIS BIRTH LATE ON A DREARY spring afternoon, bringing Teresa and little Marc with him from Hanover, as he had been instructed to. Wrathful and profane protests to the contrary had got Rogi nowhere: Paul had been adamant. This time Rogi, too, would come to Berlin and participate in the annual ritual because Denis had insisted upon it. And that was that.

It always seemed to rain on Good Friday, but at least this year the rain was warm, and was making short work of the remnant patches of street ice and the old gray mounds of snow that still lay about in the sun-starved nooks of town. By Easter, Rogi told himself subvocally, Berlin would be nearly washed clean. The pussy willows in the gardens along the Androscoggin River, where the smoke-belching paper mills once stood, would have snowdrops and blue Siberian squill and pink hellebore blooming beneath them, and the first robins would sing in the budding sugar maples, and the townsfolk in their Easter finery would stroll the riverside paths.

And with luck, before *next* Easter, Vic would be dead.

“Why will that be good?” Marc piped up. “Who is Vic, Uncle Rogi? And why will it be a good thing for him to die?”

“Oh, merde et puis merde,” Rogi muttered.

Teresa said: Rogi for heaven’s sake!

Secure in his little car seat in the back of the big Lincoln groundcar, the child turned from his interested scrutiny of the town to attack his great-granduncle with a precocious mental probe that made Rogi yelp with sudden pain. Marc’s chubby face reflected in the rearview mirror revealed nothing but solemn curiosity, and his own mind was guarded with its usual indomitable screen. He was two years old.

Marc stop that! Teresa said.

“Yes, Mama,” said the boy. The probe withdrew almost as quickly as it had penetrated, leaving only a lingering ache behind Rogi’s eyes. But the cute little tyke had nearly mind-sucked him like a plass pouch of orange juice.

“Shame on you for invading Uncle Rogi. I want you to apologize!” Teresa’s uneasiness, which she had carefully concealed during the hour-long drive from Hanover, now tinged with exasperation that she projected to the old man on his intimate mode:

For the love of God Rogi can’t you control yourself for my sake and Marc’s if not for common decency?

The two-year-old said, “I’m sorry, Uncle Rogi.”

“You’re forgiven,” the old man said. And then to Teresa: Once we get to Vic’s house the kids will read the whole family like billboards no matter how they try to screen Denis is an integral *idiot* asking you to bring Marc along to this damned charade does he actually intend to use this *baby* in a metaconcert forchrissake and whatthehell good is a lowwatt mind like mine the whole goddamn thing is a farce a sop to Denis’s guilt the lot of you should have p

an end to it years ago and Paul should have more sense than to upset you in your condition—

Marc asked, “Does Uncle Rogi think making this Vic dead will hurt you and Maddy, Mama?”

“No, dear. Not at all. I’m fine, and so is Maddy, safe inside me.” Rogi TRY to stay more securely on the intimate mode! Better yet think of something else like watching where you’re going if you insist on driving manually. Look isn’t this High Street where we turn? “Marc, dear, you’ve misunderstood Uncle Rogi’s thought. The Vic he was thinking about is Victor Remillard, who is Grandpère’s brother. We’re going to see him and pray for him. Victor is very, very sick. He’s been sick for nearly twenty-seven years, ever since the Gre Intervention.”

The small boy was prodding and thrusting now at his mother’s mental shield, as a frustrated kitten scratches at a closed door. But there was no easy way through the maternal barricade; nature, compassionate of metaphysically operant parents, had rendered most of them proof against the onslaughts of their loving offspring.

“But why should Vic be made dead? Open to me, Mama, so I can understand better! I want to understand. Being dead is bad, isn’t it? How can it be good for Vic?”

“Dear, stop poking at me. How many times must I tell you to respect the integrity of other minds? And you must call him Granduncle Victor, not Vic. Politesse, dear, always!... When a person is very sick and unable to get well, it’s usually better for him to die and go to heaven rather than live on and suffer.”

Rogi uttered a short, explosive laugh. “Heaven! That’s rich.”

Teresa said calmly to the child, “Uncle Rogi is being ironic, Marc. Do you remember what irony is?”

“Yes, Mama. But I’d rather discuss death with you now, please.”

“There isn’t much time, but I’ll do my best, dear.”

Rogi had slowed the car as they drove through the central district of Berlin. The town had undergone great change since the last time he had been here, and now seemed gussied up and gentrified almost beyond recognition. The older buildings that were worth rehabilitating had been expertly restored and framed in plantings, and the new structures looked as though they had stood there from time immemorial, mellowing gracefully. There were small parks on every other block, quaint wrought-iron streetlamps already glowing against the early dusk, even though it was still two hours until sunset, and not a trace of shabbiness was anywhere to be seen. Even in the pouring rain the old cottages and frame apartments of the residential area seemed to glow in their coats of fresh paint, many done in classic New England white with dark shutters, while others sported the cheerful ice cream colors traditional to southern Quebec.

Teresa continued in her attempt to explain mortality to the child. The tiny head with its thick mass of black ringlets had lowered as she spoke, apparently in obedient concentration. But all at once Rogi felt Marc renewing his quest for more interesting data, drilling into his own all-too-vulnerable cortex. Rogi exerted all of his adult coercion to fend off the infantile probing, addressing the boy with considerable precision on the intimate mode so that Teresa would have no hint of what he said:

Stop that digging you snoopy little foutriquet! Dammitall I’ll tell you if you stop pestering me. Vic is a bad man or at least he was bad before he got sick the baddest man that I ever knew.

and the sooner he's dead the better off for all of us now is THAT plain enough for you?

Yes Uncle Rogi.

You'll find out pretty soon what this Good Friday thing the family does with Vic every year is all about just keep QUIET and watch and listen and it'll sort itself out. Afterward if you still have questions ask Grandpère Denis.

I—I don't want to. I don't like Grandpère. I'll ask you. On the way back home. Will that be all right?

I suppose so. Now let me alone while I try to find this place. I haven't been here in twenty-four years. Damn everything looks different up here! I guess I'll have to turn on the computer.

“—and so the elements of our bodies that were formed ages and ages ago in the hearts of giant exploding stars, elements that we only borrowed for a little while, must be returned to the Galaxy for reuse,” Teresa was saying. “But even if our bodies die, our minds will live on in the Mind of the universe and be happy with God and all our friends and loved ones in eternal light. That's what heaven is.”

“Will I die?” Marc asked her.

She grasped his tiny hands and kissed the top of his curly head. “Not for a long, long time. You have—you have a very special body to go along with your special mind.”

“Will *you* die? And Uncle Rogi?”

“Your Uncle Rogi has the same kind of special body that you have. He won't die for a long time, either, and neither will Papa. I don't have the same kind of body you all have, but if I get old or sick I'll have myself regenerated so that I can stay with you. Do you remember what regeneration means?”

“Like Grandmère. In the regen-tank.”

“Exactly. When I get old I'll go to a place that fixes me, just like Grandmère Lucille did and I'll be made young and strong again. She'll be coming back to us very soon now. You hardly recognize her. She'll look as young as Aunt Cat.”

The car's guidance system, having digested the code designation for the Victor Remillard estate on Upper Hillside Drive that Rogi called up, now switched on the vehicle's autopilot. Rogi sighed and sat back in his seat while the car drove itself, using satellite reference points. In his reactionary heart of hearts, Rogi considered such refinements obscene, even worse than the now obsolete computerized highway speed-strips. They took all the fun out of driving. A man might as well take the bus! Or one of those bloody flying eggs that wafted around on preset flight paths set up by Air Traffic Control. Up until now, Rogi had refused even to consider learning to fly. But he was weakening. One had to move with the times—even these days, when the damned times seemed almost to zip along at the square of the speed of light.

The dashboard chimed and a robot voice spoke. “You will arrive at your destination in approximately three minutes. Prepare to resume manual control of the vehicle.” Rogi mumbled under his breath.

Marc asked his mother: Will we meet Papa and Uncle Philip and the others at Granduncle Victor's house?

Yes. They're all flying in.

The car had turned off Hillside Drive, following a narrow lane shaded by massive white pines and hemlocks. This manicured imitation of the primeval forest of New England opened

at length into an expanse of lawn, serene with winter, and a magnificent vista of the Androscoggin River beyond. Parked near the house were five egg-shaped rhocraft—three Wulf-Mercedeses, a Mitsubishi, and a sporty green De Havilland Kestrel belonging to Sever Remillard. Paul's scarlet Maserati was nowhere in evidence.

The house from which Victor had directed his commercial empire prior to the Great Intervention was fully as ugly as Rogi had remembered it: a looming pseudobaronial pile of brick, stucco, and false timbering, built in the 1930s for some satrap of the extinct paper mills. It had leaded glass windows, pointed gables, and a slate roof that gleamed oily in the rain. Rambling decayed extensions with fanciful cupolas mounted upon them had once been stables, garages, and servants' quarters. Inside the main building were ten huge bedrooms, an oak-paneled library, a pretentious drawing room with an attached conservatory (the latter devoid of vegetation), a vast echoing ballroom, drafty hallways paved in marble, a modern kitchen and formal dining room that would have done credit to a small hotel, an empty indoor swimming pool, and a superlative state-of-the-art security system.

Victor Remillard had lived in this house since 2009, from the time of Remco Industries' first great prosperity. With him were his younger twin brothers Louis and Leon, and his widowed sister Yvonne Fortier, all of whom he had rendered nonoperant in early childhood, turning them into his creatures. In 2013, when Victor's criminal schemes were thwarted and he was reduced to a sense-deprived, helpless vegetable, the house became his place of exile. Louis, Leon, and Yvonne were promised immunity from prosecution by Denis and his politically influential friends provided they lived quietly in the old place, caring for Victor, supervising the small staff of domestics and nursing attendants, and staying out of the public eye.

Beginning in 2016, when his youngest son Paul was two years old, Denis Remillard and his wife Lucille Cartier and their seven powerfully operant children had come once each year, on Good Friday, to visit Victor. Denis explained to Yvonne, Louis, and Leon that he and his family were praying for Victor's spiritual recovery.

Yvonne, Louis, and Leon never really understood what Denis meant by that; but they were grateful that they had escaped federal prison after aiding and abetting Victor in his crimes, and they willingly performed their assigned duties according to Denis's instructions. Since they were virtual "normals," they did not take part in the annual metaconcerted prayer ritual except to see to the needs of the operant visitors, who eventually came to include the spouses of Denis and Lucille's adult children. Without Denis's knowledge, Yvonne, Louis, and Leon themselves prayed every day of their lives that Victor Remillard would never awaken from his mysterious coma to reassume his domination over them. In point of fact, the trio prayed that Victor Remillard would die.

And finally, this year, it looked as though their petition might be granted.

Aurelie Dalembert stood at the casement windows of the library, looking out at the rain and sipping sherry. In spite of the roaring fire in the big fireplace, the room was chilly. Cecilia Maeve, and Cheri sat in uncomfortable damask chairs as close to the hearth as they could get, fortifying themselves with hot tea.

"Any sign of the Prima Donna yet?" Maeve O'Neill asked sharply.

"No," Aurelie replied. "Rogi's bringing her and Marc. In a car."

Cheri Losier-Drake, the youngest of the Remillard spouses at twenty-three, suppressed a tendency to shiver and reached for the silver teapot. “Every year this damned prayer vigil gets weirder. My nerves are a wreck. If only I could have a drink! Cele, you’re a doctor. Surely a single brandy couldn’t hurt.”

Cecilia Ashe gently laid a hand on her sister-in-law’s arm. A surge of calming redaction flowed from her brain to that of the other woman. “You know we mustn’t ... Did that za help a little?”

Cheri sighed. “Must have. Parni gave a happy kick.”

“It’ll all be over soon.” Aurelie’s voice was soothing.

“Can’t be soon enough,” snapped Maeve. She downed the last of her tea in a gulp, plunked the fine china cup and saucer down on the table with a rattling crash, and went to get another birch log from the cradle.

“I find the notion of an annual prayer ritual fascinating,” Cecilia said. “It’s touching—the concern for the family black sheep.”

“It’s easy to tell that it’s your first go-around,” Maeve said, tossing the log onto the blaze. A shower of sparks fled up the chimney. “I don’t know how much Maury told you about it, but we don’t actually pray, you know. Denis links all of our minds in a coercive metaconcert, and *he* does the praying. Or whatever. It’s Sevvy’s opinion that the whole thing is nothing more than a colossal guilt compensation on the part of Denis. Because he’s refused to pull the plug on Vic for all these years.”

Cecilia, who had married the widowed Maurice Remillard seven months earlier, assumed a professionally bland expression. “That might be one explanation. But there are others.”

“I think we’re coercing Vic to die,” Cheri said tersely. “And a consummation devoutly to be wished!”

“Amen,” said Maeve. She had thrown still another piece of wood on the conflagration and now dusted her hands and plopped back into her chair. “And if Paul’s right, and the infamous invalid is finally sinking, this might be the last year we’ll have to put up with Denis’s obsession.”

From the window, Aurelie said, “I see car lights. It’s Rogi and Teresa. And I’ve farspoken Paul. He and Denis will be here soon. The express Vee-route from Baltimore to Boston was a fiasco. OS and they lost time in a holding pattern. It’s a scandal, the way the traffic jams keep getting worse and worse.” She came to the fire and poured herself a cup of tea before sitting down with the others.

Cecilia said, “As a neurosurgeon, I find the whole matter of Victor Remillard’s mysterious coma fascinating. Is it true that his body has remained in perfect condition up until just recently?”

“He’s got the immortality gene complex like all the rest of these lucky sods,” Maeve said with a bitter laugh. “Thank God the regen-tank therapy is perfected at last. Can you imagine how poor old Lucille must have felt? Turning into a decrepit old crone of seventy-two in spite of the best that cosmetic surgery could do, while her husband, who’s only a year older, still looks like a graduate student!”

“This will be the first Good Friday that Lucille has missed,” Cheri said.

“Probably planned it,” Maeve decided. “Nine months in the tank, then—tah-dah!—reborn young and gorgeous.” She patted her thickening midsection. “It’s a crock that we still have

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