

GIFTS OF THE MAGI

A career underground.

BY ANATOLY BELILOVSKY

Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a giant cockroach. The metamorphosis startled him in a casual, momentary way, much as waking up in a strange hotel room might have, as did the darkness into which he woke. He flexed his limbs; with a crackling noise his chrysalis fractured, and morning sunlight flooded his compound eyes. He tried to blink, but although he could not feel his eyelids close, his eyes adjusted to the light much faster than his old ones could; in an instant, the whole room came into sharp, clear focus.

He did not need to dip his head to see each chitinous shard fall spinning to the floor, sparkling in the sunlight. He saw each dust mote in the slanted sunbeams, each flower on the wallpaper, each wrinkle on his bed.

The door inched open. Samsa's daughter poked her head into the room. "Hi Daddy!" she shouted and disappeared. He heard her steps distinctly, and new harmonics in her timbre. He tried to memorize her face as he now saw it, and her voice.

Smells registered next, his wife's familiar scent first of all and, after that, the aroma of dark, strong coffee, laden with sugar, wafted from the kitchen. There was a clinking noise, slower, heavier steps, the door creaked, opened wider —

Samsa's wife came through the doorway with the coffee, holding with both hands a half-full bowl. She carried it slowly, placed it in front of him on the floor, sat down on the bed. For a moment, Samsa turned to bring the densest part of his eye towards her. He saw new wrinkles, bloodshot eyes, drying tears. He turned and dipped his proboscis into the coffee, taking her out of focus, but not out of sight.

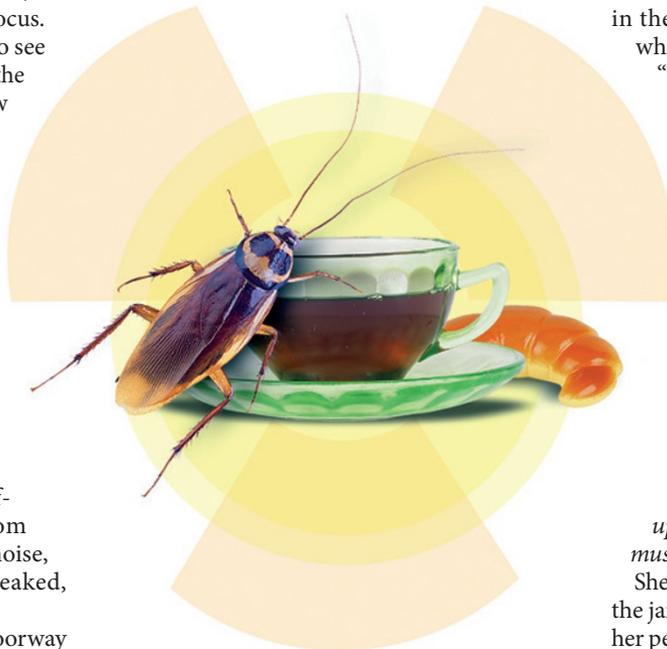
"I know you can't talk," she said. She looked down, smoothed her hair back, then looked at him again. "I'll talk for both of us. You'll say, 'it's only for a month, you know'." She sniffled. "And I'll think, a whole month. I'll imagine the pipes and the tunnels and the dangers, and you'll tell me that you're now a highly trained professional, and..."

She tried to caress

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his carapace; her hands shook, and for a moment her fingers drummed on the unyielding thorax. Her hand recoiled.

"It's the thought of you being underground," she said. "And, honestly, of you not being here. I wish you didn't have to do this. You always used to worry about me flying, and I always told you I'm the best pilot in the sky. I always paid attention to everything, always knew what everyone was doing." Her mouth tightened. "Except you." Her hands wandered as if searching for something familiar: instruments, propulsion controls, handholds; anything.



"Why didn't... Oh hell, I know why you didn't tell me. You wanted to pay off the house by December, so I wouldn't have to take the Saturn run. I didn't tell you I quit, either. I wanted it to be a surprise, that we'd never be apart that long again. So did you. We both love surprises. Remember how I proposed?"

Gregor remembered. A chartered sub-orbital to Paris. Twenty minutes of a ballistic should have been time enough, she'd thought: she would propose, he would accept, then they would make love in zero-G. Except for his nineteen and three-quarter minutes of space sickness. They got it right, finally, in the Royal Suite at Hotel George V, but he never shook off the feeling she'd been left disappointed. *You should see them weightless*, she had said wistfully,

cupping her breasts as she dressed the next morning.

"And you will tell me that this body is damn near indestructible, doesn't even need to breathe or eat," she continued, "and —" her voice cracked "— reactor maintenance pays great." She paused to wipe a tear. "Better than any desk job I could get. Not easy to find work for an ex-spacer with a family to feed," she finished in a whisper.

I should have said something, Samsa thought, *last night. I should have kissed her.*

There was a knock on the door. Samsa's wife smiled. "You raised her right. Always knock first when your parents are together in the bedroom." She stood up. "I know what you'd say if you could," she said.

"You would tell me that you love me, and that you are doing this for us. And I'd say, I love you too. And I'll miss you. Very much. I'll think of nothing else all day."

Yes you will, Samsa thought. *You'll think of flying the way you never thought of it before, just like I never thought of air until I stopped breathing.*

She shambled towards the kitchen with a spacer's graceless gait, but although she'd always been awkward under gravity, for the first time Samsa thought of a long-forgotten line: "*... as if treading upon knife blades so sharp that blood must flow.*"

She stopped in the doorway, one hand on the jamb, turned to face him. He could see her perfectly well without moving his head, but it seemed right to raise it. She swam into full focus again: porous skin, sagging cheeks; but he could see her, too, all of her. She was so beautiful.

"I'm glad we had this talk," she said, willing a smile. "Have a nice day at work, dear."

Samsa nodded. It was the least he could do. And the most. ■

Anatoly Belilovsky was born in what is now Ukraine and learned English from Star Trek reruns. He worked his way through a US college by teaching Russian while majoring in chemistry, and has, for the past 25 years, been a paediatrician in New York, in a practice where English is the fourth most commonly spoken language. He has so far sold SF stories to Andromeda Spaceways, Ideomancer, the Immersion Book of Steampunk and other markets.