

THE FRANCINE RINGOLD AWARDS

Fiction Prize



FIRST PRIZE

C. C. LEWIS

Major Tom

Major Tom is as much a household name as Snow White. Like all fairytales, he existed long before we were born, and he probably will outlive us, too. When I dreamed of him as a child, the way one dreams of imaginary friends, he appeared to me in his silver flightsuit and domed helmet, with a crude placard on his back like a kick-me sign that read *Major Tom*, so I always knew who he was.

“Tell the one about Major Tom,” the girl requests, now, as I tuck the neat white corners of the blanket around her wiry little frame. And so I do, inventing him anew. Like all myths, pieces of the story have been lost along the way, its origins muddled by time, but Major Tom is still here, so it’s up to us to reconstruct him as best we can.

The girl’s preferred bedtime stories are maddeningly incomplete, and I should know. I taught her all of them. Like a centuries-long game of Telephone, the stories grew distorted with each retelling as they were passed down generation to generation. There are varied accounts of every one: the exact relationship of Br’er Rabbit to his Tar-Baby and briar patch, for instance, or Snow White to her huntsman and wicked queen. So it is, too, for Major Tom, the tale of a man lost in space, and his blue planet and his Ground Control. I would look it up, do some investigative research into who wrote these folktales and how they’re supposed to end, if any sort of digital network still existed, if databanks were themselves more than a fairytale.

I fashion a vaguely-ever-after, total non-ending for the bedtime story, and then I tell the girl sweet dreams. It’s a bare white room where she sleeps, probably hundreds of years old, with scuffed floorboards that are more wood than paint. The sort of room our ancestors lived in, slept in after tending fields. Cooked in after wringing the necks of chickens. Rose from to go out and milk cows in the dark. Gave birth in, died in. To think, we’re doing it all

again, centuries later. There is a little painted white dresser against one wall, peeled and chipping. Beneath the window sits part of a computer, a monitor—the old kind, chubby and graceless and prepubescent as a vacuum-tube TV, a precursor to sleeker models—now gutted like a fish and quite empty. My older sister wants to grow her plants inside it, but I refused. Against another wall is the bed, and the girl, and whatever it is she's dreaming.

I always considered myself lucky, even as a child, to dream of Major Tom. Unlike myself and the girl—the both of us peaceful sleepers—my sister used to have recurring nightmares about Claudius, Hamlet's murderous uncle. The most tired, overused bogeyman, a figure so often invoked to spook unruly children into behaving that I am honestly surprised she was so affected by him. She also used to pray to Santa Claus, though as far as I know he never answered. My sister doesn't do any of this now, of course, the nightmares and the prayers, having long ago grown up and out of it. Besides, Santa Claus was meant for children, whereas Major Tom never was. Maybe that's why, even now, he floats through my zero-gravity dreams. What my sister doesn't know is that I still talk to him. What no one knows, not even the girl, is that sometimes Major Tom answers.

* * *

We pick our way through the overgrown bushes and briars, vault over rotting rickrack fences, wind down paths shaded and leafy, across the shallow crick and through the forest. We're going scavenging, the girl and me. The best place for that is the valley—the areas that haven't yet been picked clean. It's where I found my empty monitor. It's unusual to find old appliances there now, even those broken beyond repair. There used to be a discarded schoolbus, brittle with rust, but now even that has been claimed and, amazingly, somehow hauled away with the rest of the most coveted items. When the scavenging trend first caught on, word of the valley spread quickly, and people from miles around descended on it. The battery-powered gadgets got snapped up first. Chiefly the radios, to my disappointment. When the girl and I arrive, the valley opening up at our feet like a chasm full of broken glass and metal, I worry that we will find nothing today, that the valley holds nothing for us.

But I find a surprisingly passable pair of leather shoes, and she finds an old goldfish bowl, almost immaculate, aside from the spidery little crack in the rim. She will take it home to the dress-up box, pulling out handfuls of glitter, feathers, and scraps of Mylar, which she will wear with her empty fishbowl helmet. Like many children her age, she'll play the role of Major Tom for the afternoon. He inspires a great deal of glitter and facepaint in those who attempt to portray him. No one is sure why. But then, why does Santa Claus wear white-trimmed red velvet? It's not a fact one questions. It's something we *know*, instinct passed down and transmitted via our DNA.

The girl herself is what we call a child of the valley—something once lost or discarded, now found, with origins as obscure as the treasures we scavenge. Our walk home from the valley is leisurely. We pass the power plant, and I hold the girl's hand. *Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack*, she chants, struggling to keep the bulbous fishbowl tucked under her willowy arm. *All dressed in black, black, black*. The plant looks beautiful covered in vines, the same voluminous ivy and kudzu that slowly consume the chimney of our home. The kudzu-covered spires and dead towers take on the appearance of unicorn horns, of giants' distended fingers. Leaves spread constellation-like over one oblong tower. It's not for her comfort that I grip her hand, though that's in there somewhere, too; it's so I will have something to do as we pass the neighbor's house. I can already see him in the distance, grizzled beard on a face with too-young eyes, slumped in his black wooden chair. I will jauntily swing her free hand to and fro as we pass his sagging porch, and silently focus on her enjoyment of our walk, so as not to be incited into a fight.

My neighbor is a man of words. He fashions himself after those besuited marketing men who once told everyone the story of why they needed, could not live *without*, such-and-such product, again and again. That's what he would have been, once upon a time. Instead, he is a farmer, and a would-be author, with unwavering opinions when it comes to words.

"Vishnu Sharma wasn't real, you know," he called from his rocking chair, once, overhearing the fable I was telling the girl. There is some debate on the subject: who, among the few authors' names we know, truly existed like the Brothers Grimm or Orwell, and who are as much a fabrication as Mother Goose or Aesop.

“And,” my neighbor dared to add, picking on what he knew to be a particular favorite of mine, “neither was Lennon McCartney.”

I wanted to jump up on his porch and slap him, the laughable bravado of a child defending the honor of Santa Claus. So I held back, but as we walked on, I glanced back over my shoulder and mentioned Shakespeare. *Everyone* knows about Shakespeare—that he existed once, or was at least a composite, many different people contributing to his tales in addition to the original man. Who’s to say Vishnu Sharma or Lennon McCartney couldn’t be at least partially real? My neighbor was wise enough to keep silent at that. If I invoke Shakespeare, he knows I mean business.

The most direct path cuts in front of his porch, so I no longer tell the girl stories on the way to and from the valley.

As we approach his house now, the girl’s voice lilts, although she always chooses such monotonous rhymes. *Three, six, nine. The goose drank wine. The monkey chewed tobacco on the streetcar line.* I say nothing, swinging her hand, and my neighbor nods from his inky wooden chair of rotten black, calling to us about all the canning he’s been doing this week. Runner beans and chow-chow and pumpkin butter, he lists. Pickled beets as red-purple and pure as the heart of Snow White, delivered by the huntsman to the queen. The neighbor eyes my find, the leather shoes slung over my shoulder by their knotted laces, not even glancing at the girl or the fishbowl she cradles like a bloated glass baby. He holds up a hand, signaling us to wait, and rises from his chair on creaking knees. His screen door bangs as he vanishes into the house. When he returns, I know, he will have a jar full of his freshly-canned apples, pinkish-brown segments packed inside and pressing against the glass—a peace offering for me, a proposed trade, in exchange for my new shoes. And they’re so perfect, apples flavored with cinnamon, skins soft enough to melt in your mouth, that he won’t even need to tell me a story of how much I need them, cannot live without them, before I accept.

* * *

I was taught a story, as a child, of leaving out bowls of milk for the brownies, small imaginary visitors like fairies or hobbits in patchwork clothes. I tried this trick on Major Tom at the time,

despite knowing, deep down, that he was different. I left silver saucers of milk, round and white as the face of the moon, in the niche between the refrigerator and the cabinets, a place that felt like a secret. Those saucers always looked untouched in the morning, and I was never sure whether Major Tom was interested.

I talked to Major Tom again on the night my brother tried to cut his soft wrists in a claw-foot bathtub full of yellow water, the yellow tinge a result of week-long storms, rivers and cricks swollen and flooding their banks. He hadn't visited for quite some time, but even as I worried that I'd gotten too old, I was sure it didn't work like that; besides, most people *never* talk to Major Tom, the same way people don't talk to Paul Bunyan or Anansi. But I do, and he came back. Sometimes he's young and pretty; other times he's more of a grinning skull, still beautiful in his otherness. Major Tom didn't say anything that night, just looked back at me sort of sad, eyes shadowy behind the domed glass of his helmet, dark as empty sockets, like he wanted to help, but there was nothing he could do.

I could see my brother's collection of jars, lined on their shelves behind me, reflecting in the helmet that night. Marbles, buttons, worthless coins that once could be used to buy things, all housed in very breakable glass jars—rather worrying now, as my sister and I deliberate over whether or not our brother can be trusted with glass or sharp objects. The helmet reflected ghost-images of those marbles, their colors translucent over Major Tom's face, like the illusion of jewels encrusted in metallic filigree on Major Tom's forehead.

A few nights later, I pretend to know how to fix the radio, while the girl does her chores, my brother sleeps swaddled in bandages on the sofa, and my sister coaxes a pale gray-green vine to grow through the spout of a teapot. My sister once planted some basil inside an ancient toaster, where it thrived. She'd like to try mint in a radio, but radios are too precious, and I've repeatedly nixed the idea of her appropriating my computer monitor. I jab the end of a paperclip into the radio's battery compartment, probably making it worse.

Never have I heard anyone on the radio attempt a version of Major Tom. Officially, radio is for news and the spreading of information. But some programs, favorites of mine, are voices telling and singing the stories they know. I heard a woman's voice, last week, sing Barbara Allen—and then, barely pausing for breath,

the best version of the tale of Eleanor Rigby that I'd ever heard. It was different from the version I'd been taught, with an extra verse about the priest, Father McKenzie, giving him his very own elegiac backstory in eighteen seconds. Incredible, what a difference those extra eighteen seconds make. They were like finding a piece of your own heart that you never knew you'd lost.

The talk shows aren't bad, either. Anyone can broadcast their own show, if they have the means. There is a man, somewhere, who goes on the air and talks about *nothing* for hours, no news, no Jack Tales or ballads, living in the middle of nowhere with nothing of urgency to report, yet we love to listen to him. My sister and I have worked out that his radio tower and equipment must be in the middle of a vast field, given his occasional mentions of sheep and horses nuzzling at his windows as he talks, drawn to his drawl. The radio man says vague things like *You'll know on Memorial Day*, calmly, warningly. *But you won't catch me here on that day. Not for anything in the world.* He offers no context, as if assuming his listeners must know what it's about, when of course we don't. He must be utterly off his gourd, but that's his charm. In the wee hours of the morning, after midnight and only then, we can hear transmissions from up north, signals we can't receive during the day—they have the most up-to-date news about food stamps and ration books, but it's so unbelievably boring, and there are so many threats about what will happen to you if you lie about your need for stamps or if you fail to meet the criteria. We'd rather listen to the man and his paranoid ravings.

I feel something yield under the point of my bent paperclip, and at once the radio explodes into life, roaring with white noise, the tuner stuck in the no man's land between stations. At first I think the voice is coming from the radio, its antenna picking up one of the stations it's ghosting between, until I realize what I hear is the girl.

The girl sings as she does her chores, cranking butter in a churn, counting rations, thumbing through a little book of food stamps. She breaks beans in the white bedroom, tossing their ends and strings into a trash bin, their green bodies into a pot. *Eeny meeny miny moe. And my mother said that you are It.* Another handful into the pot, still chanting as she goes. *My mother said to get things done. You better not mess with Major Tom.*

* * *

To some, Major Tom is a figment to warn our children about. A cautionary tale, an Icarus, an archetype who flew too close to the sun and to the unknown, too far from the Earth as we know it. This is a mistake. We would never care about him if he'd stayed on Earth. He had to leave. Now he lives on, silently infiltrating our nursery rhymes. There's a version of "Ring Around the Rosie" that ends with "ashes to ashes, funk to funky, we all fall down," a whimsical, irreverent line about Major Tom generally believed to be written *after* the original Major Tom tale, clearly making light of our protagonist's plight, and as a result there is some debate as to its validity. It is, however, universally accepted, chanted by spinning children with flushed cheeks and clasped hands, with earnest sincerity and zero comprehension of what they sing. Parents and wizened historians (like my neighbor, the man of words) who recall one of the many original versions of "Ring Around the Rosie" shake their fingers in reproach, lamenting this fact, wistful for the days when children instead sang only of the Bubonic Plague. They lean their foreheads together, a circle of aged and withered brows, whispering *It was a simpler time*.

I ache to know the end of his story, and the truth of his origins, rather than the maddeningly incomplete lines and rhymes memorized and then distorted by memory, passed down by word of mouth. I picture tribes circled around a fireside to the beat of a drum, whispering *Ground Control to Major Tom*.

The journey I take this morning, nearly a day's walk there and back, is to the piedmont, where the ground levels out and the hills disappear. Not a journey I would ever take the girl on. Not until she's older, at least, her legs longer and stronger for the uphill hike homeward. I take a new route, veering off from the silent highway and cutting across back roads, until I am rewarded by stumbling out of a thicket and into the remains of a gas station. It's miles away from everything, and clearly always has been—the sort of gas station on the outskirts of a town too small for a post office of its own. This relative seclusion explains why the shelves aren't entirely bare, and I come away with a few handy things, feeling particularly smug about the ibuprofen.

I'm still feeling smug in the mountains, hours later, in rose-gold evening light, daydreaming of graffitied gas-station walls—of

sitting in the grass and Queen Anne's lace and broken pavement, gnawing indelicately on ancient gas-station beef jerky, fist-sized dragonflies whirring around my head, my pack full of new finds — when I traipse past the neighbor's porch.

"You wanted to know about that story of yours, didn't you?" My neighbor's voice startles me. "The spaceman one."

Stupidly, I haven't properly cinched the drawstring on my pack, and anyone can see straight into it, if they just stand a few feet above me. Like my neighbor is right now, standing on his porch, scratching his beard. He eyes my finds, undisguised and covetous. Surely he can see the large print on the box of ibuprofen, the letters red and joyous, a marketer's dream made real. The colors red and yellow make you hungry, the neighbor once told me. At this moment, he looks ravenous.

"You wanted a name, didn't you?" My neighbor wants a trade. He has information, he claims, about the origins of my story. About the first teller of the tale. My supplies in exchange for that name. He knows I've been somewhere better than the valley, that he cannot ply me with pickled beets this time, so instead offers something more precious.

He could be lying. Crickets whine, warning me. Spring peepers chirp frantically from the crick. He could easily make up a name, and I would never know. I do know, however, what my finds from the gas station are worth. They're needed, by the girl and my sister and brother.

I betray them all with my *Yes*.

Holding the contents of my pack in his hands, my neighbor tells me a name. The most wonderful name, unexpected and sharp like a knife. I know it's real.

Without a glance back at what I've given up, my pack empty and limply beating my shoulder with each step, I run home. Springing up the squat concrete stairs. Flinging open the door, its hinges shrieking, paint chips raining down like a creature shedding its skin. Gasping for breath to tell the girl what I've learned.

But my sister is there. My brother tried it again, she tells me levelly. He didn't even bother getting in the bathtub. Blood coated his wrists unevenly, she explains, surprisingly thick as it clung to his hands like a layer of kudzu. Her voice sounds detached and tinny, radio-like. I see a clot of blood like a nebula on the white

floorboards. These words all sound the same: *nebula, artery, hemoglobin, global, plasma, antimatter, antibodies, dark matter*. I am barely listening to my sister speak.

I fix the girl's dinner when my sister leaves. While I do, I lie to her about my brother, instead telling her about the brownies I no longer believe in and the bowls of milk with which to ply them. I can't read on her face whether she believes or not. I might check, later in the night, to see whether she's snuck into the kitchen to mix a bowl of powdered milk with a wooden spoon—surely she would know to save the real milk, she more practical than I ever was—and leave it beside the icebox. Or perhaps she'd choose to leave it outside in the spring house.

I warm up some of the neighbor's canned cinnamon apples, fry an egg and place it on brown toast. I slice tomatoes and Vidalia onion, piling them raw on a dish. It will take her some time to get through each course.

Then I go and prepare my invitation for Major Tom.

I go to the white bedroom with its scuffed paint. The little white dresser, the obsolete monitor sitting empty as a conch under the sill. I kept it the way the girl kept the goldfish bowl, the both of us preserving our treasures as empty shells, staving off my sister and her herbs; I don't want anything taking up space inside the monitor, nothing that might *expand* like a plant does, leaving room for nothing else, when I sense there is so much I might need to put inside it. On the narrow white bed, I arrange cushions, make a spot where I can sit and wait for my guest.

Now that I am grown, it is like a courtship, I realize. No more of the childish, fanciful leaving out of bowls of milk for imaginary friends. This is a seduction. I place a chunk of iron pyrite on the windowsill, fool's gold from an abandoned mine not far from the house. A sprinkling of glitter from the dress-up box, dusted along the windowsill, substituting for the blood or tears one might use in some arcane rite. My monitor, stray glittery specks drifting from the sill and collecting on its flat top. The girl's goldfish bowl helmet, buffed to a shine. Things he might like.

I open the window and let the moonlight in. I sit back and wait, stomach full of the clichéd paper butterflies that accompany first-date anxiety, although we have met before, so that's not quite right. It's more like the groom, I suppose, awaiting the first glimpse of the bride in her silver Mylar dress.

I try to imagine his reaction to such forwardness. I've never asked him to come before, as opposed to my waiting for him to appear in a dream. If this works, my little summoning spell, will he never come to me again, or will he never stop coming? Does he really see me, or could I be anyone? One of the millions who have dreamed of him?

Yet he comes. He's there, now, my Major Tom, weightless in front of the little white chest of drawers. I consider that he may be an image, merely the light from a dead star, taking millennia to reach the Earth, already long gone before reaching my eyes. Can he really hear me? Suddenly I recall a chunk of the original fairytale, taught to me when I was no older than the girl is now: *Can you hear me, Major Tom? Can you hear me, Major Tom?*

I decide that it doesn't matter. I still want to see him. To woo him with my cheap glitter and fool's gold and even those childhood saucers of moon-milk. I want to hear him tell me his story, from beginning to end, the way it was first written, and I will tell him what we have added in the meantime, all the minor alterations and embellishments that come with the passage of time and countless retellings and love. He is everyone's, and so he is also mine.

I gingerly step up to him and lean close until I imagine I see my breath fog on the glass that shields his face, giving him the kiss of life, until I think I can just feel the cool, ghostly curve of helmet against my lips. The floorboards gently vanish from beneath our feet, receding. I would like to watch as this house gets smaller and smaller, farther and farther away, until it becomes interchangeable with the neighbor's house and porch, and then indistinguishable from every other bump in the green and blue landscape—but I know I will only have eyes for Major Tom. We must have exited through the open window; when I cracked it, I had the moonlight in mind, a way for it to enter, but it seems that I also created the means for our departure.

When the room and its white chest of drawers are a hundred thousand miles away from us, and stars whirl past my head like lightning bugs, his helmet is still brushing my lips. Maybe I'll take his white-gloved hand in mine. In space, they say, your fingers are the first things to get cold. And he is so, so ancient, and it doesn't matter, and when at last I crack my eyelids open I can see the jewels on his face up close, ruby and cracked emerald, winking in the light of the moon.