

The Anabe Girls by A. R. Morlan

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WannaBeAnaBe: I was thinking that since u and I have the same goal, we could join forces. If you really want to avoid eating, make sure you flick your ashes from your cigarette onto your plate after the first bite, if you are still taking the first bite. From your trigger, I'm guessing you are still eating some food. Check out mine at www.life-diet.com to see what I mean...

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“Hey Jake, take a look at this.”

Jacob kept on ratting the hair of the Anabe Agency model sitting placidly before him into a gauzy puff-ball of processed-down-to-colorless brittle strands which hovered over her (if you could still call what sat on the chair in front of Jacob a *her*) taut-skinned skull like a tumbleweed which had lost its central core of thicker dried branches, until Shane repeated, “*Jacob, take-a-look-at-this.*”

Knowing that whichever of the Anabe Girls sitting there (was she Odella or Letje, Radella or Paola?) wasn't about to wander off in search of a cup of coffee, or a fresh pack of cigarettes, Jacob put down his ratting comb on the table of hair grooming products positioned near his work area, and turned to his fellow hairdresser.

“What *now*?”

Shane was looking at the exposed nape of his Anabe Agency model's neck, pushing aside his girl's forward-and-upward ratted mane of crispy-processed hair with one hand, as he probed a small patch of stretched-tight-neck-flesh with the forefinger of his free hand. For her part, the model (Coretta, Vibeke, perhaps Carling?) didn't seem to notice that she was staring not at the rush and bustle of the pre-showing backstage chaos surrounding her, but instead at her own baseball-bat thin legs, and bas-relief patella jutting up sharply under the smooth, hard skin of her knees. A singular trait of the Anabe Agency girls—no bitching, no wiggling around, no constant chomping and cud-chewing of gum ... just blessed stillness, and deep focus.

“The damn bitch *does* brand them ... like freaking range-roaming cattle.”

Jacob didn't need to ask who “the damn bitch” was—in the last five years, ever since she'd started agenting her astonishing girls, and inundating every major casting with dozens of her “finds” the latest *wunderkind* of the modeling world's name was known by both constant exposure and earned reputation to anyone and everyone in the fashion world. Ms. Stephanie Steele, also known and loathed as

Miss Steal by all the modeling agencies whose girls routinely lost runway slots at major designer casting sessions to her impossibly skinny-emaciated-skeletal walking spaghetti-girls. Not that the other agents, the other agencies, didn't try to get their girls to diet down to that gold standard of thinness, down past a size 2 into Zero-land, a place far more magical and lucrative than Fairyland or even Never-Never Land could ever hope to be. But little petty nuisances like fainting spells during five mile runs, heart failure and even the occasional actual death just kept getting in the way of any agency acquiring the perfect stable of *Å¼bermodels* ... until Miss Steal came along, with a cadre of ultimate anorexics whose willpower and accompanying success manifested itself in their perverse thinness.

No, Jacob corrected himself, Anabe Girls went beyond *thin* ... all you had to do was add a "g" and you had what they really were—things, devoid of physical sexual markers like protruding breasts, or rounded buns. Tall, compressed Slim-Jim women, who somehow found the energy to move up and down a runway, blink on occasion, and not fidget in the hair and make-up chairs even as they eschewed all manner of food or non-food like bottles of ice water, sticks of celery, or wads of gum.

These ... girls were so calorie-deprived, they didn't even need two names (a joke already considered old in modeling circles after the Anabe Girls had been on the scene less than a year). So Jacob wasn't totally sure if Shane was staring at the neck of Luryna or Lenmana as he quitted his station, and walked the five feet across the dressing area to where Shane continued to peer at One-Name's exposed nape.

Even through the loose tee-shirt the model wore, Jacob could easily see her spinal column, twin rows of protruding rounded knobs creating small rounded shadows down her back as she leaned forward on the horizontal. Stabbing his forefinger at her long neck, Shane glanced up at Jacob, and whispered, "Now this is *sick*."

All Jacob could do was nod dumbly, as he leaned over to peer at the Anabe Girl's papery-fine flesh, which sported a slightly depressed pair of brown-branded initials—"SS"—just under the bottom of her hairline.

"Goes to show you how seriously Miss Steal takes her position as CEO over there ... the *agency* initials aren't good enough for Miss Thingie," Shane said as he gently pushed the ever-obedient model's hair back down over her neck, then grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her body back into an upright position. Glancing over at her face, Jacob noticed that her expression never changed, nor did her eyes move. And despite the surrounding rumble of hairdressers, make-up people and dressers in the packed room, and the swish and snick of clothes being moved on racks, and shucked off hangers, Jacob was certain that he'd heard Miss One-Name's joints creak and ratchet in their sockets as Shane changed her position in that chair...

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PerFectLeeThin: My family doesn't understand what I'm doing—they don't get how important it is for me to keep shaving another 100 calories off the daily total. It's like an equation, 105 (weight) minus 100 (daily calorie deduction) equals PERFECTION (excuse my flame). You keep going until there's nothing on either side of the minus sign. If they knew about the diet pills, and the laxatives, and the reason why I only drink ice water, they'd freak. Which is why I am so glad I found this site. Looking at the triggers from all the others who have logged on and downloaded their photos inspires me. Even though I'm not thin enough to leave my own trigger just yet. But I am working toward that day. Who knows, maybe once I lose another ten pounds, I might be ready to leave my own trigger here. After that, I might get noticed by an agency...

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“Go on, man, take a look at yours ... it isn't like she's gotten up out of her chair when you walked away.”

Jacob didn't need to take a look over his shoulder to look at his Anabe Girl, still sitting in Zen-like calm on that uncomfortable chair behind him, to know that Shane was right. None of the Anabe Agency models were wont to cause any sort of pre-show problems during their assignments, which only added to their employability. No more supermodel-diva-rants, no threats that the latest Miss Thing wouldn't dream of getting out bed for less than \$25,000 a day, no more haze of cigarette smoke as you tried to work on their hair or make-up prior to the start of the runway show.

Perhaps it was their quietude, their sheer complacent willingness to affect any bizarre look, any out-there cosmetics the designers were wont to request prior to getting the girls dressed and shoved out on the runway proper, that made them so appealing. Nah, Jacob sadly realized, it wasn't their meekness that made them so irresistible during runway casting calls. It was their lack of flesh on the damn bones. Said lack which meant that anything draped on their pitiful excuses for bodies would hang and drape and flutter when they walked, in ways those same garments never could—never would—on any other woman with even one percent body fat.

Never mind that anyone who bought those clothes could never, never look that good in them—as long as those clothes hung just *so* while being propelled down the runway under the popping glare of the fashion photogs come that all-so-important Spring or Fall showing, the designers could sell bu-ku numbers of each garment to the retailers and the couture buyers sitting out there on those uncomfortable little folding chairs surrounding both sides of the runway. To achieve that all-important bottom line, you needed models thinner than a paper-cut.

And once said girls materialized at the castings, you hired them. No questions

asked about how or why they managed to become that mind-blowingly thin.

“I wonder if they flinch when she does that to them?”

“Does what—starve them, or brand them?” Shane began back-combing his girl’s hair, grabbing one fist-ful of hair hard enough to pull the underlying flesh away from her skull, while furiously rattling the brittle strands with his comb. Jacob moved around to look at the model’s face—like all of her fellow Anabe Agency models, Annot or Pavla or who the hell ever she was just kept on half-smiling, lips pulled up at the corners into a sort-of half-moon crescent of thin lips leeching out into a mere wrinkle in her cheeks. And her eyes—they didn’t track, as Jacob discovered when he moved his own forefinger back and forth before her face. All she did was quasi-smile and stare. In the time he stood before her, she did blink, a couple of times in well over two minutes. But that was about all...

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OOSizeOO: Pill diuretics only go so far, you have to supplement them with foods that do it naturally. Plus you can never get too far from a bottle of really icy water—put it in the freezer for half an hour before you go anywhere, so it’s a little bit crunchy when you sip it. Chewing on ice works too, but it’s noisy, and sometimes you can crack a molar. But what I wanted to tell you about was something I saw on cable TV, a show about these Buddhist monks, over in Japan a few centuries ago—they achieved something beyond anorexia, something so totally perfect I can barely type this, I’m so excited.

They were living mummies. Like no body fat, anywhere on their bodies. The thought of it is so exciting, I know my body is devouring calories by me just *thinking* about it. Of course they did die eventually, but before that, they were flesh, muscle and bone, and that’s about it. Perfection ... wasted on guys, of course, but still ... And what is coolest of all is, they did it by eating, yet not really eating-eating. Like eating food. For seven years prior to them digging a hole in the ground then going down to sit in it, they ate nothing but things like bark off certain trees, pine needles, and not much else. And they stood under icy waterfalls ... we all know how useful shivering is, don’t we? ;-)

So, once they’d melted off all that body fat, their bodies were virtually mummified, so that when they’d go sit in their holes, once they were covered up by another monk, all they had to do was wait for two weeks or so, and then, if they were lucky, they were perfectly preserved for like forever after that. If they were slack, and snuck something to eat-eat, they didn’t mummify properly. And they rotted. What a tribute to them, to stay perfect after death. No wonder the other monks worshipped them...

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“Everybody, ten minutes until curtain—”

Jacob walked back to his waiting model and, despite the time warning, took a few precious seconds to lift up his girl’s hair, and bend down to study the nape of her taut-fleshed neck. He’d been hoping against hope that those initials wouldn’t be there, that Shane’s model was merely into body art ... but they were there, a little lighter in color, not so recessed into the skin. Like something from a bad Nazi movie ... those two repeated letters indented in the skin. Jacob wondered what sort of metal they used to make the brand—Steele, perhaps?

“Jake, bring your girl over here, ok? She still needs her make-up—” Across the room, Marcia’s voice cut through Jacob’s reverie like scissors lopping off split ends.

Helping his girl to her feet, Jacob turned her bodily in Marcia’s direction and told her, “Go over there,” before giving her an asexual swat on her nonexistent ass and pushing her toward the waiting make-up artist. He’d never really noticed before, but this model—like all the Anabe Agency girls—had this shuffling gait, not quite lifting her feet up, but lurching forward, like something from a very bad indy horror movie. Something not even as good as the early George Romero pictures. And as he continued to watch the model (someone *had* mentioned her name to him—Zelinka? Kaoline? Mora?—one of the strange names like that written on those sheets of paper attached to their hangers on the racks, names Jacob never saw listed in the birth announcements in any newspaper he’d ever read in all his life) he wondered, did Miss Steal pick the names out for the girls, or did they?

Judging from the way all the models in the room more-than-meekly sat there, or stood there, letting people tease their hair into static-random puffs of fragile follicles sprayed and ratted into a quasi-lifeform squatting on their scalps, surmounting lipstick smears extending from their natural lips to their concave cheekbones and still onward, to touch their barely-fleshed earlobes, and all of that unnaturalness resting on necks so thin, so sinewy, that they resembled the damned Watts Towers, rather than anything still human, Jacob allowed the truth to finally sink in—these things had no free will, no ability to name themselves, or choose what they wanted to do. Didn’t they all come in a van, and leave in the same vehicle once the show was over? Did he—did anyone working in the fashion industry, let alone those reporters from those cable fashion and entertainment channels who were virtually interchangeable, save for the different logos on their mike flags, did *any* of them ever try to talk to an Anabe Girl, attempt to interview her? Hear her *say* anything?

The people who bought the clothes they wore on the runway may have been fashion slaves, but these ... things, what were they? Fashion zombies?

Once thought of, the word blossomed in his mind, each petal taking on the image of George Romeo extras nibbling bugs off trees in stark grainy chiaroscuro, or Haitian sugar cane workers lurching off platforms into vats of steaming processed

cane in that grade Z Bela Lugosi film from the 1930's ... *Something-or-other Zombie* . But it made no sense—real zombies (if there was such a thing as a real zombie, aside from the living-dead things created down in Haiti which weren't really dead-dead, only enslaved and salt-deprived) *ate*, couldn't get enough to eat, as long as it was available for the ripping and gnawing with the teeth.

He'd never seen these girls open their mouths, not to protest whatever weird-ass thing the hair and make-up people did to them, not to complain about the asymmetrical nightmares they had to have pinned and all but glued onto their bodies just so they'd stay on for the duration of the runway appearance before the dressers back stage would rip them off and throw something else on their bodies ... not even if someone stuck them with a pin, as he'd seen countless dressers do in those panicky seconds before clothing changes.

“Maybe if you offered one of them a french fry, she'd come back to life.”

Shane's voice so close to his ear startled Jacob for a second; jerking inside the confines of his Henley shirt, he recovered quickly enough to snap, “I doubt any of these girls would've allowed themselves to drink a zombie potion in the first place ... it might have more than a calorie in it.”

“And I don't think you can drink one of those portions on ice ... does something to the blowfish poison in the mixture.” Shane laughed, only his eyes didn't crinkle around the corners as they usually did when he was joking. They watched as the dressers began shoving the first of the girls past the curtain, and out into the glare of the runway proper—it didn't matter how high their heels were, none of them walked fast enough or lifted their feet high enough to have to worry about falling off their heels ... if anything like worry could seep into their calorie-deprived brains.

While Jacob stared at the last girl he'd done take her place in line near the curtain, all he could see was that burned-on “SS” on the back of her neck, in the same spot where a fashion doll might carry the incised name of her maker, or her country of origin ... not placed anywhere where even an upswept hairdo would reveal it, but still *there*, like a brand name, or a bar code. Or a mark of ownership.

“Don't look, but you should see who's standing in back of us,” Shane whispered, while bumping up against Jacob's right shoulder with his own narrower left shoulder.

Still staring after that last model he'd worked on, Jacob murmured, “So ... who aren't I supposed to look at?”

“The Steel-Woman herself ... come to oversee the slaves, I guess.”

“She packing the branding iron?”

“Nope ... just a pissed look on her puss. Didn’t I say don’t look back there?”

Jacob didn’t care if he’d be turned into a pillar of salt for taking a look at Miss Steal, if that’s what the All Mighty still did to those who dared look in the face of pure corruption. He just had to stare the mistress of starvation in the eye...

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Not2ThinYet: I saw that special on TV, too ... did you notice the gorgeous robes those monks wore? Like frozen fashion models. Now if those guys had been born now, and they’d been girls, they would’ve been models. Not just models, the best, most perfect models. Never eat, never drink, just be perfect. And wear even more perfect clothes. Everything hanging, so people know that you’ve made it past size 0, down to *Thin*. Just pure body, nothing getting in the way, no fat, no excess water, just the essence of a person. I suppose it’s like thin goes beyond a diet, beyond a way of life, into a religion. The same dedication, the same faith that as long as you believe, you’ll make it. Total thinness. Better than a model thin. Of course, I’d even settle for model thin right now...

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Gaunt cheekbones jutted out on either side of Stephanie Steele’s almost lipless mouth, the coating of lipstick turning her lower face into a bloody papercut rather than anything like a smile or a frown, as she stared at her lined-up Girls from the back of the dressing area. Jacob was vaguely reminded of that magazine editor, Helen something-or-other Last-Name’s-a-Color, who was practically self-embalmed when she finally died a couple of years back ... same anorexic body type, same concave lack of a gut under her barely-there bustline. Wearing one of those totally non-styled quasi-Vera Wang sort of shifts with a stark lack of ornamentation, curves or anything else which made a woman look female. Super-pointy toes on her spike heeled shoes, which matched her jutting beak of a fleshless nose. Malnourished moussed hair, the kind that is held on the head by the layers of hairspray alone. Like someone who came in fifth on *Survivor* before the rest of the people on the island voted her off for fear they’d wake up the next morning to find her dead of starvation. Only, Jacob could sense just from looking at the self-satisfied glitter in those slightly bulging eyes of hers that this woman *liked* herself skeletal ... no, make that *loved* herself that way.

But, even as Jacob saw that Miss Steal had achieved calorie-deprivation-Nirvana years ago, there was one thing starvation couldn’t give her ... height. Four inch spike heels couldn’t bring her up to five-five, if that. Even Kate Moss was five-seven barefoot, and at her skinniest. Jacob could smell a WannaBe across a roomful of models’ cigarette smoke, and today, the room was wholly free of nicotine—openly staring at her now, Jacob mouthed the words *Whoremaster bitch ... white slaver* (Oh *that* was it ... that Lugosi film was called

White Zombie) in her direction, turning only when he was sure she'd seen him.

Beside him, Shane whispered, "I wonder where she *finds* them ... let alone how she gets them *that* skinny—"

Before Jacob could come up with an answer, he heard a staccato *slap-tap* sound behind him, which quickly became louder and sharper, until it stopped altogether, about a foot or so away from him.

"They get themselves that skinny ... before they die," came a voice gone raspy from frequent bouts of puking and grazing her throat with the tips of her fingernails. Shane and Jacob exchanged brief wide-eyed stares before turning around to face the Wraith Mistress in Vera Wang silk. That lipsticked slit opened to reveal teeth permanently striated from within from vomit-rot, as Miss Steal continued, "They seek each other out, over the Internet ... help is just a search engine away. They trade web addresses the way the fleshies trade recipes for smoothies. Only way to find sisters in a world of flab ... always seeking out means to achieve their ends. Perfect is a mouse click away, if you know where to look. Then they diet until the last "t" is gone ... but don't you see how much better I've made things? Look at this room ... no choking on second-hand smoke, no tripping over ice-water bottles, no listening to diva rants. The other models, they'd cause so much grief before they backslid and got fat, or up and died from overdoses. I've made things so much better, for everyone. And everyone is happy ... the designers have their elusive drape and the buyers have the illusion that those clothes will make them look thin, too. No tantrums behind the curtain, either.

"My girls are past all that foolishness ... they've stayed the course, stuck to their plans, and achieved—"

"A state of perfect cliché?"

Miss Steal wrinkled her lips into an ass-tight moue at Shane, before saying to Jacob, "You can call me a white slaver, but you don't know squat ... I just find them right before they've consumed that last calorie, and I—I complete them. This *is* what they all want, you know. To have people gape in amazement at their impossibly perfect bodies, to make people envy them, even as they claim to be repulsed. Not everyone can starve themselves just so ... it takes dedication. Like modeling. Besides, do you really want to go back to the old way, of dealing with whiny hungry models coked up on blow who snap your head off if you look at them cross-eyed? Do you really want to work in all that cigarette haze? Or listen to them popping their gum—"

"Nobody can live on air, lady, I mean, you move the car, you gotta gas it up first. Simple law of I *think* physics—energy needs fuel. If it don't eat, it don't breathe—"

“Breathing only makes you look fat—makes the rib-cage stick out,” Miss Steal answered serenely, before crossing her bony arms over her non-existent breasts, and going on, “And besides, since when did the dead need air?”

“This is too freaky for *moi*.” Shane dismissed them with a two-handed pushing away motion, and headed for his workstation, tossing his combs and cans of styling products into a zippered bag.

Jacob continued to watch him as Miss Steal kept on whispering in that vomit-roughened voice of hers, “If you really, really want to be thin, to stay thin, are you going to let something like death stand in your way? Desire can be a powerful nutrient ... once you’re tough enough, physically *hard*, you won’t rot. Not at all ... did you realize, it’s far easier to cremate someone fat” (she spat out the word as if it were a curse) “than to cremate a lean person? People like us, we don’t go easily. We endure ... we go on. Look at Vibeke, over there in the yellow—” Jacob saw the last model he’d been working on, returning from her latest march down the walk, as one of the dressers shucked off her yellow dress to reveal a naked body of such skeletal fleshlessness it transcended any hint of raw sexuality despite her nudity, to become a mere construct of parchment flesh stretched drum-head taut over a framework of symmetrical bone rebar—” “Would you believe, before she started on the path to perfection, she weighed close to one-twenty-five? On a five-foot-nine frame? Obscene ... just disgusting. When she was surfing the pro-ana sites, she called herself ‘Not2ThinYet’ which was so, so true. Her first trigger was horrible ... convex belly, pockets of flab on her upper hips ... just obscene—”

“‘Trigger’? Are we talking Lone Ranger or that other cowboy guy?”

“Photos, posted on the websites. Of women approaching perfection. Inspirational pictures, if you will. Encouragement for the flabby. Proof that dedication will pay off, if you don’t succumb to food—”

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GoddessAnaRex: I hate to spam everyone, but there’s this drink you simply must try—I got it from someone on another site, and it isn’t easy to make, but believe me, it will *work*. You’ll need to find a store that sells real Asian food, specifically raw fish, to make it, but if you follow the directions below precisely, it’s worth the effort (and effort equals calories spent!). They might give you a hard time over the blowfish, but just show them the \$\$ and you’ll get it. Some of the other ingredients might be harder to find, but I’ve included related websites where you can order them. Once you drink it, you’ll experience a backsliding effect—you’ll swell up for a *short* time—but after that ... Calorie Free Zone. Trust me, this is *it*.

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“—used to post my own triggers, before I found a way to help more women

in a lasting way. A lucrative way, especially since they'll never waste a penny of earnings on food. Of course, my method is still out there, floating on the Internet—I tried to limit where I sent it originally, but a few of the girls who would become *my* girls passed it along to who knows whose mailing lists. But I found that marking *my* original girls, just so I can keep track of the authentic Anabe Girls, works well ... I know that impostors, wanna-bes, try to pass themselves off as real Anabe models at castings. But I've clued the people doing the casting in on my ... secret, so they can check out anyone suspicious. And those girls, in turn, are told to apply for jobs with me ... they get my card, the whole scouting treatment. Then I get the wanna-bes, before they can continue to go around ruining my agency's reputation. And as I said before, everyone is happy—the designers, the buyers—”

“Whoa, Trigger-lady ... didn't you like leave out a step? As in, the faux Anabe Girls are sent back to you, and *then* ... something, then the problem is solved. But what happens to the girls sent to you? Do you starve them unto death, then hire them—”

“I have plenty of girls in my agency. More than I can get casted, actually. Enough to fill two or three runway shows at one time. So I have no need of more girls—”

Beyond them, the runway show was winding down, and the designer was getting ready to take the stage, his arms around the T-square perfect bodies of two of the Anabe Girls, Vibeka included. The other girls were already in line, heading out past the curtain in twos, each barely aware of the other as their long, long legs scissored in unison.

“So ... you send the wanna-be models away. Send them packing—”

Laughter forced through a rusted pipe of a throat is not a pretty sound. Next to Jacob, Miss Steal said between grating chortles, “Send them away? What a waste ... weren't you the one who said ‘energy needs fuel’? Meat walks on all fours. Upright, it's just fuel. Gas for the engine, I suppose you could call it. People eat ... zombies, they feed. Eating makes you fat ... feeding just keeps you going.”

“And ... eating is for *enjoyment*, right?”

“True, true ... feeding is a painful necessity. The more painful, the less frequent, which means guilt, which means there's no temptation to actually *eat*.”

“Aren't you afraid I'll—”

“Tell someone? And risk making everyone go back to not being happy with the models? Do you miss the tantrums and the nicotine miasma that much? *Honestly*, now?”

The designer and his attendant undead models moved past the curtain, and onto the runway where, even at this distance, the rumble of applause was like a huge hungering stomach, growling and roaring with need.

“Besides,” Miss Steal hissed through those stained teeth, “I’m not abusing my girls, not putting them in any danger—you couldn’t get me on corpse abuse in any state, in any country. Not like those people in Hollywood, with the stunt-men ... oh, do you *really* think they do *all* the dangerous stunts with CGI? Are you aware of what computer generated imaging still costs, long after the beta stage has passed? Women have the need to be thin, men have the need for experiencing danger in its most extreme forms ... and once you’re dead, *nothing* is too extreme.”

Feeling light-headed, as if he hadn’t eaten in ages, instead of mere hours, Jacob couldn’t resist asking, “So if the girls find you, or you find them, or whatever, on the Internet, where do they find the stuntmen for the movies?”

“Do you think everyone who tries out for those daredevil shows on cable actually *makes* it through the audition process? They have something of an obligation to recycle the ones who die trying...”

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A. R. Morlan’s work has either appeared in or is scheduled to appear in over 117 different magazines, anthologies and webzines, under her own name and three pen names, since 1986. In addition to her novels *The Amulet* and *Dark Journey*, and her co-edited anthology *Zodiac Fantastic* (NAL), her short story collection *Smothered Dolls* should be out from Overlook Connection soon. This is her sixth appearance in *Challenging Destiny*, following “Ridin’ the De Novo Shinkansen” in Number 20.