

BLOWN BUDS OF BARREN FLOWERS

A highly unusual science fiction story that will test the stretches of your imagination and add credence to the sage observation that love is blind.

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Remembering the bracelet Drei had dropped, High slipped it onto his left wrist so he wouldn't forget to give it back to her. Then he angled his dinghy between a yellow skiff and an aqua-marine outboard, leaped up on the main pier and secured his line. He turned his back on Vanderlee Bay and the distant silhouette of his cruiser, made his way to the slip and walked along it to an outthrust rampart of the Main Mansion. A disdainful doorway loomed before him; the rampart rose forbiddingly above it, Palladian windows aflame with crimson Mira's fading light. Awed despite himself, he wondered if Drei would be there to greet him.

They had met just last night, when the first star appeared. He had been leaning on the cruiser's starboard rail, staring down into the water, and suddenly he had seen the pale blur of her face. At first he thought it was a water flower (they were common in the freshwater lakes of Skjold), but the illusion dissolved in a trice when she surged up the boarding ladder and stepped over the rail into the light of the decklamp. Water rivuleted down her tunic-like swimsuit and lovely legs, glistened on her face. Something gleamed on her left wrist. She said, "I hope you don't mind my dropping up to see you. It gets awfully lonely down there in the deep."

It was spring: the night was cool. He fetched a blanket from the cabin but she evaded him when he tried to slip it round her shoulders. "Can't you see I'm a fish?" she said.

"You look more like a naiad to me."

"Naiads are fish. I know the point has never come up, but what else could they be?"

"Rich girls who like to play games."

She laughed. "I'm a fish."

Where her gills should have been glistened the rich texture of smooth, uninterrupted skin. Her nose was slightly pointed but not in the least piscine. Her eyes were a liquid blue, and large and far apart. Soaking wet, her long black hair streamed down to her shoulders, patterning her pectorals with black arabesques.

Behind her, beyond the dark expanse of the bay, shone the lights of the Vanderlee compound. Arching overhead were the storybook constellations of Skjold—the Squirrel, the Goose and the Salamander; the Cricket and the Owl.

High said, "I think you're a Vanderlee fish. That you decided to find out how a mere mortal like me spends his evenings."

"How do you spend them?"

"Fishing."

"You landed a whopper tonight."

"Yes, but I won't be allowed to keep her."

She laughed again. "My name is Drei and I hereby invite you to dinner tomorrow night." And she turned and dived over the rail and vanished beneath the waters of the bay.

He wasn't impressed when she didn't resurface during the long underwater swim to shore. The Nesbreds might not be quite as rich as the Vanderlees, but they too attended the best Earth schools, and all the best Earth schools featured courses in under-water endurance (why, no one knew). More stars had come out (Skjold had no moon), and at length he saw her climb out of the water onto one of the

many piers and blend into the background of the Vanderlee compound. Not long afterward, the lights of the compound began to wink out, and soon but a handful remained. It was said that the Vanderlees went to bed with the chickens.

"Dear High Nesbred," Thar Vanderlee XII had written in his letter to High: "Now that Earth school's behind you, why don't you breeze across the lake someday soon and pay us a visit?" An atypical epistle indeed to receive from the head of a clannish family of reputed immortals that for nearly three centuries had pretended their neighbors—the Haskins to the east, the Elbs to the west, and the Nes-breds just across the lake—did not exist.

But no more atypical, High sup-posed, than the invitation he'd re-ceived from Drei.

She was standing in the disdainful doorway waiting. "Hi, fisherman."

"Hello, fish."

They ascended a spiral stairway side by side, High tall and straight in his form-cut blues, Drei aglow in a gold-en gown. "I brought your bracelet back. I found it lying on the deck this morning."

"It's not mine—it's yours." She held up her left wrist. "This one's mine."

It was identical to High's—a self-adjusting filigreed golden band mount-ed with an exquisite golden cylinder. "A gift? Why?"

"All Vanderlees wear them when they're young."

"I'm a Nesbred."

"Nesbred, Sesbred, it becomes you just the same."

The stairway brought them to a thick-carpeted corridor that in turn brought them to a mammoth reception hall illumined by a Magellanic Cloud-like chandelier suspended from a black ceiling studded with coruscating cut-glass stars. The room was populated with Vanderlees, young and old, all of whom had far-apart liquid eyes like Drei's. Fascinated, High flowed with her from group to group. "My cousin, Floretta," "My uncle Dande-lac," "My great aunt Guinevera," "The Matriarch," "The Patriarch" (the Matri-arch and the Patriarch appeared to be in their sixties; "Actually, they're crowding one hundred and thirty-five," Drei whispered into High's ear), "My third cousin Elred," "My great great aunt Evangella," . . . "Mother, Dad, this is Mr. Nesbred."

Tall, boy-faced Thar Vanderlee XII said, "Welcome to Vanderlea, High."

Lovely Thora Vanderlee said, "You're even handsomer than the photos of you in your scrapbook."

"You kept a scrapbook of *me*?"

"Drei did. Even though you attended different Earth schools."

"You scholastic record's quite impressive," Thar said. "In fact, I'm a little awed by it."

A washed muzhik ("muzhik" was a term the early Vanderlees had lifted from Old Russian to describe Skjold's ignorant indi-genes) had entered the room bearing a tray of glasses filled with effervescent wine. Thora, Drei and Thar took one apiece. High followed suit. He tasted his. The wine was water.

Thar said, "We hope you'll stay with us at least a fortnight."

High said lightly, attempting to hide his astonishment, "I may stum-ble onto your secret."

Thar didn't bat an eye. "We Van-derlees have no secrets. We are the victims of tall tales told by our mu-zhiks."

High studied the boyish face. Far-apart blue eyes, like Drei's. Clear, almost creamy complexion. Not a seam, not a wrinkle anywhere. "I may even stumble onto your subterranean spa."

Thar laughed. "Maybe you al-ready have. Will you stay? At least until tomorrow."

Drei said, "Of course he will." She took High's arm. "Come on, it's time for dinner."

The fish and the fisherman, High thought. Which was which?

Who had landed whom?

After a frugal meal served at a table as long as High's cruiser, the children were chased off to bed and the adults retired to the "Entertain-ment Hall," a vast chamber consist-ing of a glossy dance floor and chairs and couches arranged along the walls. Vapid dance music began ema-nating from hidden

speakers, and High danced dutifully with the Van-derlee females he had met. At length he danced with Drei, only to be cut in almost immediately by her cousin Elred, who was half a head taller than he and some fifty pounds heavier. Promptly High cut back in, saw Elred's flaccid face redden and felt the giant's gaze burning into his back as he whirled Drei away.

"Your cousin doesn't like me."

"That's because he's a distant enough cousin to be eligible."

"Eligible for what?"

"For mating with me. He doesn't know yet that he's been ruled out."

High stared at her. Suddenly mel-low chimes sounded—eight of them. "It's bedtime," Drei announced. "You're staying, of course."

"I'll have to return to the cruiser for my things."

"That's been taken care of. They're in your room in the east wing."

His room was next to hers. She helped him arrange his things in voluminous closets and towering, hand-crafted chests of drawers. Afterward he half expected her to climb into his bed, but apparently there were conventions that even the Vanderlee arrogance dared not trample, for she merely kissed him lightly on the cheek, said good-night and left.

Not only did the Vanderlees go to bed with the chickens, they got up with them. Breakfast consisted of a gritty cereal submerged in *onrus*—a near-equivalent of goat's milk—and accompanied, or perhaps compensated for, by individual pots of delicious tea. When it was over, Thar Vanderlee said, "Come along, High—I'll show you Vanderlea."

Seated beside his host in a noise-less ground-skimmer, High surveyed vast fields strikingly similar to the Nesbreds' own. The Vanderlees muzhiks were already at work in them, operating complex agrarian machines whose mechanical processes their muddled minds couldn't begin to comprehend but whose simplistic controls were made to order for blunt fingers and callused hands. Skirting a cluster of wretched izbas, Thar said, "Not only did I want to show you Vanderlea, I felt I owed it to you to disperse some of the Van-derlee mystique."

High said, "I hope you're not going to try to sell me the notion that regimen by itself enabled the Matri-arch and the Patriarch to live nearly one hundred and thirty-five Skjold years and left them looking like a pair of healthy sixty-year-olds. And left you looking like an eighteen-year-old boy at the age of—shall we say?—forty-five."

Thar smiled. "No, I'm not. Although regimen was a contributing factor. There *is* a spa, High, as I implied last night. And it's located beneath the Main Mansion, just as the muzhiks say. But don't go looking for it, because all you'll find will be pipes and pumps: it became an adjunct of the compound's plumbing system long ago. You drank its waters last night—before, during and after dinner. You drank them this morning in your tea. One doesn't *bathe* in fountains of youth, High. One drinks their contents."

"And lives forever?"

Thar either failed to hear the question or chose to ignore it. He continued to drive. More fields. More muzhiks. More izbas. At length he said, "The artesian lake that feeds the spa is the habitat of a short-lived microorganism deposited there aeons ago, we think, by life forms from another island universe for whom the organism functioned as a nutritive symbiont indispensable to their survival during their stay on Skjold. But that is pure conjecture.

"When introduced into the human body in sufficient quantities, these microorganisms retard tissue breakdown and assist homeostasis. Since they can reproduce themselves only in their natural habitat, the body's supply must be constantly replenished. When this is done, senescence is slowed, and its usual accompaniments, such as sarcomata, carcinomata, arteriosclerosis, osteo-arthritis, hypertension and heart disease, are absent. Mind you, I said 'retard' and 'assist': the microorganisms don't *stop* senescence. But combined with the commonsense way of life we Vanderlees follow, they permit us to grow old slowly and to live well beyond the maximal human life span."

The skimmer was circumventing a huge pasture in which orange and black brindle cattle were grazing in the bright and sparkling air. To the right stretched an uncultivated field whose rows of little hummocks and awry cairns denoted it as a muzhik burial ground. High pointed to it. "Why don't *they* live well

beyond *their* maximal life span instead of dying prematurely in their mid-thirties? Physically, they're no different from us."

"Maybe they did once. The reason they don't anymore should be obvious. The Vanderlees, ever since they settled the land, have reserved the waters of the spa for themselves. Not out of selfishness, I assure you, but because of the extraordinarily high muzhik birthrate.

"I can anticipate your next question: Why don't we share the spa with our neighbors? If you'll think for a moment, you'll see why. If we shared it with them, eventually we'd have to share it with everybody, and eventually the artesian lake would go dry. But there's also a psychological reason behind our reluctance to share it, or introduce its microorganisms into other bodies of water. Any possession, tangible or intangible, is valuable only when held by a certain few. The moment it becomes the property of the many, it becomes worthless. I think it was Ortega y Gasset who said that. Anyway, the one thing that sets the Vanderlees apart from the rest of the worlds—or from the rest of the rich, if you prefer—is the distinction arising from their relative longevity. Surely you can't blame us for not wanting to throw that distinction away."

"No, I suppose not," High said.

The pasture, with its grazing cattle, was behind them. In the distance up ahead, beyond muzhik dotted fields and scattered clusters of izbas, the Vanderlee compound was sharply defined against the brisk blueness of the lake and the benign blueness of the morning sky. When High made no further comment, Thar said, "It's said that the waters of the spa take effect overnight, that they cast the world in a different light. Does the world seem any different to you to-day than it did yesterday, High?"

"There's a sparkling quality about the air that wasn't there before, and I don't think the sun ever shone quite so bright."

"Already you've acquired the Vanderlee vision! But I think in your case it's partly attributable to the fact that you're young and to the possibility that you've fallen in love ... I hope you'll remain with us, High. For good."

"Why?"

"Our motive will become evident all too soon. Will you stay?"

And marry Drei? The question hadn't been asked, but it had been implied. High shelved the mystery of the Vanderlees' motivation and thought about Drei. About living to be one hundred and thirty-five. Naturally he would live that long anyway, but why take chances?

"I think I'm thirsty," he said.

Drei, wearing a burnt orange tunic that cupped her breasts and made sequins of her rose-red nipples, cornered him after lunch. "This afternoon, you're mine," she said.

Moments later, seated beside her in her green-gold ground-skimmer, he watched a dozen fields flash by as she cut across them to a grassy thoroughfare that led straight inland to a distant range of hills. The hills crept forth on green-sandaled feet to meet them. Glancing back, High saw that a second skimmer had left the compound. It did not overtake them, perhaps because it couldn't. When they entered the hills, it vanished from view, and he forgot all about it.

The thoroughfare narrowed, wound this way and that among ever more numerous trees. Drei glanced at him sideways. "How're we doing, god?"

"I'm not a god."

"You're on your way to becoming one—that is, if you opt to stay."

"I've already opted to—as though you didn't know. But gods live forever—not to a measly one hundred and thirty-five."

"So they do. But don't use the Matriarch and Patriarch as criteria. They're nothing but a couple of kids. Didn't Dad fill you in?"

He stared at her. But a tortuous tree-lined stretch of road was preempting her attention and she did not look back. "I thought he did."

He let several seconds go by; then, when she made no further comment, he asked, "Just how old *do* you people get to be?"

"I think," she said, "that I'd best refer you to my father for the answer to that one. Meanwhile—"

She drove down into a wooded valley, turned off the thoroughfare, skimmed across a flower-pied meadow and over a knoll and stopped near the bank of a twinkling tree-shaded stream. She got out and so did he, and they sat down on a flat rock and removed their shoes and dangled their feet in the water. He kissed her lips and then her roseate cheeks. He alternated among them like a bee buzzing from flower to flower, became lost in a warm wilderness rich with nectar and scented with frankincense and myrrh. He could have all of it if he wished, and he wished.

In the midst of his meandering, a stunning blow on the back of his head sent him sprawling into the stream. The coldness of the water shocked him, and he flopped over onto his back and braced himself on his elbows. On the bank, Drei was screaming imprecations at a tall young man with a flaccid face and lackluster—though unquestionably Vanderlee—eyes.

Staring up at that face, into those eyes, High understood at last why he had been proffered the Vanderlee longevity.

Cousin Elred was a defective.

Probably there were others—among the children, most likely.

The Vanderlees hadn't panicked—that wasn't their style. But they were taking steps to counter the increased homozygosity that centuries of inbreeding had brought about.

He, High, insofar as he knew, was the first.

Others like him would follow. Haskens, even Elbs. All carefully pre-selected, all meticulously screened. The waters of the spa would be shared—but reluctantly and only to the extent necessary to reduce the likelihood of more Elreds.

High crawled out of the stream. Elred, awed by Drei's anger, had taken a backward step. He took another, but before he quite completed it, High launched himself head foremost, butting the giant in the stomach. Both men went down, Elred with an astonished grunt. High was first to his feet; when Elred was half-way to his, High's right fist homed in precisely on target. You could almost hear the glass shatter. High rolled the log that had been Elred into the stream, and it became Elred again, Elred sitting up and sputtering.

Slowly he got to his feet and waded over to the bank. He regarded High dully for a moment, then walked around him and over the knoll. Presently the susurrus of a skimmer skimming over meadow grass could be heard. The sound faded away.

High turned toward Drei. The sparkling quality of the ambient air seemed to have intensified. The sky, the trees, the grass—all had acquired a Van Gogh vividness of hue. The sunlight poured down upon the earth in a vast bright cataract that disintegrated, when it struck the ground, into a trillion motes of purest gold—

And Drei—she stood there waiting, rose-lipped, fresh-faced, straining toward him even as he strained toward her ... And suddenly he knew that for every man there is a moment that towers—will always tower—high above all others, and that this was his.

They stood on the bank, beside the stream, amid the whispering of the grass and the sighing of the wind in the trees; and the wilderness flowed with milk and honey, and there was frankincense, too, and myrrh—

But there was a voice in the wilderness, and the voice, even though it was Drei's, robbed the moment of some of its splendor. *Don't use the Matriarch and Patriarch as criteria*, the voice said. *They're nothing but a couple of kids.*

Night found High in the corridor leading to the Main Mansion's west wing.

The corridor was red-carpeted, illuminated by occasional electric candles on low beam. A movement up ahead caught his eye, and presently a female muzhik emerged from the dimness. She bowed to him as they passed, and High strode on, more confidently, and a few moments later reached the base of a flight of stairs.

He ascended them boldly, arrived at the mouth of a long hallway, its walls interrupted at wide intervals by closed doors. He paused before the first door. He doubted whether whatever lay beyond it would differ substantially from whatever lay beyond the others, and, finding it unlocked, he opened it and stepped inside.

A long rectangular room, windowless and dimly lit. Two rows of converti-beds; an aisle running between them. Above the headboard of each bed, a small recessed shelf illuminated by a little nightlight and containing a tiny rack filled with what at first glance appeared to be diminutive golden test tubes.

All of the beds were occupied. Stepping over to the nearest one, High leaned above the occupant. He saw the face and head of an old, old man or woman (it was impossible to tell which, for the head was hairless) whose skin was drawn so tightly over the frontal, nasal and zygomatic bones as to lend the aspect of a skull. Although bald, the top of the head was not featureless: at the approximate juncture of the frontal and parietal bones, the end of a small cylinder protruded—a cylinder, High suddenly saw, exactly like the ones in the rack on the recessed shelf which he had taken for diminutive test tubes, and exactly like the one mounted on his bracelet.

The body proper, covered by heavy blankets, brought to mind a bag of bones. Only an almost imperceptible rising and falling of the blankets indicated the presence of life.

Thar Vanderlee I?

Raising his eyes to the recessed shelf, High saw that the rack holding the cylinders was stamped with tiny numerals, one for each notch. The first notch was empty.

Glancing at the next bed, he saw that its occupant also had a small hole trephined in his/her skull from which the end of a golden cylinder protruded.

Far down the room, one of the sleepers stirred. "Two," it whispered hoarsely. "Two."

A female muzhik, whose presence High hadn't suspected, materialized out of the dimness, went over to the whisperer and withdrew a cylinder from its head, replacing it with one she selected from the shelf above the headboard. After returning the original cylinder to the rack, she withdrew and blended back into the dimness.

Shuddering, High walked down the aisle, looking at each of the sleepers. He remembered Daudet's story, *Les Vieux*. "The Old Ones." Here were the *old* old ones.

The room was greenhouse-warm. He wiped moisture from his forehead with his handkerchief. "Sort of unsettling, isn't it," a voice behind him said, and turning, he saw Thar Vanderlee standing there in silken dressing gown and soundless slippers.

"That's because you're viewing Paradise from the outside," Thar went on. "If you'd waited till tomorrow, I'd have brought you here myself."

"The cylinders—they're some form of bio-recorders, aren't they?"

"'Tiograms,' we call them. The products of one of our electronics concerns on earth. They're our solution to the problem of terminal depression."

Another of the dreamers stirred. "Two," it whispered. "Two."

"Individual bedtimes are employed so that a single attendant can service an entire ward," Thar explained. "In the morning, the beds are reconverted into chairs as the retirees sequentially awaken."

"They—they sit up?"

Thar nodded. "The walls are 3V screens which, when activated, depict Vanderlee as it was during their heyday. They're served breakfast, lunch and dinner and they sit and reminisce about the best days of their lives and gradually their memories fade away, and when night comes they're ready to relive their youths again for what seems the first time ever. Marvelous, don't you think?"

Horried, High said, "How long does this go on? Forever?"

Thar shook his head. "No. I didn't lie to you, High. The mere fact that no Vanderlee has ever died of natural causes doesn't mean none ever will. Death can be delayed but not denied. Such reasoning, however, is far beyond the intellectual horizon of the muzhiks, and I suppose the Vanderlee practice of cremating those of their relatives who die of unnatural causes hasn't brought that horizon any closer."

High asked, "When does terminal depression set in?"

"In our case, at about the age of one hundred and fifty. Sometimes sooner."

High thought of Swinburne's "Garden":

I am weary of days and hours,
Blown buds of barren flowers,
Desires and dreams and powers

And every thing but sleep—

Aloud, he said, "But it's inhuman to keep someone alive when he wants to die."

"Not when it's in keeping with his wishes. When he reaches one hundred, every Vanderlee is required to choose between the antidote and the disease."

"And if he chooses the disease?"

"None ever has, so it's a problem we've never had to contend with. And I don't think that once he's opted for the antidote any Vanderlee has ever regretted his choice. The Matriarch and Patriarch are a case in point. They're scheduled to leave for Earth next month to undergo the necessary surgery for placement of cortices. It's a simple operation and they don't dread it in the least. More-over, they're looking forward eagerly to their forthcoming retirement. And why not? Who doesn't want to regain his lost youth?"

"I don't," High said.

Thar smiled. "How can you tell? You haven't lost it yet."

High was looking at his bracelet—at the "filigreed" band and mounted cylinder he'd unthinkingly assumed comprised a simple talisman. Thar touched it lightly. "The band transfers the intake of the five senses to the cylinder. The cylinders are good for approximately twenty-eight hours—after that, they have to be replaced. The replaced ones are stored in our Youth Bank under the owner's name along with precis of each one's contents. At age eighty, the owner selects the ten that contain the moments he'd most like to relive and arranges them in chronological order.

"Relife," Thar continued, "is experienced on a twenty-eight-hour-to-one time scale, so during a standard ten-hour sleep period, a retiree can become reacquainted with virtually all the best moments of his youth. We wanted the preservation of your moments to begin as soon as possible, High—that's why Drei left your bracelet on the deck when she first visited you. The moment you slipped it onto your wrist, biogramming began."

High said coldly, "You wasted your time. I'll marry Drei—I love her. And I'll remain in Vanderlea. But I'll never permit a biogram receptacle to be inserted in my cerebral cortex. Ever. And when I reach the age of one hundred, I'm going to choose the disease. And when I start crowding one hundred and fifty and *want* to die, I'm *going* to die! By my own hand, if necessary!"

"Of course," Thar said gently. "And die you will, High, if that is still your wish. Come, I'll take you back to your room."

They descended the stairs together and walked side by side along the corridor that led to the east wing. "Never," High murmured over and over. "Never, never, never—"

"Ever, ever, ever—"

END OF BIOGRAM #1

Ask attendant to insert Biogram #2 "Two," he whispered in the dimness. "Two. . ."