

The Companion

Literary Arts

Short Story—Fiction

Patricia Curtis

The Companion

"Wake up." There was an urgency in the voice that roused me from a deep sleep. The first thing I remembered when I awoke was that I didn't recall going to sleep. The second thing I noticed was that I was not in my bed but seemed to be lying in a pile of straw inside a structure that smelled of old dust and musty wood. Bewildered, I sat up, stretched and yawned. Well, I tried to yawn. Panic squeezed my chest when I realized that I could not open my mouth. The right side of my lips would not part. My jaw was locked. I gasped but only through the left side of my mouth, which seemed to be working okay. With my right hand, I reached up to rub my right jaw. There was no pain so I didn't understand why I could not open my mouth. Horror accompanied my panic when, instead of my smooth, twenty-something skin, there was a leathery, bumpy, almost scaly covering there and it seemed to cover half of my head. Even with a ruined mouth, I managed to scream. Loud and long.

"Stop that!" It was the same voice that commanded that I awaken. Whipping around, scanning every corner of what I now realized was a barn loft, I searched for the person who spoke. I saw no one. I was alone, it seemed. My legs quivered as I stood and peered over the edge of the loft. Empty. Apparently, it had been that way for a very long time given the general decay and layers of filth. I was a bit relieved that there was not a pitchfork-wielding farmer below, mucking a stable.

Like a child that picks at a scabbed-over sore, I could not stop my right hand from traveling to the right side of my face again. I could not feel the touch of my fingers so steeling myself against what I thought would be painful, I pinched myself very hard on my right cheek. I felt no pain, but I jerked with a start when I heard a voice cry out in pain. My legs turned to rubber, and I stumbled back to fall onto the pile of hay. "Who said that?" I tried to ask through the small opening that was the left side of my mouth.

My left hand moved up on its own volition and rubbed the left side of my face, just as my right hand had rubbed the right side earlier. I braced myself for the searing pain of a pinch. Thankfully, it didn't happen. When the answer came it sounded as lost as I felt. "I don't know."

The voice was my own and like it did the other times I heard it, seemed to emanate from my head.

"What is happening?" I whispered. Coming from the left side of my mouth, the words sounded like hisses and puffs, unintelligible.

The voice repeated, "I don't know."

My frustration at feeling so clueless as to what was happening and trying to articulate that feeling grew along with my anger. I could not push the words out. "What *DO* you know?" I struggled to yell.

Unfazed by my outburst, the voice inside my head said, "there is no need to speak. We can communicate telepathically. I can discern your thoughts, as you can mine. As you are aware, the part of you that is me has no mouth."

"The part of me that is you?" Communicating telepathically was surprisingly easy to me and was so much less annoying than trying to actually speak, under my new circumstances. Once I realized how easily it came, I continued my tirade. "And what kind of creature has no mouth? How do you eat?"

"Through osmosis. I gather the nutrients I need from the environment through my external covering. So, am I to assume that you take nourishment through the opening you call your mouth? That your mouth is used for many different functions?"

I had never thought about it. I talked, smiled, pouted, kissed, ate, chewed, tasted, yawned, licked an envelope, sneezed, so yeah. Many functions. Absurdly, I became worried that I might sneeze. Afterall, the barn was dusty. What would happen to my dilapidated mouth if I sneezed?

"The worst," I muttered.

As much as I dreaded seeing what I looked like, I felt compelled to know. Reluctantly, I reached for my phone in the back pocket of my jeans. Fortunately, it was there. Once I powered it on, it seemed to work. It was odd that my phone was not already on since I never turned it off. There was no signal, but I wasn't planning to call anyone or share a picture on Instagram. Heaven forbid!

The wallpaper on my phone was a photo of my boyfriend, Bruce, and me. The picture was taken early in our relationship by our friend Sam. We were both smiling broadly and looked very much in love. We made a striking couple, all gleaming white teeth and thick luscious hair. Looks can be deceiving.

I touched the camera icon and looked at myself.

Even though I suspected what I would see, I almost dropped the phone when I saw my image come into focus. Half my head was covered with a greenish-gray substance with purple veins running from ridges at the top of the head to a huge black eye. Below the eye where my cheekbone used to be, were what appeared to be gills. There was no nose and no lips. The hideous mask ended just above my chin. My long chestnut hair was missing on that side of my head. I saw what was left of my lips and I watched in horror as they worked to speak. I mumbled, "you're an alien."

"That is correct since we appear to be on earth. On my home planet, you would be the alien."

"Were you on earth when this happened?"

"No. I was on my home planet, working."

"Do you know who did this? Did you?"

"No."

It's funny how things come to your mind and stick during times of stress. All I could think of was an old movie I watched on a streaming service. It starred Jeff Goldblum. Entitled "The Fly" it was the story of a man who built a teleportation device and when he used it, a fly was also in the pod. Their DNA mingled and disaster ensued. I really don't want to spend the rest of my life like this, I said to myself. "Nor do I," the voice said.

We were silent for a few minutes while I arranged pieces of straw into a picture, and just like it was for me in the regular world, it became uncomfortable. "Do you have a name?" I asked.

"I am called Mender."

"Mender? What kind of name is Mender? Why would your parents have named you that? Did you, like, mend their marriage by being born, or something?"

"We are named according to our occupation. I mend things that are broken or damaged and irreplaceable."

"So, you were not named as soon as you were born? They waited until you were old enough to work before naming you? You said you were working when you were, er, abducted. So why you? Why not another mender? Why me?"

"I don't know why we are the ones subjected to this. I am the only mender. There are no others. I became a mender the day I came into being."

"You were born knowing how to mend things?"

"We are not born as humans are. We are genetically engineered to fulfill a purpose."

"Wow," I whispered, momentarily forgetting my new-found gift of telepathy. I wondered if knowing your purpose from the start of life would be better than struggling to find your purpose without a clue as to what it was.

"Are you happy mending things? Is there something you would rather do?"

"I don't understand. I do what I was made to do." Mender said.

No choice. I tried to imagine it. It could be good in one aspect, like knowing how you were going to make a living. Having choices seems nice if you don't continually make the wrong ones. But then, if you have no choice, you may be stuck in a dead-end job, going nowhere. I had choices but still wound up in a job that I hated and an uneasy relationship from which I saw no exit.

Bruce, my significant other, my eye-candy, my companion so I wouldn't seem lonely, was also a manipulative, vindictive gas lighter. We had an argument, one that caused me to leave the apartment we shared to

breathe, walk and consider my options. I believed that he would come to find me to take me home. He didn't and the next thing I remember, I awoke in a barn as some sort of hybrid.

Trying to chase away the dark thoughts, I said, "I guess you already know that my name is Audrey. You probably know everything there is to know about me, given your ability to read my thoughts."

"I can discern your thoughts only when they are presented as communication. Your private thoughts are still your private thoughts. Only when you direct them at me, can I know what you are thinking."

"I'm not sure I have mastered keeping them separate. A thought is a thought."

"Well, yes," Mender said, and I suddenly knew there was no hiding. My life was an open book as far as Mender was concerned.

I was good at duplicity. Everyone saw this beautiful but vapid girl who rolled with punches and bounced back with a winning smile. No one, Bruce included, saw the real me, the artist, the scientist, the lover of things that were useless for a profitable life. I found that despite my ability to keep hidden those parts of me, I could not do that now. I could not hide from Mender, any more than I could stop a sandstorm in the desert. I was afraid.

"Don't be," Mender said, confirming that I was not as good at hiding as I thought I was.

"Will we always be this way? I've always felt like a pariah in the best of times. Even though you seem to be nice, I really do not think I can be seen in public looking the way I -we- look."

"I don't know," Mender said, again. "Time has a way of working things out."

I sighed. "Maybe, but it isn't always a better solution."

"Choice seems to be important to you. I am not good at imagining because it is unnecessary, but I am aware that you are. You imagine that your life could be better, but you feel trapped where you are. Why?"

"Why do the birds go on singing? It's life. It's the hand I was dealt."

"No. My life was dealt, predestined when I was a drawing in the laboratory where I was engineered. Yours is not, because you have choices. You said you were afraid. I understand fear because even though our destiny is predetermined, we still have enemies, other species that dwell on our planet who can cause us harm. That kind of fear is necessary for our survival. Fear of change is not. What is the worst that can happen to you? If I had the power to decide my fate and walked away from my occupation as mender, it would be considered a malfunction and I would be decommissioned, destroyed. Would that happen to you if you walked away from the job you hate? From Bruce?"

"No," I said.

"And what would you do, if you chose another occupation? Another mate?"

"I have always wanted to be a teacher," I said.

"Then, why aren't you a teacher?"

"I'm not smart enough. I never did well in school. Everyone's expectation of me is fairly low. No one is surprised that I wound up working as a dishwasher."

"You asked me if I was born knowing how to mend. Were any teachers on earth born knowing how to teach? Do you not have training facilities to teach you to teach? I can tell by the questions you have asked me that you are inquisitive. Is that not a mark of intelligence? Inquiring minds want to know."

I laughed out loud, the huge expulsion of air hurting the left side of my mouth. I sensed Mender's confusion at my burst of merriment. "It's an old ad slogan for a tell all rag," I provided.

"It is a good slogan," Mender said. I rolled my existing eye.

"I'm not sure that I could pass an entrance exam to a university," I said. "That is where I would need to be if I want a teaching degree."

"Have you tried?"

I didn't answer. I think Mender already knew, but I felt an excitement growing deep in my gut. Why couldn't I apply? A university was intimidating but I didn't have to start there. I could attend a small community college to get a feel for it.

"That is true," Mender said.

As is my nature, I destroyed my resolve with another dark thought. "Oh, but what would Bruce think? He's a bit possessive."

"Does possession not mean ownership? Does Bruce own you?"

"No," I said without much conviction. Thinking about it, though, I reasoned that I had given Bruce ownership because, more than I hated being controlled by him, I feared being without a boyfriend. What would people think?

"Does it really matter what other people think? Because they can choose, they will think what they think. Nothing you can do will take away their privilege of being able to choose. The only thing you can do is give them a different choice, a new way to think. You can teach them.

"You know what you know about Bruce," Mender continued. "Will you be able to teach him? Do you want to teach him to be different?"

"That would make me as controlling as he is. No. I have no desire to change him. I find that I have no real connection with him and I'm tired of fighting with myself and him." That was a decision that felt good.

I smiled with my half mouth, sensing that Mender was smiling as well. The right side that was home to Mender's non-existent mouth didn't move but I imagined there was a twinkling in the huge eye that dominated Mender's -our- face. Maybe it would not be so bad, being a hybrid, having a built-in companion. I felt closer to Mender than I had felt to anyone other than my parents. People adapted to things so maybe, after a time, they would accept my unusual appearance. Maybe they would accept the new me. Again, I smiled. The new me!

"Wake up." There was an urgency in the voice that roused me from a deep sleep. I opened my eyes to the familiar surroundings of my bedroom in my apartment. Bruce was staring down at me with a frown on his face. "You've been asleep for hours," he yelled. "We're supposed to be at Sam and Chelle's house in thirty minutes. You know how long it takes you to get ready."

I sat up, my right hand traveling to the right side of my face which was as smooth as a twenty-something year old's skin should be. I ran my hand through my long chestnut colored hair. Stretching, I opened my mouth wide and yawned. Both sides of my mouth worked in unison. I felt for my phone, still tucked in the back pocket of my jeans. I pulled it out and again, I had to switch on the power. I did have service but still had no interest in making a call or texting. I went straight to the camera, relieved to see that I was all me again.

"Mender," I sent out a thought. There was no response. Mender was gone and I felt a momentary loss. Then, I looked up at Bruce, facing the fear I felt and moving past it. "I have decided to go to college to become a teacher," I said.

Bruce laughed. "I pity anyone you would teach."

I realized that Bruce's opinion no longer mattered. "Oh, and one more thing," I said, smiling up at him. "I'm leaving you."