

The Most Beautiful Woman on the World

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Jun 2008

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Dave Tallman — 21 Jun 2008, 12:34

Here is my take on the story "The Most Beautiful Woman on the World" from "Endangered Species."

The setting seems to be a Mars terraforming mission. A rift and a connected valley have been filled with an Earth-like atmosphere and a colony has been established there. More changes are expected: "Do you think they'll ever really make it rain?"

Three men are in a shack with the wind howling outside, telling stories by candlelight. They are Garcia, Hoong, and Davis. Garcia starts a story with "Let me tell you of a man I knew once," but it's immediately apparent it's about himself.

Davis has a story that must be pulled out through questions and deductions. It's very odd that the others know that he's in trouble ("I'm surprised she doesn't try to help you now...") without knowing any of these details. Are Hoong and Garcia just humoring a madman, trying to draw out something he only imagined?

Davis seems to have cut off his own hand when he thought he was cutting off Sigrid's. /"Everything they saw was mine, and there wasn't a mark on her."/ He struck the table with "his fist."

After Davis tells his story, there is a sudden change of subject back to Garcia's story of Catalina and the stallion Estampido. "The silence thickened until it seemed to fill the dark corners of the shack... Garcia shook himself as though waking from an evil dream."

Garcia resumes his story as if Davis had never spoken. This conversational reset is as strange as the one in "The Packerhaus Method," and I think it has a similar reason: the loss of memories.

The key is back where Davis describes what Sigrid said about her husband. "She said he acted, too, as if he hadn't told her about his dreams at all; now he told her again, beginning back when he was a kid." The leaper seems to have the power to alter memories as well as to make dreams real. When the group starts to get too close to the truth their memories are reset. This has probably happened more than once. Davis asks "Did I tell you?"

Garcia's story itself is suspect. His supposed background as a misogynist Mexican horse rancher doesn't fit with his current life as an intelligent scientist on a Mars terraforming mission. I think it may be drawn from his own fantasies and "macho" cultural memories, just as the geologist's were. Hoong may be headed down that path as well, since he starts writing his name with Chinese characters. They will be of no help to Davis or themselves.

The shack itself is probably not real. The leaper can make illusions that appear solid if they are believed in enough. These three men have been drawn into a private hell, like the three people

in "No Exit."