

Alien Treaties Sampler

By Randal S. Doering

<http://www.randaldoering.com>

randal_doering@hotmail.com

This sampler is a selection of 3 short stories taken from my collection *Alien Treaties and Other Stories*. This collection is available from Amazon.com for \$9.50 for the printed version or \$4.99 for the ebook version. The stories in this sampler range from an alternative future where capital punishment is taken to a whole other level, to a Middle Eastern contemporary fantasy, to a hard look at near-future America in a story about a troubled psychic. These are among the shorter pieces from the collection, which contains 12 stories covering a broad spectrum for your reading enjoyment. I hope you like this sampler and that it whets your appetite for the complete collection!

In the Footsteps of Hammurabi

Ryan received the summons at work, in an official envelope embossed with the seal of the city of San Diego. Jane the receptionist, who handled the firm's mail, brought it straight to him and slid it across his desk while he was in a conference call in his office. He glanced at it, his throat going dry, and gave her a thumbs-up. Jane took off. Ryan slit the envelope open and pulled out the letter within.

They were formally charging his father. Ryan was to be questioned in relation to the matter. There was a date, time and place. No attorney required, not yet.

He thought they were probably going to go light on him, not pit him against his own father, but it all depended on who was handing the inquiry. It was hard to tell, because America was in a bad mood, had been for six years now, and this matter had all the earmarks of a real dog and pony show. The economy was sour, the trade war was going badly. China was stealing global dominance, and with it, global wealth. The economy looked like it might be gone for good, and Americans were looking for some payback. This matter might be just the ticket, one of those local affairs that blew up into a national affair that united the people behind a false cause because the real one was unreachable. Ryan saw that potential.

Five days after he received the summons he was in a small office downtown: hardwood paneling, expensive knick-knacks, a smooth man in a thousand dollar suit adjusting a camera across the desk from him. The smooth man was an attorney for the city, and he had exactly twenty questions for Ryan. He sat down at the desk, turned on the record button on the camera, and asked his questions; Ryan answered them in a steady, forthright manner. First off: Ryan was thirty years old. He was an attorney with a firm that handled intellectual property registration and disputes. Yes, his father was the famous judge, Joseph Rimaldi. Yes, he and his father had lunch once a week. Yes, they discussed matters relating to work, usually funny incidents that had occurred. Nothing confidential. No, Ryan was not aware of any wrongdoing on his father's part. No, they did not discuss financial matters. Yes, he was aware that his father was accused of taking bribes. Yes, Ryan had the same psychic gift as his father: they were both able to tell when someone was lying. On a scale of ten, he had the gift at a level seven, which was considered strong and reliable. No, he was not willing to turn his gift on his father for purposes of this inquiry. Yes, he understood the city might compel him to do so

anyway.

The entire interview took less than fifteen minutes. Ryan left with only one worry, that they'd turn him on his father. For the last six months that the rumors had been circulating, Ryan had pointedly failed to ask his dad about the allegations. He didn't want to know. Let the system do its thing, and he'd accept the outcome. Let the city attorney ask the questions, let another psychic do the testing. Leave Ryan out of it.

Weeks passed, and the city marshaled its witnesses and made statements to the press. In those days there were two tiers in the judiciary, regular judges and the aleph judges, the crème of the judiciary, those whose reputations for wisdom and fairness made them exemplars of the system at its best. Ryan's father was an aleph judge; he made the extra money, got the extra respect, and stood in a perpetual spotlight, which he seemed to love. Joseph Rimaldi was one of the three or four most-watched judges in San Diego, and the media spotlight fell hard on the case. The national media picked it up and ran with it, and the nation caught fire. An aleph judge accused of taking bribes took the imagination of the country. It was someone to blame for all America's woes, a failure at the top, and members of congress, perhaps seeing an opportunity to slip the heat for the faltering trade war to someone else, began commenting on the case.

The city attorney called Ryan in three more times for follow-up questions. They hinted he'd be called on to verify his father's statements. They made comments along this line to the media, and the media ate it up. "Father-Son War," howled the newspapers. "Son to Devour Dad?" asked the stone-faced anchors. "Lying Son Will Cover Dad's Ass," screamed the tabloids.

Opinion polls were conducted; no one believed Ryan would turn on his dad. The citizen on the street said he'd lie if forced to verify his own father. The city attorney stopped talking about it and found an independent psychic. A trial date was set. Ryan got time off from work and slipped in and out of the trial. Preliminaries took a week, then the city brought in the witnesses. There were more than fifty of them, and they testified for two weeks. Ryan was not there in an official capacity, but he verified the witnesses as they testified. They were telling the truth; they were sure Ryan's father was taking bribes.

Finally the day came when Joseph Rimaldi took the stand. The city attorney grilled him for hours, and he broke down and admitted he had been taking bribes for four years, some as large as half a million dollars. Ryan carefully avoided verifying his father, but the prosecution's psychic said Joseph Rimaldi was telling the truth. The trial came to a swift close after that, and the jury found Ryan's father guilty. The question was, what to do with him.

America was feeling angry, depressed and mean, and it was that mood that impelled Congress to push through emergency legislation to deal with this specific case. Washington's elites seemed to live on the news during those days, making statement after statement about cleaning up America's tarnished judiciary. More judges were accused of bribes, more trials opened, this sort of event became a growth industry. Congress demanded an example be set. Something unusual, something hard.

So they had Joseph Rimaldi hanged and then skinned. The hanging was public, the removal of Joseph Rimaldi's hide was private. America wanted blood, and the politicians gave it, and

America lowered its head and lapped it up. Congressman Anthony Speel, from Texas, commented that the skinning should have been public, while the judge was alive, but curiously, America didn't agree. The citizens were satisfied with the punishment as handed out. Some even questioned whether it went too far, but on the whole America didn't think so. On the whole, America was having a good time.

It was a correspondent from MSNBC who asked the sixty-four million dollar question, and that was, what was to happen to the judge's skin? So Congressman Speel came on the news and spelled it out for everyone. The judge's son, Ryan, was an attorney in San Diego. He would receive the skin. In fact, it would be a requirement, by law. The judge's hide was even now being made into a chair cover, which Ryan Rimaldi would be required to sit upon for the rest of his working life. Upon Ryan's death, the chair would go on display at the Smithsonian, as an example of firm justice in America.

"We take this failure of the judiciary seriously," said Congressman Speel. "We take the failure of this family seriously. There is every appearance that the judge's son is a sober and law-abiding attorney, and he will have every encouragement to remain that way. We in Congress do not feel the sins of the father devolve onto the son, but we do feel an example needs be made. That is what will happen in this matter. That is the will of the Congress."

And so it was done. Ryan Rimaldi was obliged to attend a public ceremony in Washington D.C. where he could barely keep from weeping as he received the chair that bore his father's skin as its cover. This chair was sent to San Diego, where he sits upon it even today, in his fiftieth year. He is a partner in his firm now, and successful, and married with three children. He has nightmares about the chair; it speaks to him in his dreams. It whispers its failures and its regrets to the judge's only son. It murmurs of misdirection and scapegoating. America moved on and found other corrupt judges, and they were imprisoned or hanged, but no more were skinned. That was Joseph Rimaldi's fate alone and the one that hangs over Ryan Rimaldi's head every day of what promises to be a long, long life.

The Jewel Tree

Once Upon a Time there lived a man named Ahmed ibn-Khalid, who was a spice merchant in Cairo. Ahmed loved two things in this life, his family and their special legacy, a jewel tree that had been given to his family a thousand years ago by a djinni. If you've never heard of a jewel tree before, it is exactly what it sounds like: a tree whose fruits are not lemons or pears or apricots but are citrines, rubies, opals, garnets and emeralds. Each day the gem tree ripens one rich gem, which falls off the tree onto the ground where it can be found by its owner. This gem can then be sold to provide a rich income for the owner of the gem tree. Ahmed's family had been harvesting their gem tree for a thousand years, and it had kept the family through thick and thin, through wastrels and spendthrifts and entrepreneurs and idiots.

In times long past there were many jewel trees in this world. If well tended they will last forever, never growing larger and never shrinking, a large shrub or a small tree depending on how you care to see the situation. But men get greedy, and they shake the gem trees trying to make many gems fall at once, and they break the stalks, and the gem trees fail. And thieves steal them but fail to care for them properly, for they are finicky in temperament and need a special diet of loam and fertilizers to grow properly. Camel dung works best, cow dung is next best. The jewel tree soaks up this fertilizer in great quantities, along with rare minerals and wood chips from certain aromatic trees, and it can be a challenge to keep the tree fed. Many gem trees have died of neglect, such as when the owner dies without passing along the secrets of the gem tree's fertilizers, so his children do not care for it properly. So over the centuries all the jewel trees have died but for a handful. Ahmed's tree is one of the last survivors.

Every year in Saudi Arabia there is a meeting of the owners of jewel trees; they all get together to discuss how their trees are doing and to show off favorite gems from their charges. Ahmed thinks of these people by their nationality: there is the Moroccan, the Syrian, the Saudi, the Yemeni. There is an Iranian and an Afghan and even an Indonesian woman who supposedly has a lush and vibrant jewel tree in Bali. Ahmed himself is the Egyptian, of course. That is all of them, just eight jewel trees left in the world of men, though the Saudi says he has three jewel trees on his estate. Ahmed doubts this claim but has never been public in his disbelief, as it seems rude. Three jewel trees for one owner would be a miracle beyond price, forget the value of their fruits. Of them all the most spectacular jewels by far come from the

jewel tree of the Moroccan, and Ahmed has traveled to Morocco twice just to see this marvel for himself. It is a big jewel tree, twice as big as Ahmed's own tree, and it gives three jewels each day. Truly, the gifts of the djinn are not evenly spread across the face of this world.

This year the meeting of the jewel tree owners was a shadowed affair, because there was a scholar, a Lebanese intellectual named Bashir Fadi, who was seeking out the remaining jewel trees. He was criss-crossing the Muslim world, armed with ancient books and many questions. He was going to the representatives of old families, asking about jewel trees. It was only a matter of time until this man found one of the eight owners of jewel trees, and then they would have to lie to him or count him among their number. So the jewel tree owners were discussing this man and what to do about him. The Syrian was all for having him killed; such were the politics of Syria, those days: very quick to the sword. The Saudi, who had clout because of his claim to own three jewel trees, said only:

"There is no need for killing this man. Simply claim that there are old stories in the family, but these are stories only with nothing in the world to back them up."

The Moroccan, whose voice carried the most weight in the group, said, "If he comes to me I will misdirect him to the Anwer family, who lost their tree three hundred years ago when a fool was head of their family. Let him seek his jewel trees among the lost."

The Indonesian smirked. "I'm of half a mind to show him the real thing, just to see the look on his face. And to let him know that my family will never relinquish their tree, come scholars or revolutions. Woe be to he who seeks that which is ours alone!"

There was universal agreement with this sentiment. All the jewel tree owners felt themselves to be stewards of the ancient legends who had been charged with a sacred duty that they took very, very seriously. Ahmed himself had three sons, who were now grown men, whom he had never shown the family jewel tree to, not once. He was waiting to see which one was wisest, and to that one he would pass the secret of the jewel tree. So it had been for a thousand years, and Ahmed ibn-Khalid was nothing if not traditional.

After the meeting of the jewel tree owners, Ahmed returned to his manor house in the south of Cairo, with its secret garden containing the jewel tree. In due time, the scholar Bashir Fadi showed up at his door. The man was tall but bone-thin and twisted in frame, as though he had been in a terrible automobile accident or something similar. He staggered as he walked, and he fixed on the world weary eyes that seemed to have seen much suffering. Ahmed was expecting him and had been thinking long and hard about what to do with him should the man darken his doors. In the end he decided he would play it by ear, depending on what the man said to him. So he opened his door to the Lebanese and invited him into his home with honeyed words. The scholar got straight to the point:

"Ahmed ibn-Khalid, my name is Bashir Fadi. I am a Lebanese scholar who has devoted ten years now to searching for the last jewel trees on this earth. I was told by an Upper Egyptian that your family used to have such a tree, but they didn't know if you still possessed it. Do you?"

"What a forceful question," Ahmed said, as his wife offered the man dates and honeyed tea. The scholar thanked her and helped himself and munched away as they talked. "I thought

jewel trees were the stuff of legend only," Ahmed continued.

"There is talk of them everywhere in the old books and scrolls," the Lebanese said. "Sultans speak of them, poets praise them, pashas claimed to have owned them. Sheiks spent lifetimes trying to get the djinn to give a jewel tree to their families. In the Middle Ages there were hundreds of them spread throughout the Arab world, and beyond. Muslims everywhere knew of these marvels, and the families that kept them were revered. I have spoken with more than a hundred family heads whose families supposedly once kept these miracles, but all say their secret has been lost to time. No one claims to know where there are such trees, today."

"As I can well imagine. The stuff of stories, I think, not the physical world."

"Ah, you'd be surprised," said the Lebanese. "Some families have actually kept the remains of their jewel trees in their gardens, long after they have died. I have had these remains analyzed in laboratories, and they are of a species apart. Nothing like them exists anywhere else. So, not just legend, but the stuff of truth!"

Ahmed sucked down a couple of dates and took a sip of tea. He wanted to know this man's character before deciding whether or not to trust him with sacred information. Maybe this Lebanese was a harbinger of positive change, a herald of a coming time when the jewel trees would again be seen in this world, revered and known to all. It was sad to Ahmed that there were only eight jewel owners left of all the hundreds; he hoped there would be a way to see to the increase of the trees once more. So he said,

"Whatever for are you seeking these things out? Miracles and wonders, yes, but what would you do if you found one? Steal it from its owner?"

"I want only to gaze upon such a thing before I die," said Bashir Fadi. "I am fifty years old, and I have been seeking out the jewel trees for over a decade now. It is my private obsession. The university thinks it is a funny quirk and doesn't mind my research so long as I pay for it myself. I don't think it would be wise to publish such a find, though, because of the fame it would bring the owner of such a tree. Can you imagine the caliber of criminal who would be attracted to such a marvel? Not to mention the grasping politicians and scheming relatives of the owners. Publishing such a find would bring untold miseries upon the owners."

"You are a man of rare caliber," said Ahmed. "But tell me, if you don't publish your find, what will you do with it? What is the point to such a long search, if not to make it known to the world?"

"It would be known to me, alone," said the scholar. He shifted in his chair; his twisted body seemed uncomfortable no matter how much he moved about. "I can easily keep a secret of such magnitude."

"If there were once many gem trees and are now only a few left, what would it take to create many again? Cuttings?"

"No, such has been tried in the past. It's all in the old books. Jewel trees don't give up seeds like normal trees, only gems. They cannot be propagated through cuttings, either. They cannot reproduce here in the world of men, at all. They reproduce in the world of djinn and are gifted to men. But the djinn have given up on the human race as a bunch of fools, so no more gem trees are given to us. We did it to ourselves, Ahmed ibn-Khalid, by being poor stewards of the

bounty of the djinn." His voice as he said this was heavy with sorrow.

"So how do we convince the djinn that we have become good stewards, once more?" muttered Ahmed. "How indeed would we contact them at all?" When he said this Ahmed was thinking of the Saudi, with his three jewel trees. Could he, Ahmed ibn-Khalid, become the owner of three jewel trees? Four? *Six*?

The scholar looked astonished at these questions. "Why, the djinn are all around us, all the time, if the stories are true," he said. "They are constantly weighing us to see if we are worthy of their largess. I came across a family in Iraq where the mother was infertile, and she begged for help from the djinn, and *voila*, she became pregnant three times and bore three healthy children. I spoke with her doctor who knew her from the time she was infertile, and the doctor swore this young mother had a rotten womb. Then suddenly she was pregnant, and there were her children, pretty as pie! Don't doubt the djinn, Ahmed ibn-Khalid. Doubt men, instead."

"So you think we should just beg the djinn for a jewel tree, and see what happens?"

"I think there are still some jewel trees left in this world, so why would they give us more? You can try asking the djinn nicely, I suppose, but you know what they say: the djinn like to see miracles and marvels. Show them you are serious, and they will not fail to be impressed."

"Why haven't you tried this, if you believe it is the way to proceed?"

"I have, but I must admit my faith in the djinn is not what it could be. You must be a believer, and I believe in science, not djinn. A weakness in my character, no doubt."

So far this conversation was proceeding nicely enough, but Ahmed had a hard time believing this man would simply gaze upon a living jewel tree and not give away its secret to others. After such a long search, how could he not be burning with the desire to publish such a finding? It would be the proof of all his research, the summation of his personal obsession. Against this Ahmed weighed this truth: sometimes to move ahead in life one had to take risks. Certainly this was true in the spice trade, when one had to decide what spices to stock for that year and in what quantities and had to see to suppliers and distributors well in advance. Ahmed suspected that if he wanted to see the number of jewel trees in the world swell once more, he was going to have to take some risks. Certainly he couldn't stay hunkered down for all his life along with the other jewel tree owners, clinging desperately to their trees, trying to keep them alive. The jewel tree owners had been doing that for a thousand years, and they were losing the struggle. Every century saw fewer jewel trees, and that was a fact.

So Ahmed decided to take a chance, but a cautious chance. He said to the Lebanese:

"I may know of someone who can help you, but I cannot simply trust you without checking up on you first. You are going to put me in touch with your university, and I will see that you are who you say you are. Then we'll talk again."

"Gladly," said the scholar. He gave Ahmed the name of his university, and his department, and let Ahmed take a photo of him with a brand-new digital camera, and then Bashir Fadi went back to his hotel, to wait.

Ahmed went to his computer and sent an email to the scholar's university, along with the photo of Bashir Fadi, and in a few days the head of Bashir's department got back to him, confirming the man's identity. So far, so good. Now Ahmed looked up Bashir Fadi on Google

and found half a dozen papers the man had written about jewel trees, including one very interesting paper where he claimed he would not reveal the owners of a living jewel tree even if he found them, for fear of the ruin the publicity would bring. This paper was eight years old, and Ahmed was beginning to believe Bashir was sincere about maintaining the secret of the jewel trees.

During these three or four days since Bashir Fadi came to visit him, Ahmed was begging the djinn for another jewel tree for his garden.

"I have been a good steward for the tree I already possess, have I not?" he said to the invisible djinn of his household. "A thousand years, we have been the safe-guardians of this tree, that is no light responsibility. My sons are intelligent men, and wise. We can handle more jewel trees. A whole little garden of them, would be best. Trust in us, me and my sons and my wife, and allow us to increase our number of trees, before they all wither away!"

The djinn, if they were listening, did not say anything to Ahmed, nor did they let their will be known. No wonder the scholar didn't believe in the djinn, if they didn't answer one's prayers in a timely manner. Idly Ahmed thought about the infertile Iraqi woman who had children due to the djinn, wondering how long she had to beg for her babies before they were granted. Years, most likely. Years of supplicating before the invisible world. Not just three or four days. Ahmed felt annoyed. Didn't it count for anything, his family's good caretaking of their jewel tree? Surely that was proof they were competent guardians. Only a handful of other families in the entire world could boast such a tradition. Did he have to start over from nothing, in his begging to the djinn?

Once Ahmed got the information he wanted about Bashir Fadi, he called the scholar at his hotel and invited him back to his home. It was time, Ahmed felt, to take a risk, but a calculated risk. Before the scholar came Ahmed went into his bedroom and took a small pistol from the nightstand there. It was for home defense, and if it came down to it, he would use it to defend his jewel tree. Bashir arrived in about an hour, and Ahmed ushered him in.

"Your search has come to an end," Ahmed said to the twisted man, as they were served dates and honeyed milk by Ahmed's wife.

"Thanks be to God, who alone sees all paths," said Bashir. "You know someone who has a jewel tree? I could sense you were no ordinary spice merchant. A cut above."

"Better than that, there is such a tree here, on this property," said Ahmed, carefully. He suddenly remembered what the Indonesian woman said about showing Bashir her tree, just to see the look on his face.

Bashir stared at Ahmed in amazement. "What a well-kept secret that would be," he said. "The Upper Egyptian who recommended you to me said your family had possessed such a tree four hundred years ago, but they didn't know if you still had it. May I see it?"

Ahmed led the scholar through his manor to a thick, locked door that led out into a small garden. Ahmed's own sons knew this garden to be their father's private place of respite, and they were not allowed to go here. Ahmed's own wife only went there a few times a year, just to see the jewel tree. It was Ahmed who fertilized and watered and cared for the tree, and who harvested its jewels and sold them several times each year.

It was mid-morning when Ahmed showed Bashir to his garden, and the sun was shining down with full autumn splendor. The jewel tree gleamed like a thousand tiny suns as its maturing gemstones caught the light on their facets and reflected it in all directions.

"It is as I imagined," said Bashir. "Look at the little developing jewels on the tree, there must be ten thousand ripening gems on this plant. Only the djinn could come up with such a curiosity, to be sure."

Ahmed started to say something and was stunned when Bashir seized an immature gemstone and ripped it off the tree. He felt a sudden rush of blood to the head—vertigo, spinning and nausea.

"What are you doing?" he cried as Bashir stuffed the little gem into his mouth. The scholar seized another gemstone and ripped it off the tree and swallowed it, as well. Then the man's hands were moving fast, fast, tearing away ripening gemstones and stuffing them into his mouth.

"Criminal!" shouted Ahmed, rushing the man.

Suddenly Bashir stood up tall and proud and strong. There was no longer any sign of his twisted limbs or broken body, all the damage was somehow healed. Bashir slammed Ahmed across the chest, and Ahmed flew back into a wall, hard. Bashir continued devouring the gemstones, one after the next.

"I should tell you my story," he said between swallows. "You see, in my family all the children are born crippled. Some have broken bodies, some have broken minds. This is not a genetic disorder, Ahmed; that's what we thought it was, but the tests all came back negative. Do you understand? There were old whispered legends in my family, and where science failed they stepped in."

Ahmed moaned and tried to get up, but he could not. He suspected he had bruised ribs, or worse. Take a risk on a stranger, and look what happened! There would be no more jewel trees in the world, with crazy men eating all their gems!

"The stories have been passed down for a thousand years, in my family," Bashir continued. "We were born of djinn-kind; a woman from my family slept with a djinni and bore the first of our twisted ancestors. To be healed of our afflictions we have to consume something from the djinn world. Anything wondrous would do: a magic apple, enchanted apricots, ensorcelled sand, anything that has been touched by the djinn. My family has been wandering the earth for a millennium, devouring jewel trees and other mystical delights, but with each generation it gets harder to find something magical to consume. The djinn have forsaken mankind, and my family will be permanent cripples if we cannot find more djinn artifacts to devour. Your jewel tree is doomed, I'm afraid. One of my ancestors tore up another one six hundred years ago, and they can't take this kind of abuse; they wither and die. So there will be nothing here for my descendents to devour. Fate has been cruel to the Fadis, but for me there is this way out..."

Ahmed had heard enough. Bashir had his back to him now, and Ahmed slipped the gun out of his robe and pointed it at him. His ribs shot pain, and Ahmed gritted his teeth. The scholar was still stripping the jewel tree of fruits and stuffing them into his mouth. Ahmed sighted in and squeezed the trigger twice, and the bullets took Bashir in the back of the head.

The gun didn't sound like a gun, it sounded like a firecracker going off. Ahmed's house wasn't close to any others, it was surrounded by a little land, and he hoped the gunshots would go unnoticed by anyone else in the neighborhood.

Ahmed slowly got up and searched the body and took away a couple of notebooks detailing the scholar's travels, which he burned. Bashir's identification, his papers, his passport: all burned. Ahmed told his wife what had happened, and that redoubtable woman took it all in stride. She even handed Ahmed the saw and the cleaver he needed to chop up the body for disposal. Ahmed took a weekend and drove the remains all the way up to Alexandria and put them in a landfill there, where they would never be found.

The jewel tree grew sickly and withered, as Bashir said it would, but it didn't die. Its gems were smaller, and not as precious, and were no longer worth as much money, but they still bloomed on Ahmed's tree. Ahmed thought about Bashir's story about his crippled family being born to the djinn-folk and gave thanks to God that his own family was blessed by the djinn and not cursed by them.

The next year rolled around, and Ahmed went to the meeting of the jewel tree owners, and there he told the story of Bashir Fadi of the twisted body and grasping hands. The others were spellbound as Ahmed described the attack on his jewel tree and how he resolved the matter. Everyone agreed he had done the right thing. The Indonesian woman was clearly shaken by what happened and said,

"I don't have a pistol at hand in my house, but I'm getting one now. Born of the djinn, and living off djinn-miracles! What a monster, and after our precious trees!"

"And nearly killed mine," Ahmed confirmed.

After the meeting of the jewel tree owners was over Ahmed returned home to Cairo, where he tended his maimed little tree with tender care. He was resigned to getting fewer gems than in the past, and of lesser quality. He trusted the wrong man, and this was his punishment; it was all in the hands of God. So it was that Ahmed ibn-Khalid came to his fiftieth birthday in life: more experienced and a little wiser, getting ready to choose one of his sons to take his place. And through it all he continued to mutter prayers to the djinn, asking them to increase the number of jewel trees in this world, prayers which he hoped would be answered someday...

The Man Who Came to Kill the Children

It all began at Jerrod Appleton's house, on Maple Lane in San Francisco, on a drizzly September morning a couple of years back. Jerrod was sixty-six years old then, one year retired, and had just come in from his morning walk. So he was parked on an easy chair in his living room, relaxed and resting, when he heard the angry voice passing by underneath his bay window. He heard it because the bay windows were open about two inches. Neighborhood watch said this was foolish, it let the criminals in, but Jerrod had had his windows cracked for twenty years without incident, and he wasn't going to close them now, drizzle or no. So he heard the voice muttering angrily as someone passed by. It was saying:

"Fucking kids. Yelling, screaming, all hours. Little ones are the worst. Never shut up, those little ones. Get what's coming to them. I know where they are, all day. Someone ought to blast the little fuckers." It was a one-off, just angry cursing, but there was an edge to it that piqued Jerrod's professional instincts. Jerrod Appleton, in his working life, had been a psychic around level six on the ten-level scale, a "verifier" for the city of San Francisco's Health and Human Services. His psychic gift ran to telling lies from the truth. He could listen to someone talk and know when they were lying, what they were lying about, and whether they were lying to themselves as well as him. These days psychics are a dime a dozen, thanks to the genetic research and the gifts it's unlocked, but level six is still notable, and Jerrod had had a good career. Plenty of people wanted to rip off Health and Human Services, and his job had been to flush them out.

So, as this angry man went by his window Jerrod turned on his gift to see if this man was really going to do something or was just making noise. But Jerrod was tired from his walk, and the comments only took a few seconds, and by the time his gift was on, the man was already gone, and Jerrod got nothing.

Now he was aroused, and he got up and went to the bay window. The man had already passed. Jerrod's house was near the end of the block, and apparently the passerby had turned the corner. Jerrod had been too slow to catch a glimpse. He returned to the easy chair and sat down, but he was fidgety and vaguely upset. It was that edge to the man's voice that had him going, that hard angry edge. The comment about blasting the little fuckers. You couldn't open a newspaper anymore without a school shooting jumping out at you. High school kids and

middle kids killing each other, whack jobs breaking into elementary schools and laying waste. It was all in the papers. Not only in America, but all around the world, this stuff happened. France, Germany, England, Spain, Italy, Ireland, Africa, Iran. Everywhere.

Jerrod wished he had verified the man, got to him faster, separated signal from noise quicker. He closed his eyes but couldn't rest.

"Little ones are the worst. Someone ought to blast the little fuckers."

There was an elementary school not three blocks down the street from Jerrod's house, it was a small school as schools went but had an outdoor basketball court and an asphalt playground. Jerrod felt vaguely sorry for the kids, having to play on asphalt instead of grass, but he supposed the school district didn't want to spend money on a groundskeeper for a small school. So they paved the schoolyard, and the kids could play on that.

Jerrod didn't have children, himself. He had been a singleton his whole life, happily married to his career, like so many other San Francisco singletons he was friends with. But his neighborhood had some kids around, little ones and intermediate ones and a couple of teens, and children had always been there on the periphery of his life, in one capacity or another. He had a goddaughter who was now in her thirties and had young children of her own, and they lived across the city, and he visited them about once a month.

Jerrod walked around the lower floor of his house, upset and worried, thinking about the elementary school and the angry man. He finally got on the phone to Peter Whikker, a friend of his who had taken early retirement and now played golf. Peter was home this morning, though, and he picked up the phone with a cheerful,

"Yello."

"Peter. Something just happened, something upsetting. Tell me if I worry too much." And he told his friend about the angry man, and the elementary school, and the school shootings. Peter heard him out and said,

"No such thing as being too safe, these days. Call the cops, tell them what you've got. They can run extra patrols past the school, alert the administrators to keep an eye out. Seems like a bit much, for some angry comments, but how can you be too safe with eight year olds?"

They talked a little longer, about golf and Peter's lousy score and how the golf courses were all crooks and in with organized crime and other topics that kept Peter amused, and then Jerrod hung up and called the cops. It was a desultory call. The cops took his information and thanked him for it, but he could tell this was priority number ten thousand. He tossed in the fact that he was a verifier level six, and the cop of course asked if Jerrod had verified the angry man, and he was forced to admit he didn't get the chance.

"Maybe you can run some extra patrols around the school, scare this guy off if he gets squirrely," Jerrod said hopefully.

"I'll pass it on up, see what happens," the cop said in a bored tone. Jerrod began to worry all over again. He thanked the cop and hung up. He was on a land line, probably the last land line in San Francisco; it was a marvel the phone company even continued to offer land lines anymore. After the big quake in '26, land line service was out for weeks, but cell phone service was fine. Everyone in the city who hadn't committed to a cell phone got one after that, and use

of land lines plummeted. It was all in the papers. Everything was in the papers.

Jerrod sat on his anxiety all day. Little kids across the street came out to play and whooped and hollered, threw a toy airplane back and forth, ran into the street too often for Jerrod's tastes and got called back by their mother on the front porch, who scolded them. Jerrod heard the whole thing. These were four years old, too young yet for school, a pair of twins named Michael and Scott. Jerrod had frowned himself at the amount of noise these two were able to make some days, but he was glad they were in the neighborhood. Kids added life to a place, they brought energy and enthusiasm. He thought about the angry man and blasting the little fuckers and wasn't sure why he couldn't let it go. People made angry comments all the time. He did it himself.

But not this angry. Not this edgy. He'd been told the verifier's gift was always on, even when he was not actively deploying it, though the law didn't recognize this. You were still getting input, on a subconscious level. He wondered if that's what he got from the angry man, subconscious input. Criminal intent. That was the sub-shading of his gift, spotting criminal intent. It's why he worked for the government, looking for people trying to get on services who weren't supposed to be getting services. This part of his gift was mostly below the radar; he could barely bring it up to the conscious level, for the tests. With the government, the tests are everything. You need your gifts validated if you expect to get paid for them. They put him down as a level one verifier of criminal intent, barely a gift at all, but enough to get a bonus in his paycheck. A little kicker for forty years.

So did he verify the angry man, on a subconscious level? Verify criminal intent? The law said, if your gift wasn't 'on' verification didn't count. You were trained to turn it on, turn it off, put it on the record. Having it on the record was everything, in his field of endeavor. They didn't pay you for hazy impressions garnered when your gift was off. Jerrod had always been a law-abiding citizen, had always stayed between the lines. He held liars and criminals in contempt, as people who chose to cheat to get by. The system allowed you to do just about anything legally, if you tried a little. No need to cheat.

The twins got bored with their toy airplane and went back inside their house, their mother Rachel right behind them, and Jerrod sat with his anxiety for several more hours. Friends called to see what he was up to, and he mentioned the angry man to a few more people.

"Well, if you called the cops and told them, what more can you do?" said Angelica, a social worker friend of his who was sixty-four and still working.

"Yeah, I know," Jerrod said. "But it's unsatisfying. I worry about the kids. This guy was really hacked off."

"Did you verify him?"

"Not consciously."

"Then you didn't verify him," she said decisively. Angelica had empathy level eight. He wondered sometimes how people with that much empathy kept from melting into a little puddle of fellow-feeling, but she'd been commended more times than he could count and was a senior social worker for the city of San Francisco.

"Maybe I got him subconsciously," Jerrod said, and Angelica snorted.

“Don’t go there.”

Angelica’s lunch break ended, and she had to go, and Jerrod went back to worrying. Too edgy. Too angry. The worries circled around in his head and his gut, and he wandered around his house for a couple of hours. Criminal intent. Blasting the little fuckers.

At three sixteen in the afternoon he started calling gun stores. These were down the peninsula; San Francisco didn’t allow guns to be bought and sold within city limits. You had to have a special permit to own them, though these were quick and easy to get if your record was clean. Jerrod hadn’t handled a firearm in forty years, since he did three years service in the Army. He wasn’t sure he remembered anything beyond the basics, but he was sure it would all come back to him, with a little practice. By four fifty-five he had bought a pistol, a nine millimeter, to be picked up the next day. Computer systems just got faster and faster, and the background check took less than an hour. He wasn’t sure exactly what he was going to do with a pistol, but he’d already paid for it, so it was his.

Jerrod spent a restless night; it had been years since he had slept so badly. He wished he had the pistol right now, right next to his bed. There was a sense of urgency he couldn’t shake. It was the elementary school down the street, he was certain of it. Certain the angry man was going to end up there. Certain there was going to be an incident, something lethal.

The next day Jerrod skipped his morning walk and drove down the peninsula to the gun store and picked up his pistol. He’d never owned a gun before, and this one was a heavy, matte black number with a plastic pistol grip and a big muzzle. He talked ammo with the clerk for a while and ended up buying soft-tipped shells that mushroomed on impact. They weren’t good for punching through body armor, but they wouldn’t penetrate walls, either, if he missed. He asked about shooting ranges nearby, and the clerk pointed him to a few. Jerrod went to one of these next. He bought six boxes of bullets, three hundred shells, and spent the next two hours shooting. The first few times were surprising; the pistol had a kick to it that startled him, and the guy running the range laughed at the look on his face.

“You think that’s a kick, try a fifty caliber,” he said. “Just line up your sights on the center of the target and squeeze. Don’t pull too fast, or you’ll jerk. Firm, steady pressure. Try it.”

Jerrod followed the advice and shot wild for a dozen shots. The guy showed him how to hold the pistol, how to sight it, how to squeeze off the shots. In the Army Jerrod had had a rifle, not a pistol; he’d never shot a pistol before. He’d never been that much into guns, even in his military days. It was just a tool of the job, he never got into them beyond that.

Jerrod eventually began hitting the target, at fifty feet away. By the end of the three hundred bullets he was hitting more often than not. He hoped if he had to use this thing, his target would be closer than fifty feet. He still wasn’t sure what he was going to do with a pistol. An idea was taking shape in his mind, but it was still unformed and incomplete. Now he thought maybe he should have gotten a taser, but if the guy showed up with thick clothing, he was screwed. And for this September in San Francisco, thick clothing was the order of the day. Global warming went back and forth, cold autumns and hot autumns, and this year was a chilly one.

Jerrod finished on the range and took his weapon back to San Francisco. He had a permit

for it, but the permit didn't allow concealed carry. It still took weeks to get the concealed carry permit. He was only cleared for ownership for home defense. So for the first significant time in his long life, Jerrod Appleton was going to break the law.

He went out and took his walk, anxiety pushing him to move slowly past the elementary school. It was a small school, with its front doors locked during business hours. There was a security guard with a taser who walked the perimeter of the grounds during recess and went back inside during class. Jerrod had walked past the school a thousand times over the years and knew its routines without even thinking about it. He was walking the same route, in the same direction he always walked, but today it was different, because he was carrying the pistol in his coat. He'd selected it for its small size and concealability, and it didn't seem to weigh a thing as he toted it along. It was loaded with sixteen rounds, which should be enough to get the job done. If the job needed doing. If he wasn't imagining things.

Across from the school on one side was a small park where he sometimes sat and watched people play with their kids or their dogs. Today was a chilly day, and there were only a few other people, twenty-somethings playing Frisbee on the grass. There was a bench that faced the school, and Jerrod sat there and stayed put for the next few hours. He watched the kids come out for recess, tear-assing around for twenty minutes and then going back inside. God, to have that kind of energy! In the early afternoon the school let out, and all the kids were picked up by their mothers or walked home in groups. Jerrod waited until the school grounds were empty and then got up and went home. For this one day, mission accomplished.

The next day Jerrod went back to the school just before it opened and sat there the whole day. His rear end got sore, and sometimes he got up and stretched or even walked around the park. He didn't like his attention to be off the school for even a minute. He worried that the security guard was going to notice him, but if he did he made nothing of it. No one came to talk to Jerrod, no cops or anything. The pistol in Jerrod's coat sometimes seemed red-hot, practically screaming for attention. Couldn't everyone see he was carrying a pistol?

Peter called Jerrod's cell phone, and Jerrod told him he was at the park.

"What are you doing there?" Peter said. "It's not your walk time, is it? You get a late start today, or what?"

"No, just watching the kids at the elementary school. To have that kind of energy!"

Peter was quiet for a moment. "Oh, shit," he said. "I know this one: 'why didn't I find a nice girl and settle down and have kids.' Is that it?"

Jerrod could hardly tell his friend what he was really doing, and he said, "A little of that."

"Don't let that get settled in, Jerrod. You can have regrets like that for years. When Jeanne and I broke up, back in my forties, I knew my best chance at a family was walking out the door. That plagued me for six, seven years. Don't let that get hold of you. Damned nuisance."

"Right now I'm just watching someone play with their dog," Jerrod lied. Actually he was watching the kids go back into the school after recess. The security guard was walking behind them, keeping an eye on everything. Jerrod felt a little better to see how alert the guard was.

That's two of us, he thought. The kids are that much safer.

"Dogs are good," said Peter, who had a handsome German Shepherd named Max. Jerrod

didn't believe in pets, there was something about keeping animals captive that disheartened him. Max was a very well-behaved dog, and Jerrod liked him, but he always wanted to let the pets go free. He knew, of course, that most of them would die without someone to feed them, so the whole thing was impossible. He wanted it anyway.

Then Peter had to go, he was taking off for an afternoon round of golf, and Jerrod said his goodbyes. The day went on, and school let out, and Jerrod watched the kids take off with their mothers or in their little groups. He was struck by how sad this was, a man his age sitting watching the children all day, waiting for an angry man to show up with a weapon. How he was betting on negativity and human evil.

Nothing to be done for it, though. It was better he spend a few weeks doing this and be there if something happened, than not.

The next day was Friday, and he returned to the park to watch the children, but nothing happened. That weekend he went out with his goddaughter for dinner and found he was unable to tell her what he'd been up to. It was a strange dinner, full of holes and omissions, and he didn't like the feeling of keeping secrets from his loved ones.

Angelica called on Saturday to see if he was still having worries about the angry man, and he said he wasn't worried anymore, which was another lie.

"Handed that off to the cops, it's their problem now," he said. In truth he noticed occasional patrols going past the school, but not what he'd call a beefed-up presence. Business as usual.

"You can only do so much," said Angelica. "You have to have boundaries."

"I guess it's hard not to worry a little," Jerrod weaseled. "That guy was really angry."

"Take my word for it: if you can't do anything, it's not worth worrying. Call the cops, ask if they're sending by extra patrols. Follow up, if you're still worried."

"Might do that. Seems like a lot of trouble, though."

"Then you're not that worried. Let it go!" Their talk turned to other matters, and Jerrod didn't have to lie anymore, for which he was grateful. He didn't know how long he could keep up this double life. *A few weeks*, he thought. *Don't know why I think this, but it'll all be over in a few weeks.* It was the angry man's energy, he decided, the amount of energy in his comments. Enough to carry him a couple of weeks, Jerrod thought, not longer than that.

On Monday he returned to the park facing the school, and on Tuesday, and that whole week. He was really sweating now that the security guard was going to notice him, so he changed his clothes every day and wore a different jacket each time he went. A hat too, sometimes. He took breaks when the kids were inside, and walked around the park, stretching his legs and his gluteus maximus. There were more calls on his cell phone, from Peter, but Jerrod was able to explain himself as walking through the park.

"I always catch you in that park, these days. You're moping, aren't you?"

"A little," Jerrod said. "But not much. You just happen to get me here, lately."

"Not in the afternoon. You walking in the afternoon now, too?"

"My doctor wants me to get plenty of exercise," Jerrod said. He was feeling tired of lies,

tired of keeping it all straight in his head. "He's always after me to keep my heart pumping."

"Yeah, so's mine. Doctors."

Then it was back to watching, back to being the second guard on the school, back to hanging out in the park. Another weekend came, and Jerrod found himself tense and nervous. He didn't have plans this weekend, so he went to the shooting range and blew through two hundred more bullets. His aim improved. He tried out the fifty-foot targets and the twenty-five foot targets and get better at both of them.

It was Wednesday of the following week when everything happened. Jerrod was sitting on the park bench in an old coat on a very chilly October day, freezing his butt off, when a man pulled up and parked outside the school in an old car. Jerrod felt immediately alert. People came to the school from time to time, to deliver food to the cafeteria and to take away the trash. People he assumed were parents came by sometimes and were met at the front doors by school staff. But there were no staffers at the door now, as this man got out of his car. There weren't many visitors to the school each day, eight or ten maybe, and most of them, like the trash men and the food delivery people, were on a schedule that Jerrod was familiar with. So he perked up as the man got out of his car and went around to the trunk and looked around. Then he opened the trunk and pulled something out of it, something sleek and metal. It was a rifle, an assault rifle in matte black like Jerrod's pistol.

Jesus Christ. It was show time. There was no one else on the street right now. Jerrod looked at the man's slow, deliberate movements. The man took up his rifle and a bag of some kind and closed his trunk and started toward the school. It wasn't fifty feet for him to go, and Jerrod got up and started running. He had three hundred feet to go. Only thing in Jerrod's favor was that the man's back was to him.

Jerrod moved across the park, looked both ways, flew across Maple Lane. The man, in dark blue jeans and a plaid jacket, was doing something to the front doors of the school. Whatever it was, it didn't take very long. As Jerrod gained the sidewalk in front of the school, the man took up the assault rifle in his hands and then opened the door. He sighted down the barrel of the rifle and then fired off a single shot with a loud *crack*; Jerrod was fifty feet away and closing, and he saw the brass casing fly away from the rifle. He didn't need to be told that the security guard, who would be pacing the halls of the school, had just been shot.

Jerrod reached inside his coat and pulled the pistol out, caught the weight of it, pointed it at the shooter. There wasn't a thought in his head, just the shooter and himself and the school full of kids. Jerrod was thirty feet from the shooter, he was well within range, and now the shooter stepped into the doorway as though about to disappear into the school.

"Hey, fuckface!" Jerrod shouted, pulling up short there on the sidewalk and aiming the pistol. His hand was shaking, the business end of the pistol was moving all over the place. Jerrod ran up another six or eight feet on the shooter, who was looking startled and then pulled the rifle out of the doorway and aimed it at him.

The world turned blurry at the edges, all Jerrod could see was the man's red plaid jacket and the long barrel of the assault rifle aimed at him. He breathed in and squeezed off a shot, and up and to the man's right there was a cloud of dust from the school building, which was

made of cement. The man also squeezed off a shot; something whined past Jerrod's head, and he thought, *I have to bring this to a close fast, all these bullets flying around are going to kill someone—* and he squeezed off a second shot.

The shooter ducked his head as the second bullet struck the cement school just to his left. He too squeezed off a second shot, and Jerrod felt something bite into his left side. A cold numbness erupted in his flesh, and he knew the next hit would kill him. He pointed the pistol with his suddenly steady hand and aimed it center of the man's body and squeezed the trigger.

The pistol kicked in his hand, and flame belched out the muzzle, and the man flew backward as the bullet mushroomed in his chest and nailed him with a couple thousand pounds of stopping power. He dropped the assault rifle. Jerrod ran up on him and kicked the rifle away, looked the man over for the back-up pistol that the papers said is always there.

The man was laying on his side, gasping, a patch of blood spreading over his heart. Jerrod dropped to one knee and knocked the man over onto his belly and there it was, a nine millimeter pistol stuck in his back pocket. Jerrod pulled it out and hurled it aside with the rifle. He kept his pistol on the fallen shooter as he frisked the man's jacket and found a second pistol, a steel forty-five, in one of the pockets of the jacket. He pulled this out and tossed it with the other one.

"What's your problem, fuckface?" he snarled at the fallen shooter. The man's eyes were glazed, his breathing ragged and weak. Jerrod saw he had hit the man right next to the heart. If he survived, it would be a miracle.

Jerrod hadn't planned for any of this. Right now people would be phoning 9-1-1 about the shots, and when the cops arrived they'd come loaded for bear. He stepped over the fallen man and entered the school, walked down the hall with his pistol in hand. As he walked he put his weapon back in his coat and looked at the doors, all of which were closed. At the far end of the hall was the security guard, fallen with half his head blown off. Jerrod went past him to a door with black letters that read "principal." He knocked on the door and called out, "All clear. Call the cops and an ambulance, the shooter is down."

Jerrod would have said this was the end of the matter, but in point of fact the death of the shooter was only the beginning of the media storm and the troubles with the cops and the problems with his friends and his community at large. The cops came heavy and surrounded the school, and two of them came into the principal's office where Jerrod was waiting with the principal, and hauled Jerrod away in handcuffs. They charged him with pre-meditated murder and carrying a concealed weapon without a permit and held tense press conferences where he was described as 'reckless' and 'out of control' and threatened with all sorts of legal mayhem.

The media, for their part, loved the story. CNN played up the fact that Jerrod was an old soldier, and wasn't he doing what soldiers are supposed to do, which was to protect society? The tabloids seized on the 'creepy old man' angle, his sitting in the park day after day with an illegally carried weapon, spying on the school and waiting for a potential shooter to arrive. "It's hard to tell the shooters apart," said one tabloid. "One was an angry man who hated children, one was a lawbreaker hoping to kill the other one on the stairs of the school. Which one do you

root for?"

Fox couldn't get enough of the fact that Jerrod had told his friends about the angry man and then called the cops and informed them, and they hadn't increased patrols past the school. "If the police won't protect our children, isn't it up to us to do so?" said the Fox reporter. "And isn't that what Jerrod Appleton did? What more can a society ask of its citizens than they step up to fill the gaps left by the police?"

The San Francisco police made a terse statement to the effect that they received dozens of calls a day with credible threats and that they could not possibly cover them all, and Mr. Appleton's call was vague to the point of worthless. There was nothing more they could have done.

The shooter was identified as one Michael Fassbinder, a locksmith who lived on the street behind Jerrod and must have been taking a walk the day he popped off with his angry comments. In addition to the assault rifle, which had been modified for full-auto action, and the two pistols, he was carrying four more clips of ammunition for the rifle and eight clips for the pistols. It was enough to kill more than two hundred kids, at one shot per kid. Neighbors were interviewed, friends were interviewed; everyone professed shock and confusion.

Jerrod saw all this from his hospital bed, on the tv in the ward. The shooter had nailed him in the left side, just puncturing the skin and flesh underneath, which was why Jerrod hadn't spun around when he was shot. The bullet had only grazed him. His wound required dressing and some stitches, but he was released back to police custody after a day in the hospital for observation. He spent a few days under lockup while his attorney worked to secure his release on bail. After this it was media time, and he felt obliged to give some interviews to the press, with his attorney on hand for good advice.

After several months of back and forth, opinion went with Jerrod, and the charges against him were reduced to carrying a concealed weapon without a permit and reckless endangerment of the public, for which he was obliged to pay a stiff fine and do some public service. The murder charges were dropped, and the media made him a qualified hero who had undoubtedly prevented a massacre. Jerrod made sure the subject of subconscious verification came up more than once, and this topic was punted in the major media and got serious attention from the psychic licensing agencies, as he felt it should.

The media storm lasted about a year, but it took longer to win his friends back. Peter and Angelica both felt he should have told them what he was up to, and their lives were turned upside down as the media hounded them for interviews, and they gave Jerrod serious grief for not trusting them. Jerrod's community, his little neighborhood on Maple Lane, wasn't much more understanding. They didn't like the idea of his having guns around the neighborhood kids, or skulking around the park spying on the school, because this set precedents for others to do the same.

For the next few months the cops sent extra patrols past the school, where reporters were often camped out recording the children at play and taking still footage of the school's locked doors or the pock marks where Jerrod's bullets had dug divots in the cement. So Jerrod was forced to win back his people, one by one, until his life resumed more or less as normal on

Maple Lane. The hole in his side healed up, his friends and neighbors returned to him, and Jerrod Appleton, psychic verifier level six, had the sad satisfaction of having done something useful with the first time he'd ever seriously broken the law.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randal Doering has a B.A. in creative writing from San Francisco State University and an M.A. in anthropology from Cal State East Bay. During his masters degree he studied the Maya Indians to the fullest extent his degree program would allow. He has strong interests in the cultures of the Middle East and in the Maya Indians of Central America, which show up in his fiction rather often. Most of his stories are fantasies, though he does a smattering of science fiction. He has published nearly twenty short stories in the small press and semi-pro magazines and has available nearly a dozen novel-length works on Amazon.com.

Randal has a website at <http://www.randaldoering.com>. There you can download two free novels and a selection of short stories as samplers for his short story collections. There are also links to his for-sale books on Amazon, which include a memoir and about a dozen novel-length works of fiction. His email address is on this site, so you can send him a message if you wish. He loves to hear from his readers and wants your feedback!

Randal lives in San Diego, California, in the United States.