

THE EYES OF YOUR HEARTS

by John Fraraccio



The Eyes of Your Hearts
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Cover image from Star Trek episode “Shore Leave”

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Author's Notes:

The author acknowledges his debt to the memory of Theodore "Ted" Sturgeon and the production staff that reportedly wrestled with his "Shore Leave" script to the everlasting benefit of the genre and the premiere medium. The broadcast story left this viewer wanting more and directly inspired this long gestating triptych of might-as-well-be deleted scenes that purposely avoids "telegraphing" later episodes of The Original Series.

The author also acknowledges The Animated Series episode "Once Upon a Planet," written by Chuck Menville and Len Janson, then adapted by Alan Dean Foster for publication in Star Trek Log Three (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975). (Animation suited the premise better, and the author is glad Uhura got involved.) Any interstitial reference in the author's story to the putative sequel is entirely coincidental.

THE EYES OF YOUR HEARTS

She was the “little blonde lab technician” that Gary Mitchell said he had steered toward me at the Academy.

Gary...no, not here and not now.

Ruth and I sat in a glade not far from where the landing party had reassembled and were introduced to the Caretaker of what we had at least planned for shore leave. She looked as out of place here as she had in any laboratory that I had seen her in.

I had already had my fill of android technology and capabilities in my encounter on Exo III with what had effectively replaced Doctor Roger Korby. Notwithstanding the loss of two crew members and my own very near fatality, what had most unnerved me was the replacement’s quite vocal and articulate insistence to the contrary.

Yet I had willingly walked alongside what could not possibly have been Ruth to where we now quite intently sat. Together.

Ruth...

She had not taken her eyes off me. Now she smiled at me. “Yes, Jim?”

“This—is going to take some getting used to.”

“Isn’t it enough that we are here?”

“For the present.”

“And how long will that be?”

“I did say a day or two, didn’t I? Well—I authorized shore leave for my ship’s crew. It is of course optional, and certainly not done all at once, but after what we lately have been through, I would have to say it’s essential if not critical. I fully expect my First Officer to dutifully and personally supervise the briefing of any crew members who wish to avail themselves of this planet’s—what this planet has to offer. I am trying hard not to make that sound like a threat.”

“You were never a threat to me, Jim.” *The eyes...*

“Ruth—”

“Please.” She held my right hand with both of hers. They were warm.

“What can I do for you?” I asked, almost whispered.

“Anything. Think about me.”

“Right now, I can think of little else.”

“But you are. You fight that.”

“I should not?”

She studied the hand she had enfolded. “I am here, with you, for as long as you want me to be.”

“There are no—countermanding instructions?” *That was not fair.*

Her smile turned into a grin that I could see even with her head bowed. “You need only give them.”

“That’s not the Ruth I knew.”

“But I am the Ruth you know now.”

When the Ruth I *knew* adopted that pose that customarily made me want to correct that very gently. Sometimes I could. I could now. I could not help but kiss her again. It was warm. As I had always remembered it. I stopped just as gently as I could and asked just as gently, “Are you disappointed?”

The eyes...

“How can I be?” she replied.

“That’s a fair point.”

“Ask me, Jim.”

“Ask you—”

“Ask me why we parted.”

“*Ask* you why? I can tell you why. I was assigned to the Starship *Farragut*. You did not see me off. You—you never—you never told me what happened to you. I did try to ask. Can I try to ask now?”

She paused, then said, “I don’t know what happened to me. If I should think of it, I may disappoint you. Again. I don’t wish to. Tell me what happened to you. Please.”

I told her as much I could or felt I could. I might just as well have handed her a print copy of my Starfleet service record.

And yet. I could not help thinking about the Prime Directive. You think me the pathologically dutiful type? Given the Korby encounter, with his—plans—and what this planet already revealed, I simply could not shake the conviction that I was setting myself up for a proper—gleaning.

I purposely stopped just before our reintroduction to the Romulans. Ruth remained silent throughout. I could not help studying her. Her gentle, encompassing, embracing smile did not change. Her eyes did not harden. Her grasp did not slacken, perspire, or grow cold. In sum, *she did not move.*

Quite suddenly, the Ruth I *knew* came to me.

I will let you look at me. I will let you distract me. I will let you approach me. I will let you talk to me. I will let you embrace me. I will let you be my lawfully wedded husband.

And before I fully realized what all that had truly meant I would have been content beyond words to accept and live with all that. Until death did us part. Or, as it turned out, the *Farragut*.

All that was missing here. Something was added: The realization that she would age only if I consciously or even subconsciously wished she would.

That was no way to live. Then Ruth moved.

I saw a look of hurt on her face that no android had any right to give me. It was the second time I had seen that look. The first time it came from the Ruth I *knew*. I had sworn then and there at least to myself that I would never provoke that look from someone I loved if only for that reason.

I broke from that gaze, opened my communicator, and spoke into it: “Captain to *Enterprise*.”

“Spock here.”

“Mister Spock, how many of the crew have taken shore leave?”

“No one besides the original landing party. Briefings remain underway. As I expected, the fact that individual briefings were designated as mandatory influenced the crew’s interest.”

“Does the landing party remain on the planet?”

“In its entirety.”

“Cancel shore leave with immediate effect.”

Relief? “Acknowledged. Shall I summon the rest of the landing party?”

“Tactfully, Spock. When they are finished—amusing themselves—and any of them contacts the *Enterprise* directly, say they are all needed aboard the *Enterprise* on Captain’s orders. See to it that’s done with dispatch.”

“Agreed. When should we expect you?”

“On my signal, Spock. I would like another word with the Caretaker. Kirk out.”

Ruth had released my hand and faced downward again.

I told her, “I need to go.”

“May I walk back with you?”

“If you do then I may not leave at all. I think it best if I do not think of you.

At all.”

I stood, turned my back on—*her*—and did not see her again. I half expected but did not wish that I would hear something, *anything* from her. I heard nothing save for the chimes of the occasional breeze bearing the fragrance of orchids.

* * *

The Caretaker stood near where I had left him, but leaning on a tree, arms folded across his berobed chest, looking at me quite intently yet with a bemusement that, coming from anyone with the perceived inclinations of Cadet Finnegan, would very likely have made me take instant issue.

“*Ah*—Captain Kirk. Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Not nearly as much as I expect I should have.”

“Do you fault us?”

Surprise. “Why—why should I? You hardly know us.” I smiled.

“*Do you?*”

The Caretaker changed his bemusement to a smile that I could not regard as other than genuine even if I had wanted to.

“Captain, if your ship’s command is not a pressing concern, do please set with me for a while. I cannot help but think that would do us both some good.”

I could not decline. The Caretaker was a psychologist, quite possibly from a species of psychologists, all of whom thought play invariably involved wishes and dreams. Small wonder he weighed his words carefully. I supposed it could have been worse. I felt obliged to impress upon him that in our case it very nearly was.

We sat upon a fallen log that I would have sworn had not been there when I last looked.

He began, “The rest of your landing party returned to your ship. None in fear, I should emphasize. Some—*ah*—lingered. I promise you are not being scanned for the duration of our meeting. Why are you smiling?”

“I can’t help it.”

“I cannot read your mind, you need know. It is not entirely accurate that the system—the *machine*, if that pleases you—can read your mind either. At least not in quite the way that you infer it does. That is not something I wish to discuss in any detail. Suffice it to say there is a fair if not material amount of interpolation involved, enhanced by what you regard as—*ah*—friendly persuasion, shall we say—to reach a point of integration and realization with your conscious mind that—*ah*—‘what you see is what you get.’ It is not readily done, but with a template of-a-kind in place and the processing power we utilize, the impression of—*ah*—wish fulfillment is—*ah*—speedily attained.”

“And what about the subconscious?”

“Our censor systems address that.”

“But—no, I agree we should not elaborate. I gather our respective views on that profoundly differ. Perhaps later.”

“Very good, Captain, and appreciated. I need also supplement your Mister Spock’s stated inference of the power generated by the—*ah*—machine. It is not merely used for manufacturing, as we have demonstrated. Our planet’s core is very well adapted as a power source, but the actual generation, transmission, regulation and—*ah*—distribution very often require as much if not more power. On nearly the other side of this planet we have the cooling arrays to show for all of that. Variable, of course, depending upon the—*ah*—needs of the participatory sample. We do set limits on what is wished for and—*ah*—granted and for how long.”

“How large a sample can you accommodate? At any given moment?”

“Your ship’s crew is an optimal number, assuming a few things—*ah*—of course. More if they all wish for the same thing. Less if each participant wishes for several things at once or in serial fashion.”

I had to pause on this last part.

“I—*ah*—regret our introduction was under suboptimal conditions. Please consider that we at first exercised caution. Or thought we had.”

“My ship’s surgeon would beg to differ with you.”

The smile dissipated. “He does not, Captain. All was explained to him. He understands. We appreciate that.” The smile gently returned. “We apologized to him. We—I apologize to you. The issue with—*ah*—scalability is since mitigated. We are also unaccustomed to contending with chains of command.”

“‘We’?”

“I—*ah*—do at times—quite often in fact—refer to the collective. Make no mistake, Captain. *I* am the Caretaker.”

“How long have you been the Caretaker?”

“Why, for as long as I—but, Captain, does it truly matter?”

“No. I suppose it does not. What does matter is how powerful an influence your—*machine*—could wield for the benefit of other cultures, other civilizations.”

“But that is not its purpose, Captain. I can assure you that is also not our goal.” Again, the smile dissipated though the Caretaker’s tone remained benign throughout. “We cannot prevent you from discussing it among your pertinent authorities. We would much prefer you would not.”

“You did not stop me from authorizing my crew to take shore leave on your planet.”

“Witness the results. I can also assure you that we have not gleaned insights into your species sufficient to pose a threat or even a tactical advantage. Neither is—*ah*—our style.”

The Caretaker stood. Out of respect, so did I.

“Captain, I propose agreement on a basis for what we have just now discussed. I will trust your proven and considerable judgment concerning the future actions between our species.”

Surprise again. “Our—I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say what you mean only when you intend to. As you correctly observed, this is play. Amusement, if you keep an open mind. Our species requires it. So obviously does yours. Let us agree that we chanced upon each other. The odds are—*ah*—were,” his smile broadened, “astronomical. We also appreciate that.”

“As I have no doubt we do.”

“I will share one insight as to your species. *Only* one. The means by which you arrived on our planet are the means by which you can emulate our scanning and—*ah*—playmaking. We recognize this only because we have long striven for that—*ah*—level of efficiency. Would you be willing to share the requisite technology with us and train us in its use?”

The Prime Directive. “I cannot do that now, Caretaker. I need consult with my chain-of-command. For starters.”

“Agreed, Captain. I dare say you and I understand each other.” He clasped his hands in perceived glee.

“Splendid.”

I nodded as I reached for my communicator.

“Oh, Captain, one more thing. Did you enjoy yourself? Again?”

“I did indeed, Caretaker. I don’t ask for much, do I?”

For a while I had regarded the Caretaker a humanoid, benign, gracious to a fault even when quite unconsciously provoked—and *alien*. To make one laugh out loud is as memorable as making an android look hurt.

I spoke into my comm, “Transporter Room, one to beam up—belay that, await my signal.” The Caretaker settled down to the introductory state of bemusement, then set down upon the log.

“Actually,” I told the Caretaker, “I have one more question.”

“Do but ask.”

“How did you become the Caretaker? Voluntary application? Is this a hereditary title? Or was a planetary lottery involved?”

“I was judged the most contented member of my species.” *Would that I could be.*

* * *

I was quietly grateful to see someone wearing a familiar face that I had not wished for enter my cabin through the automated doorway.

Doctor McCoy removed and placed two tall frozen glasses from a tray that he had parked on the table in front of me. He sat, offered me a glass, took one himself and declared,

“Doctor’s orders.”

I studied both glasses. “That’s not Saurian brandy, is it?”

“No, it’s strictly medicinal.”

“And it’s not blue. The Fingal’s Folly you keep mentioning?”

“Finagle’s. No, not that either.”

“That’s what I thought you’d said. If you value our professional relationship, just don’t say, ‘Finnegan.’”

“Whatever I said, here’s mud in your mind’s eye, Jim.” He raised his glass. “A toast, to dreams, real and imaginary.”

I raised my glass. “How does it taste?”

“I haven’t tasted it yet.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” He sipped first, which influenced me to sip my medicine. We sat and said not one word to each other. For a while.

The drink was not strong but suitably distracting and better sipped. Bones was not one to lose himself in his thoughts as he tended to think out loud. Deep

thinkers who do that tend to frighten others. Right now, I was quietly grateful for both as well.

He put his glass down. He had not finished his drink and neither had I. “*Was she real, Jim?*”

The answer took longer than I first thought it would. “No. No, she wasn’t. She never was.” Another unduly long pause after my next dose.

“Well—she was. Once. An age ago.”

“I suppose a step in the right direction would be to call it—‘It.’”

“I suppose—”

He picked up his glass, sipped, and, so help me, smacked his lips. “So—what are you going to report to Starfleet Command?”

“‘The truth makes a strong argument.’ Here’s hoping.” Another sip. “And if I were you, I’d be clinically circumspect in composing my medical log entry.”

“Then allow me to rephrase the question: What will you *recommend* to Starfleet Command? A quarantine? An outright ban, punishable by death, like Talos IV? Mandatory and personalized briefings before taking shore leave?” He leaned forward. “Premeditated—*premedicated* shore leave?” And pointed directly at his Captain. “It’s no fun to have fun if you partake before you get to where you’re authorized to partake. By golly, I think even Spock would agree with me on this point.”

“On its logic, at least.”

“And as for my medical log entry, *Captain Sir*, all I know is that I saw Sir Galahad heading toward me at a full gallop, my resolving that he was instead Sir Balderdash, feeling a sharp pain in my thorax, hearing Barrows scream, then opening my eyes in some kind of recovery room with two of the most beautiful chorus—nurses—with *very* familiar faces and plumage—hovering over me.” He leaned back in his chair, firmly grasping his drink. “And I do mean hovering.”

“The Caretaker told me all was explained to you.”

“They did all the explainin’.”

He smiled. “You saw them too, Jim.”

“So did Yeoman Barrows. Was *she* real to you, Bones?”

“Certifiably. She’s a bright girl, Jim. Respect is readily given before you realize it still needs earnin’. Add to that only the best of intentions. She’ll personally see to that.” He emptied the rest of his glass.

“As the poet says, ‘He comes too close that comes to be denied.’” I then remembered Barrows’ report of Don Juan’s entrance.

“While we’re on the subject, I predict Rodriguez and Teller will soon ask you to officiate at their wedding.”

“Lieutenant Rodriguez is an officer and a gentleman and exactly what Lieutenant Teller wanted and needed. I will be happy to preside. I will be especially happy for her.”

“You still haven’t answered my question. Sure, I saw and was duly impressed by the facilities I saw underground—but, Jim, I’m not all that certain I want to put any of that on the record. As for doing that, *please* don’t say ‘Captain’s prerogative.’ On this matter I truly think *I* can pull rank.”

“How about a warning to the wise? The very wise indeed.” I finished my drink. “And if anyone has a comment concerning my canceling shore leave, tell them to see me. In Sickbay. With you in attendance. To help drive the point home.”

Bones turned professional. “Understood, Captain.”

My desk comm blared with a very welcome brogue: “Engineering to Captain.”

“What is it, Scotty?”

“No emergency, Captain. I would like you to visit the engine room and see my latest effort to improve upon the intermix procedure. I think I’ve addressed the wee problem we’ve lately had, and may in fact have found a way to safe it altogether.”

“If you have, Mister Scott, I will personally advance your pay for the next cycle.”

“You needn’t, Captain. I appreciated the break during shore leave. That is, the shore leave that was planned and authorized. I mean, the shore leave you well know I wouldn’t’ve taken in any event.

“And Mister Spock was only too happy—beg pardon, *content*—to share his library research computer time for this purpose.”

“On my way. Kirk out.” I placed my empty glass on the table, winked at Bones, stood up, and headed for home.