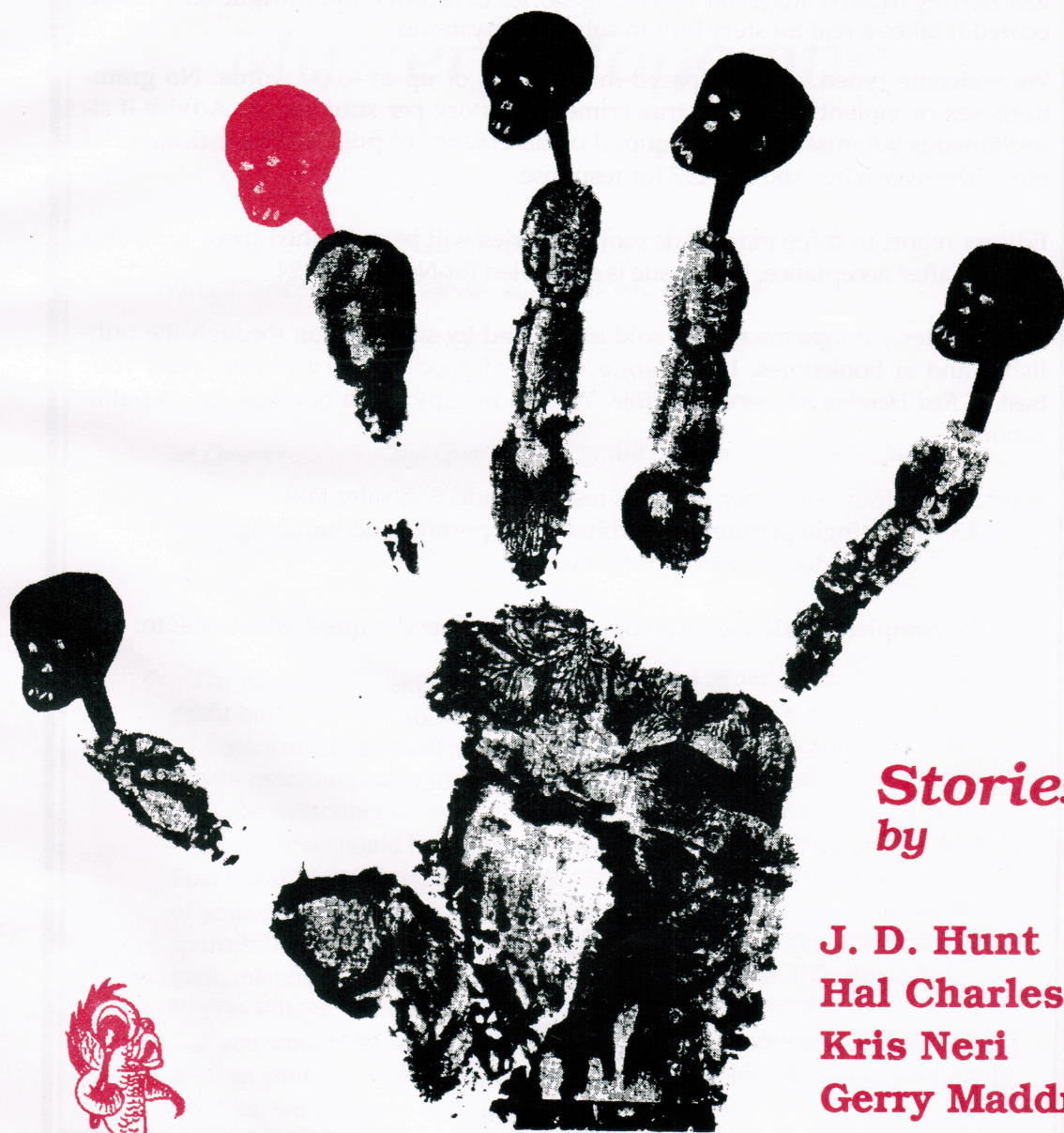


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THE ESSENCE OF ARTHUR POLKOWSKY

Jacqueline Freimor

If you want to know about Arthur, then ask him. It's no fair asking me—I'm his mother, whaddya expect me to tell you? They say there's a special bond between a mother and her son, and in our case it's the truth. I'm sure I don't have to tell you, Miss, but it ain't easy raising a kid on your own. Twenty-seven years I been doing it, since Mr. Polkowsky passed over, God rest his soul. But sad as it is, maybe Arthur never knowing his daddy brought us closer than most.

No, Arthur ain't here. He went into Manhattan to one of them swank hotels where they have the Star Trek convention. Whaddya want to talk to him about, anyway? Oh, THAT. I just thank my lucky stars Arthur didn't go to work yesterday—sick, he was. A touch of stomach flu, if you can believe it. Talk about luck! Look, why'ntcha come in, take a load off? I'll make some coffee or something. You want some coffee? Well, suit yourself.

Terrible, isn't it? How many people died—five? I swear, I just get a shiver up my spine when I think my Arthur could of been one of them. Must be a maniac or someone like that to poison all those people that way. I tell you, in my day, people had more respect. Nowadays nobody respects nothing. Except Arthur, of course. He's got plenty of respect. He's a good boy, a real good boy.

Look, if you want to know about Arthur, just look at how he's already advanced himself in life by studying and working hard. I might of told Arthur about the job down there at the publishers, but he's the one applied for it and got it himself. I don't know if I already told you, Miss, but for eight years I been a cleaning lady at that Galaxy Publishing House that prints, whaddyacallit, science fiction, working nights on the Executive and Personnel floor. They got notices on the bulletin board there about the jobs they got open. One night about seven years ago, I seen a notice for a editorial assistant, and I told Arthur to apply. Got hired

right out of school—Hunter College's where he went. On scholarship, I'll have you know.

Now, I don't want you to think I'm bragging, Miss. That's what Arthur says I do—brag. I remember just a few weeks ago, the day he come home to tell me he was finally promoted to editor. I was standing right where you are, Miss, dusting the knickerknacks on the coffee table.

"Ma," Arthur says, busting in, "guess what? They made me an editor!"

"Oh my God," I says, almost falling down prostrated. "You don't mean it."

"No, really," he says.

"Is it more money, can I ask?"

"A lot. A whole lot. My own office, too."

This time I do fall down, only on the sofa there, then get up again right away to go to the telephone. "Your own office," I say. "Wait'll I tell your aunt." It's about time that stuck-up sister of mine back in Chicago had to hold her tongue and listen to my good news, for a change.

"Don't go bragging to everyone, Ma," Arthur says to me, but he's smiling.

And why not? I ask you, if you can't brag to your own family, who can you brag to?

I tell you, Miss, when Arthur showed me his first letter he sent as editor, I was so proud. Makes me feel kinda foolish now, if you want the truth, now that I know what I know. But I'm getting ahead of myself. At the time I was so proud, I called up my sister right away, read it to her over the phone. That sour-faced bitch, you know what she says to me? She says, what's the big deal? So he wrote a letter. You act like he won Star Search or something.

I ask you: is that any way to talk to your own sister about your own nephew? And her son Joey's an auto mechanic, has grease on his hands all day long like his father and grandfather before him. "Listen," I says to her, "my son is going to do something with his life, unlike some people I could name."

"Oh yeah?" she says. "If you got something nasty to say about my Joey why'ntcha just come

right out and say it?"

"I'm naming no names," I says. "And as a matter of fact, I was talking about Mr. Polkowsky, may he rest in peace."

But that's neither here nor there. You come to talk about Arthur, right? Listen, if the plastic on the sofa bothers you, go sit in the easy chair. That's right, Miss. Now don't you feel more relaxed than you did when you come in? You looked mighty tense when you first come in. I swear, if you took your hair from outta that silly hat you'd be a pretty girl. And that uniform don't do nothing for your figure. Oh, no offense, I hope. But let me ask you something, you married? That's too bad. I mean, that's good for you, but if you wasn't maybe you coulda gone out with my Arthur.

I tell you, a girl could do a lot worse. Oh, I know Arthur's not much to look at—he takes after Mr. Polkowsky in that respect. His hair is way too thick and wiry, and it does get kinda greasy looking, no matter how many times he washes it. Plus, he's got those thick glasses, and he's a teeny bit overweight. Well, so what? Like I told Arthur many, many times, beauty's more than skin deep. Time was when he wouldn't believe me. You know, when he was a kid the other kids used to tease him, call him "Four-eyes" and "Porcupine," and in high school there was that girl, whatser-name, Cindy, from across the street. She wouldn't go out with him, you know, she laughed at him, so one morning in November Arthur took a shower in his underwear and stood out on our front stoop for maybe an hour in the freezing cold before I come home from work. Pneumonia, he said. He wanted to catch pneumonia and die.

Well, you can bet I gave him what for. What did he think he was doing? I said. Giving himself a terrible cold and making a spectacle of himself in front of the whole neighborhood, all because of some stupid slut of a girl who couldn't see what a beautiful person he was inside. She was trouble. I said he was better off without someone like her. And wouldn't you know, a couple of months later Cindy got hit by that hit-and-run driver, smashed

her up real bad. Not like I'd wish that on my worst enemy, Miss, but after what that Cindy done to my poor Arthur I couldn't help feeling it was kinda like she got what was coming to her.

So what was I saying? Oh yeah, about beauty being more than skin deep. I always told Arthur that, but he didn't believe me. You know what changed his mind? A book. Don't look at me like that, Miss, I thought it was crazy too. It was some science fiction book about these outer space people who look just like you and me when they're born but who have to go through all these tests to prove themselves. Arthur says that every time they pass a test their inner beauty gets stronger and stronger, and their outer shell begins to fall off so they look pretty disgusting. If they pass enough of them tests, though, all that's left of them is their inner person, which looks like a thin beam of light in the colors of the rainbow.

It's crazy, right, Miss? I thought so too. But since you want to know about Arthur, I figured I should tell you. Boy, he really believes it, thinks it changed his life. How do I know? I don't mind telling you I once sneaked a peek at that notebook he writes in all the time. Well, maybe twice. Can you blame me? He writes in it all the time, it's like he don't think about anything else. So one day I just went and took it from his briefcase when he was in the shower. I have to say I didn't understand much; it was all this science fiction kind of writing and drawings of people on other planets. It put my mind at ease, though. I mean, I was glad to see that Arthur has an interest. And it's not dirty pictures or anything, so where's the harm?

No, I don't know when Arthur'll be back. What's the matter, you bored or something? I still don't understand why you want to talk to him about them poisonings. I mean, he don't know anything about it, he didn't go to work, so how could he tell you anything? I told you already, he had stomach flu or something. Poor baby was sick as a dog, he was throwing up all day. When I think what could of happened to him if he'd of gone to work! I heard on the news that the poison was in

the coffee filter, is that right? So everybody who had the office coffee was poisoned? Oh, it just makes me sick. It makes me think, though, that Arthur's got some kinda guardian angel or somebody like that watching out for him.

I wonder what they're gonna do about the office now. I mean, do you know if they're gonna shut down? Not that I think Arthur should go back on Monday anyway, not unless you catch the murderer before then. And even if you do I don't think he should go back. Not after what they done to him.

Whaddya mean, Miss, what did they do? It's what didn't they do that's the problem. I come to Arthur's office a couple days ago on my day off—I told you I work nights at that publishers, didn't I?—kinda to surprise him, you know, since Arthur told me they promoted him to editor with his own office and all. I thought I could call up my sister in Chicago, tell her, yeah, he's got a big desk, a big chair, a ROL-O-DEX for crying out loud, his own secretary, maybe...well, can you blame me? All my life I had nothing but my Arthur, and there he was, finally making good.

Only he wasn't. Sad to say, Miss, but he lied to me. See, I clean Executive and Personnel, so I never had cause to go down to Arthur's floor before, especially since no one's there late at night when I clean. And when I come to visit him at the office I see he's in a little cubbyhole near the front door, all squished in with a typewriter and shelves with lots of paper on them, and Arthur's typing envelopes and answering the phone, just like he always done. So I freeze there, not knowing if I should just turn around and walk out and pretend I don't see him to spare his feelings, you know, and I see something makes my blood run cold. It's two boys, one blond, one dark, two boys just like those hateful boys who used to tease Arthur in the schoolyard of P.S. 22, only older. They're standing by Arthur's desk trying to look friendly, but you can see it's the kind of friendly where they're just laughing at you behind their eyes.

"You're looking pretty snazzy," the blond one

says, sitting on the edge of Arthur's desk.

"Yeah," says the dark-haired one, "got a hot date?"

"Why don't you just go away," says Arthur.

"Killer bow tie, man," Dark Hair says. "And you even tucked in your shirt. She must be something."

Now Arthur stands up to walk away, politely like I always taught him.

"Hey, man," Blond Hair says, "don't leave without this." And he holds something up in the air, wagging it just a little bit.

It's Arthur's notebook! I see Arthur turn white and freeze where he's standing. Blond Hair holds the book in his left hand and slowly opens it, licking two fingers of his right hand and then turning the page. "How about this, Randy? 'Only You and I know the true essence of things. The Others fix on the externals, the superficialities, the gloss. I despise them. They are like ants, laboring blindly without any inkling of the greater pattern to their movements.'" I only remember it, Miss, because later I sneaked a look at Arthur's journal and read the words over and over again, to see if I could understand why the boys thought the words were so funny.

"Where did you get that?" Arthur says, grabbing for the book. "It's personal. Give it back."

Blond Hair holds it out of reach. "Uh uh uh," he says. "I want to look at the drawings again. Especially the ones of you as Mondar the Magnificent."

"Give it back! Give it back!" Arthur cries, his voice high and screechy. Everybody in the office stops for a second to look at what's going on. It's suddenly so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

"We found it in the john," Blond Hair says, closing the book with a bang and dropping it on Arthur's desk. He walks away.

Dark Hair follows him. "Man, are you whacked," he says, and giggles. What could I do, Miss? I ask you, what would you do? Arthur hasn't seen me yet, and I want more than anything in this whole world to go up to him and hold him like I

used to when Mr. Polkow—when Arthur got hurt as a baby. But I know if I go in, all the other people will make fun of Arthur even more. I stand there for a few minutes, but Arthur's cheeks are burning and he's typing very very fast and doesn't look up. So I go home. I go home and pretend nothing happened.

I say I acted like nothing happened—on the outside. Arthur didn't know I saw him and those two boys at the office and when he didn't say nothing about it I just went and made him his favorite supper—stuffed cabbage—and acted all cheery and happy and made him take me out to the movies just like we was on a date or something and I was his best girl. Inside, though, I was hopping mad. Did you ever get so mad, Miss, that you couldn't even see straight? I mean, like everything you looked at was fuzzy and blurry and kinda red around the edges? Well, lemme tell you it's no fun. It's like one of them migraine headaches or something that takes a whole day to go away. And afterwards you feel kinda tired and sick.

I only felt like that two other times in my life. The second time was when that slut of a girl Cindy hurt poor Arthur's feelings so that he stood out on the porch trying to kill himself. I already told you about that. The first time...I didn't tell you this earlier, Miss, but Mr. Polkowsky, he wasn't too crazy about Arthur on account of we had to get married because of him. There we were, two eighteen-year-olds with a one-year-old baby in a railroad flat in Chicago, poorer than dirt, and one night—well, I don't like to speak ill of the dead—but I really think Mr. Polkowsky tried to kill Arthur while he was sleeping in his crib by holding a pillow over

the poor baby's face. Of course, I couldn't be sure about it because it was dark, but I thought that was what he was doing.

"Carl!" I said, "what are you doing?"

He drops the pillow, and, of course, Arthur starts to scream.

"Nothing," Carl says, "I come to check on the kid."

"Forget it," I says, "I'll take care of him. You go back to sleep." And I rush over to the crib to pick Arthur up, to keep him away from his dad.

Well, I ask you—what could I do? No matter what he said I knew Carl tried to kill my baby, and for the next week I kept an eagle eye on him whenever he was around Arthur. Luckily he wasn't home too much—he was working sixteen-hour shifts at the factory. And then, wouldn't you know it, a week later Carl drove his forklift into a brick wall. Drunk, they said he was. The last anyone saw of him he was taking a big swig out of a pocket flask when he up and passed out.

So there I was—eighteen and a widow. I can't say it hasn't been hard raising Arthur on my own. And even though I was naturally upset about Carl's passing, you know what, Miss? It sounds bad to say it, but I gotta admit I was a tiny bit relieved when Carl died. It was almost like he got what was coming to him. Like that girl Cindy. And come to think of it, like those terrible people at Arthur's office. It's kinda funny, isn't it, Miss? It's almost like Arthur has some kinda guardian angel or something like that, watching over him. Protecting the beauty inside him that only she can see.

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