Come to Me Not in Winter’s White

Roger Zelazny and Harlan Ellison

She was dying and he was the richest man in the world, but he couldn’t buy her life. So he did the next best thing. He built a house. He built the house; different from any other house that had ever been. She was transported to it by ambulance, and their goods and furnishings followed in many vans.

They had been married little over a year; then she had been stricken. The specialists shook their heads and named a new disease after her. They gave her six-months-to-a-year; then they departed, leaving behind them prescriptions and the smell of antiseptics. But he was not defeated. Nothing as commonplace as death could defeat him.

For he was the greatest physicist ever employed by AT&T in the year of Our Lord and President Farrar, two thousand and seventy-nine.

(When one is incalculably wealthy from birth, one feels a sense of one’s own personal unworthiness; so having been denied the joys of grueling labor and abject poverty, he had labored over himself. He had made of himself one who was incalculably worthy⁠—the greatest physicist the world had ever known. It was enough for him...until he had met her. Then he wanted much more.)

He didn’t have to work for AT&T, but he enjoyed it. They allowed him the use of their immense research facilities to explore his favorite area⁠—Time, and the waning thereof.

He knew more about the nature of Time than any other human being who had ever lived.

It might be said that Carl Manos was Chronos/Ops/Saturn/Father Time himself: he even fitted the description, with his long dark beard and his slashing, scythe-like walking-stick. He knew Time as no other man had ever known it, and he had the power and the will and the love to exploit it.

How?

Well, there was the house. He’d designed it himself. Had it built in less than six weeks, settling a strike by himself to insure its completion on time.

What was so special about the house?

It had a room; a room like no other room that had ever existed, anywhere.

In this room, Time ignored the laws of Albert Einstein and obeyed those of Carl Manos.

What were those laws and what was this room?

To reverse the order of the questions, the room was the bedroom of his beloved Laura, who had had Lora Manosism, an affliction of the central nervous system, named after her. The disease was monstrously degenerative; four months after diagnosis, she would be a basket case. Five months⁠—blind, incapable of speech. Six-months-to-a-year⁠—dead. She dwelled in the bedroom that Time feared to enter. She lived there while he worked and fought for her. This was because, for every year that passed outside the room, only a week went by within. Carl had so ordained it, and it cost him eighty-five thousand dollars a week to maintain the equipment that made it so. He would see her live and be cured, no matter what the cost, though his beard changed its appearance with each week that passed for her. He hired specialists, endowed a foundation to work on her cure; and every day, he grew a trifle older. Although she had been ten years his junior, the gap was rapidly widened. Still he worked to slow her room even more.

“Mister Manos, your bill is now two hundred thousand dollars a week.”

“I’ll pay it,” he told the power & light people, and did. It was now down to three days for every year.

And he would enter her room and speak with her.

“Today is July ninth,” he said. “When I leave in the morning it will be around Christmastime. How do you feel?’

“Short of breath,” she replied. “What do the doctors tell you?”

“Nothing, yet,” he said. “They’re working on your problem, but there’s no answer in sight.”

“I didn’t think so. I don’t think there ever will be.”

“Don’t be fatalistic, love. If there’s a problem, there’s an answer⁠—and there’s plenty of time. All the time in the world...”

“Did you bring me a newspaper?”

“Yes. This will keep you caught up. There’s been a quick war in Africa, and a new presidential candidate has come onto the scene.”

“Please love me.”

“I do.”

“No, I know that. Make love to me.”

They smiled at her fear of certain words, and then he undressed and made love to her.

Then, after, there came a moment of truth, and he said, “Laura, I have to tell you the way it is. We’re nowhere yet, but I have the best neurological minds in the world working on your problem. There’s been one other case like yours since I locked you away⁠—that is, since you came to stay here⁠—and he’s dead already. But they have learned something from him and they will continue to learn. I’ve brought you a new medicine.”

“Will we spend Christmas together?” she asked.

“If you wish.”

“So be it.”

And so it was.

He came to her at Christmastime, and together they decorated the tree and opened presents.

“Hell of a Christmas with no snow,” she said.

“Such language⁠—and from a lady!”

But he brought her snow and a Yule log and his love.

“I’m awful,” she said. “I can’t stand myself sometimes. You’re doing everything you can and nothing happens, so I harass you. I’m sorry.”

She was five feet seven inches in height and had black hair. Black? So black as to be almost blue, and her lips were a pink and very special pair of cold shell-coral things. Her eyes were a kind of dusk where there are no clouds and the day sets off the blue with its going. Her hands shook whenever she gestured, which was seldom.

“Laura,” he told her, “even as we sit here, they work. The answer, the cure, will come to pass⁠—in time.”

“I know.”

“You wonder, though, whether it will be time enough. It will. You’re virtually standing still while everything outside races by. Don’t worry. Rest easy. I’ll bring you back.”

“I know that,” she said. “It’s just that I sometimes⁠—despair.”

“Don’t.”

“I can’t help it.”

“I know more about Time than anybody else... You’ve got it: on your side.”

He swung his stick like a saber, beheading roses that grew about the wall. “We can take a century,” he said, quickly, as though loath to lose even a moment, “without your being harmed. We can wait on the answer that has to come. Sooner or later, there will be an answer. If I go away for a few months, it will be as a day to you. Don’t worry. I’ll see you cured and we’ll be together again in a brighter day⁠—for godsake don’t worry! You know what they told you about psychosomatic conversions!”

“Yes, I shouldn’t have one.”

“Then don’t. There are even other tricks I will be able to play with Time, as it goes on⁠—such as freezing. You’ll come out okay, believe me.”

“Yes,” she said, raising her glass of Irish Mist. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas!”

But even for a man who has been thought incalculably wealthy, lack of attention to compounding that wealth, monomaniacal ferocity in pursuing a goal, and a constant, heavy drain, inevitably brings the end in sight. Though the view to that end was a long one, though there were more years that could be put to use, even so it became obvious to everyone around him that Carl Manos had committed himself to a crusade that would end in his destruction. At least financially. And for them, that was the worst sort of destruction. For they had not lived in the thoughts of Manos, were unaware that there were other, far more exacting destructions.

He came to her in the early summer, and he brought a recording of zarzuela love duets by de la Cruz, Hidalgo, Bréton. They sat beside each other, their hands touching, and they listened to the voices of others who were in love, all through July and August. He only sensed her restlessness as August drew to a close and the recording schusssed into silence.

“What?” he asked, softly.

“It’s nothing. Nothing, really.”

“Tell me.”

She spoke, then, of loneliness.

And condemned herself with more words; for her ingratitude, her thoughtlessness, her lack of patience. He kissed her gently, and told her he would do something about it.

When he left the room, the first chill of September was in that corner of the world. But he set about finding a way to stave off her loneliness. He thought first of himself living in the room, of conducting his experiments in the room without Time. But that was unfeasible, for many reasons⁠—most of them dealing with Time. And he needed a great deal of space to conduct the experiments: building additions to the room was impossible. He could see, himself, that there would not be sufficient funds to expand the experiment.

So he did the next best thing.

He had his Foundation scour the world for a suitable companion. After three months they submitted a list of potentials to him. There were two. Only two.

The first was a handsome young man named Thomas Grindell, a bright and witty man who spoke seven languages fluently, had written a perceptive history of mankind, had traveled widely, was outspoken and in every other possible way was the perfect companion.

The second was an unattractive woman named Yolande Loeb. She was equally as qualified as Grindell, had been married and divorced, wrote excellent poetry, and had dedicated her life to various social reforms.

Even Carl Manos was not so deeply immersed in his problem that he could not see the ramifications of possible choice. He discarded the name of Grindell.

To Yolande Loeb he offered the twin lures of extended life and financial compensation sufficient to carry her without worry through three lifetimes. The woman accepted.

Carl Manos took her to the room, and before the door was apted open from the control console, he said, “I want her to be happy. To be kept occupied. No matter what she wants, she’s to have it. That is all I ask of you.”

“I’ll do my best, Mr. Manos.”

“She’s a wonderful person, I’m sure you’ll love her.”

“I’m sure.”

He opened the outer chamber, and they entered. When they had neutralized temporally, the inner chamber was opened, and he entered with the woman.

“Hello.”

Laura’s eyes widened when she saw her, but when Carl had told her Miss Loeb had come to keep her company, to be the friend Laura had needed, she smiled and kissed his hand.

“Laura and I will have so much time to get acquainted,” Yolande Loeb said, “why don’t you spend this time together?” And she took herself to the far corner of the room, to the bookshelf, and pulled down a Dickens to reread.

Laura drew Carl Manos down to her and kissed him. “You are so very good to me.”

“Because I love you. It’s that simple. I wish everything was that simple.”

“How is it coming?”

“Slowly. But coming.”

She was concerned about him. “You look so tired, Carl.”

“Weary, not tired. There’s a big difference.”

“You’ve grown older.”

“I think the gray in my beard is very distinguished.”

She laughed lightly at that, but he was glad he had brought Miss Loeb, and not Grindell. Thrown together in a room where Time nearly stood still, for endless months that would not be months to them, who knew what could happen? Laura was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Any man would find himself falling in love with her. But with Miss Loeb as companion⁠—well, it was safe now.

“I have to get back. We’re trying some new catalysts today. Or rather, however many days ago it was when I came in here. Take care, darling. I’ll be back as soon as can.

Laura nodded understanding. “Now that I have a friend, it won’t be so lonely till you return, dearest.”

“Would you like me to bring anything special next time?”

“The sandalwood incense?”

“Of course.”

“Now I won’t be lonely,” she repeated.

“No. I hope not. Thank you.”

And he left them together.

“Do you know Neruda?” Miss Loeb asked.

“Pardon me?”

“The Chilean poet? The Heights of Macchu Picchu? One of his greatest works?”

“No, I’m afraid that I don’t.”

“I have it with me. It is a piece of blazing power. There is a certain strength within it, which I thought you⁠—”

“...Might take heart from while contemplating death. No. Thank you, but no. It was bad enough, just thinking about all the things the few people I have read have said about life’s ending. I am a coward, and I know that one day I will die, as everyone must. Only, in my condition, I have a schedule. This happens, then this happens, and then it is all over. The only thing between me and death is my husband.”

“Mr. Manos is a fine man. He loves you very much.”

“Thank you. Yes, I know. So if you wish to console me concerning this, then I am not especially interested.”

But Yolande Loeb pursed her lips, touched Laura’s shoulder, said, “No. Not consolation. Not at all.

“Courage or faith, perhaps,” she said, “but not consolation or resignation,” and, “ ‘Irresistible death invited me many times: / It was like salt occulted in the waves / and what its invisible fragrance suggested / was fragments of wrecks and heights / or vast structures of wind and snowdrift.’ ”

“What is that?’

“The beginning of Section Four.”

Laura dropped her eyes, then said, “Tell me the whole story.”

“ ‘From air to air, like an empty net,’ ” said Yolande, in her deep, impressive tones, and with a slight accent, “ ‘dredging through streets and ambient atmosphere, I came / lavish, at autumn’s coronation...’ ”

Laura listened, and some variety of truth seemed to be present there.

After a time she reached out and their fingertips touched, gently.

\* \* \*

Yolande told Laura of her girlhood in a kibbutz, and of her broken marriage. She told her of life after that thing; and of the suffering attendant thereto.

Laura cried, hearing of this misery.

She felt gray and sad for days thereafter.

Yet these were not days to Carl Manos, who also had cause to feel a constricting anomie. He met a girl whose company he enjoyed, until she said that she loved him. He dropped her like poison sumac and hot potatoes. After all, Time⁠—their friend/their enemy⁠—had a deal going with Laura and Carl. There was no room for intruders in this fated ménage à trois.

He cursed, paid his bills, and figured ways to make Time even more amenable to his bidding.

But suddenly he was in pain. He knew nothing of Pablo Neruda, or this Pasternak, Lorca, Yevtushenko, Alan Dugan, Yeats, Brooke, Daniels⁠—any of them⁠—and Laura spoke of them constantly these days. As he had no replies for this sort of thing, he just nodded. He kept on nodding. Time after time...

“You’re happy with the present arrangement?” he finally asked.

“Oh, yes! Of course,” she replied. “Yolande is wonderful. I’m so glad that you invited her.”

“Good. That’s something, anyway.”

“What do you mean⁠—?”

“Yolande!” he cried out, suddenly. “How are you?”

Yolande Loeb emerged from the screened-off section of the apartment to which she discreetly retired during his visits. She nodded to him and smiled faintly.

“I am quite well, Mr. Manos. Thank you. And yourself ?” There was a brief catch in her voice as she moved toward him, and realizing that her eyes were fixed on his beard, he chuckled within it, saying, “I’m beginning to feel a trifle like a premature patriarch.” She smiled, and his tone was light, but he felt pain, again.

“I’ve brought you some presents,” he went on, placing sealtite packages on the table. “The latest art books and tapes, recordings, some excellent film beads, poems which have been judged by the critics to be exceptional.”

Both women moved to the table and began running their fingertips down the sealstrips, opening the parcels, thanking him for each item as it was unwrapped, making little noises of pleasure and excitement. As he studied Yolande’s swart face, with its upturned nose, numerous moles, small scar upon the brow, and as his eyes moved on to Laura’s face, flushed now and smiling⁠—as he stood there, both hands upon his walking-stick, reflecting that it was good to have chosen as he had⁠—something twisted softly within him and he knew pain once more.

\* \* \*

At first, he was unable to analyze the feelings. Always, however, they returned to him as accompaniment to his recollection of that tableau: the two of them moving about the package-laden table, leafing through the foilpages of the books, holding the recording cassettes at arm’s length the better to study their dimensional-covers, chatting about their new treasures, excluding him.

It was a feeling of separation, resulting in a small loneliness, as well as something else. The two women had a thing in common, a thing which did not exist between Laura and himself. They shared a love for the arts⁠—an area of existence for which he could allow himself little time. And, too, they were together in a war zone⁠—alone in the room with the opponent Time laying siege. It had brought them closer together, sharing the experience of defying death and age. They had this meeting place where he was now a stranger. It was...

Jealousy, he decided suddenly; and was quite surprised by the notion. He was jealous of that which they had come to share. He was shocked at the thought, confused. But then, impressed as he always had been with a sense of personal unworthiness, he recognized it as another evidence of this condition. He then thought to banish the feeling.

But then, there had never been another Laura, or another ménage such as this.

Was it guilt that came now in response?

He was not certain.

\* \* \*

He coded a fresh cup of coffee, and when it arrived, smiled into the eyes⁠—his own, perhaps⁠—which regarded him through the steam and darkness of its surface. His knowledge of the ancients stopped short with their legends and theories of Time. Chronos, or Time, had been castrated by his son, Zeus. By this⁠—it had been contended⁠—the priests and oracles meant to convey the notion that Time is incapable of bringing forth any new thing, but must ever repeat himself and be satisfied with variations of that which has already been begotten. And that is why he smiled...

Was not Laura’s disease a new thing come into the world? And was not his mastery of Time now to be the cause of another new thing⁠—its remedy?

Guilt and jealousy alike forgotten, he sipped his coffee, tapping his fingers the while, to the beat of an unheard tune⁠—as the particles and antiparticles danced before him in the chambers. And thus time was kept.

And when, later that evening, the viewer chimed, that evening as he sat there, white-smocked, before the Tachytron, archaic glasses pushed up onto his forehead, cold cup of coffee before him on the console, as he sat looking inside himself, he put aside remembered guilt for a premonition.

The viewer chimed again.

That would be one of the doctors...and it was...

The results of his latest experiments⁠—rainbow journeys where no physicist had ever gone before⁠—had been integrated with the work the doctors had been doing, and his premonition became a hallelujah reality.

He went to tell Laura they had won; went to the room outside which Time lay siege with growing frustration; went to restore the full measure of his adoration.

Where he found them, making love.

\* \* \*

Alone, outside the room where Time now waited smugly, finally savoring the taste of victory, Carl Manos lived more lifetimes than any special room could hoard. There had been no scene, save in the tortured silences. There had been no words, save in the linear impressions of three who were surrounded by all that had happened in that room, locked invisibly in the walls.

They wanted to stay together, of course. He had not needed to ask that. Alone together in the timeless room where they had found love, the room Carl Manos could never again enter. He still loved her, that could never be changed. And so, he had only two choices.

He could work for the rest of his unworthy life, to pay for the power to keep the room functioning. Or he could turn it off. To turn it off he would have to wait. Wait for Time the Victor to turn his all-consuming love into a kind of hate that would compel him to stop the room’s functions.

He did neither. Having only two choices, he took a third course, a choice he did not have, had never had.

He moved to the console and did what had to be done, to speed up Time in the room. Even Time would die in that room, now. Then, unworthy, he went away.

\* \* \*

Yolande sat reading. Neruda, again. How she always came back to him!

On the bed, what had been Laura lay decomposing. Time, unaware that all, including himself, would be victims, had caught up, had won victory finally.

“ ‘Come, diminutive life,’ ” she read, “ ‘between the wings / of the earth, while you, cold, crystal in the hammered air, / thrusting embattled emeralds apart, / O savage waters, fall from the hems of snow.’ ”

Love, love, until the night collapses

from the singing Andes flint

down to the dawn’s red knees,

come out and contemplate the snow’s blind son.

She laid the book in her lap, then sat back in the chair, eyes closed. And for her, the years passed swiftly.

A Word from Zelazny

This collaboration with Harlan Ellison “was so short that it didn’t entail much effort. It was just one basic idea. I did a section, he did a section, I did a section, and he took it and finished it and it was all over. In very brief sections. So I didn’t have to become Harlan Ellison exactly.”[[1]](#footnote-1) As he wrote it, he had no idea where it was headed: “I am also doing a story with Brother Harlan... It is the first collaboration that Harlan and I have tried together. We’ll see how it works out.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Asked to write about this collaboration for a planned feature tentatively titled “I Was a Partner in Wonder,” Zelazny begged off, as did Ellison’s other collaborators. “I wish that I could do you a piece containing some measure of élan, a few sparks or at least a good anecdote, but alas! it was pretty much a cut-and-dried affair. Harlan telephoned me one evening, suggested we do a quick story together to body out Partners, recommending I whip off a thousand words and then send it to him, to which he would then add a thousand words and return, etc. And that is precisely what we did until we reached the end, where we stopped. That really was pretty much all there was to it, engineering-wise. I doubt that I would have done it had it been anyone other than Harlan, but he is in a very special category so far as I am concerned and I like to watch Ellison projects unfold.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

A Word from Harlan Ellison

Working with Roger on this story was one of the easiest, most pleasurable work-experiences I’ve had in many years. It was a cross-country collaboration, with Roger starting the story, writing through to the paragraph whose last line is Still he worked to slow her room even more, and then mailing the pages to me. He did not indicate where or how he thought the story should go, as he had assumed the role of picking the game, and it was my job to set the rules.

In collaborations of this sort, I’ve found, the opening sets the tone and the major characters and indicates the area in which the work will be done. That is roughly 1000 words. In the second thousand the direction of the plot and the initial complications should emerge; in the third thousand the complications should intensify, the characterization should solidify and the solutions should be indicated, however minutely. The final thousand words or so of a short story of this kind are the summing-up and solving areas. It worked just that way with “Winter’s White.”

In my thousand words, from “Mister Manos, your bill is now two hundred thousand dollars a week” to And he left them together, I set up the basic situation that Roger would intensify in the following section.

He wrote from “Do you know Neruda?” to he knew pain once more. I finished the story.

There was virtually no rewrite. I went over it once, after it was finished, to smooth some awkwardnesses we’d encountered in the mails, and then it went off to be published.

I am very proud of this story. Silverberg contends it’s mawkish, and a fan writer said it was the worst of both Zelazny and Ellison, and as far as I’m concerned they can both go hump a toadstool. I love this story because, in a career lifetime of writing often violent and frequently loveless fictions, this is one of the few times I feel my work has reached toward gentleness and compassion, and I don’t think I would have been able to do anything even remotely like it, had it not been for Roger. It also introduced me to the writings of Pablo Neruda, and if I’d been enriched no further, it would all have been worth it.

Notes

The story originally took place in nineteen hundred and ninety-eight, but Ellison changed it to two thousand and twenty-nine for its reprinting in Manna from Heaven[[4]](#footnote-4) and to two thousand and seventy-nine for this edition. Ellison newly edited several dozen other items in the story and a few in “A Word from Harlan Ellison,” but these will not be detailed here.

This story deliberately blurs the distinction between Chronos and Cronos. Chronos is the personification of time and is now often depicted as a wizened old man with a beard (“Father Time”). Cronos (often Cronus) is a Titan and the father of Zeus. Zeus overthrew his father and castrated him. Cronos’s wife (the mother of Zeus) is Rhea, the goddess of fertility and the earth. Saturn and Ops are the Roman gods that correspond, respectively, to the Greek names of Cronos and Rhea.

Psychosomatic conversion disorder means developing physical signs of disease from mental illness, such as hysterical blindness or paralysis that ends when the mental disorder is corrected.

Ramón de la Cruz, Juan de Hidalgo, and Tomás Bretón were some of the best known author/composers of zarzuela, a Spanish lyrical drama. Apted open means opened an aperture. Pablo Neruda wrote the epic poem of spiritual ascent The Heights of Macchu Picchu after visiting that ancient Incan city; several verses are quoted in the story. A kibbutz is a voluntary collective community in Israel. A ménage à trois is a threesome, a love triangle. Boris Pasternak, Frederico Garcia Lorca, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Alan Dugan, William Butler Yeats, Rupert Brooke, and David Daniels were all poets.

1. Science Fiction (Australian) June 1978 Vol 1 No 2, pp 11⁠—⁠23 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mentat #11, May 1969, pp 200⁠—⁠203 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Letter from Roger Zelazny to Jeff Smith, August 27, 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Manna from Heaven ed. Scott Zrubek, Wildside Press and DNA Publications, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)