

INSIGHT

SCIENCE FICTION WRITER PAT CADIGAN RESPONDS TO CHRISTINA MACKIE'S WORK

When I got up this morning, I found a stand of trees in my living room. Or, rather, *instead* of my living room.

At the time, I was just a bit too sleepy to be upset. I thought, actually, that I might still be asleep and dreaming. I can never tell whether I'm dreaming or not, no matter what happens. Everything seems equally absurd to me, and has for a very long time now.

Which is not to say that I can't tell when something's wrong, or at least not quite right. I knew very well that when I go into my living room, for real or in a dream, I should find the usual living room furniture — my fabulously comfy couch (purchased specifically for its fabulously comfy quality), the old steamer trunk I use for a coffee table, the TV, the cable box, the VCR, the stereo, the china cabinet I inherited from my Aunt Loretta (and all the *tchochkes* in it), and my five hundred favourite books carefully alphabetized and positioned on my custom-made bookshelves.

This was where I woke up enough to be scared. Up till then, I was on the way to thinking that some of my goofier friends must have gotten higher than usual and decided to play the mother of all practical jokes on me. They really are that crazy, some of them, situationists born too late, or maybe just frustrated performance artists, who would think that swapping someone's living room furniture for a collection of potted trees was the height of 21st Century Dada. It's well known that I sleep like the dead, so getting my furniture out of the house overnight without my waking would be entirely possible. The books would be easy — but not the shelves. Those were custom-built, as I said, and there's no way to simply dismantle them. You might destroy them — but then that would leave marks. My living room walls were smoother and more unblemished than the day I'd moved in. The shelves might never have been there.

Nor the carpet, I realized, suddenly aware of the floor on my bare feet. Nor any of the furniture. Or anything else.

I leaned against the doorway and tried to think what to do next. Call the police, ask them to bring a botanist? Maybe I should call a journalist first. Or maybe just call my goofier friends. For all I knew, this sort of thing happened to them all the time, which was what made them so goofy in the first place. Random improbabilities

that struck like lightning — this was the twenty-first century, after all, full of things like genetically modified foods, the Human Genome Project, cloned sheep, Ebola viruses, global warming.

Global warming? Was *that* it?

I shook my head to clear the thought away. Global warming might screw up the weather, even grow toadstools in your carpeting, but as far as I knew, it didn't remove whole rooms of furnishings and replace them with trees. At least, not potted ones.

Fine...but what did?

Without thinking, I made a move for the telephone and then remembered that was something else that had disappeared with everything else. I'd have to use the one in the kitchen.

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"I see what you mean," said Julie. Julie was not one of my goofier friends — very much the opposite. Only a few people I've met come up to Julie's level of thoughtful rationality. "If I hadn't been here before, I'd think that this was just a bare room with a stand of potted trees in it." She gave me a sympathetic look. "Kind of spooky. Maybe it's a media stunt."

The look I gave her wasn't so sympathetic. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but there hasn't been a whole lot of media activity around these parts."

"I mean like *Big Brother* or *Changing Rooms*, only done in the style of *Candid Camera*. I mean, whoever did it made sure they put down plastic to save the floor. Did you look for a hidden camera that might be recording your reactions?"

I gestured at the bare walls and ceiling. "You see any place that might be concealing a camera?" Julie pointed at the trees. Then, before I could answer, she stepped off the bare floor and into the midst of them. "Oh, my," she said faintly. She turned around, gazing at the trees as if she'd never seen anything like them before.

"Are you all right?" I said.

"Oh, sure," she said, her voice still very faint, as if she were speaking to me from a distance.

"Any cameras nestling in any branches that you can see?"

Without answering, she moved further into the group of trees and I began to get a sense of *actual distance*, as if she were now much farther away from me than it seemed.

"Julie?" I called.

She turned her head in my direction, tilting it to one side as if she were listening for something.

"Julie?" I said again, raising my voice.

She held her listening position a moment longer and then shrugged. Something to her right caught her attention.

"Julie!" I hollered but it was obvious that she hadn't heard me — couldn't hear me. She made her way through the trees slowly, and as she did, she was being obscured in some way, as if the air (the space?) between us was too thick to see through. Which made no sense at all, of course.

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Christina Mackie, *Iron Image Project (Pupils)*, 1999, courtesy of the artist.

"Julie!" I shouted and went around to the other side, thinking I could pull her out as she came forward, and then take her outside for some fresh air to clear away whatever it was — a mild hallucinogen borne on pollen or seeds, perhaps?

She was gone. I hurried around to the other side of the grouping, thinking I needed new contacts, and I *still* couldn't see her. Come on, I thought as I kept walking around the trees, my pace getting steadily faster, this wasn't a dense cluster in the woods, this was someone's idea of a joke in my living room.

Maybe. But it didn't matter what angle or direction I viewed the trees from, I could not see Julie among them anywhere. And the light was bad, and getting worse.

If there's a mild hallucinogen coming from those trees, you didn't necessarily have to be right in the middle of them to feel the effects, I realised.

I found a tissue in my bathrobe pocket and put it over my nose and mouth as I ran for the telephone again.

"So, what you're saying is, those aren't your trees." The policeman at my kitchen table looked up from his notebook. "And you don't know whose they are, or where they came from. Is that correct?"

I nodded.

"And all the furnishings in the living room were somehow removed."

"And the trees are drugged. Spiked with a drug, I mean, a hallucinogen of some kind."

One eyebrow went up as he referred to his notes.

"What makes you so sure it's the trees? And not, say, some kind of gas leak, or perhaps an allergy that affected your eyesight in some way?"

"Because my friend Julie is in there. In the trees."

The policeman nodded in that noncommittal way people do when they don't agree with you but don't want to show serious opposition yet. "What did you have for breakfast this morning?"

"Nothing. Not even coffee."

"Are you a diabetic, or taking any kind of medications for depression or schizophrenia?"

"I told you, no."

His radio said something I couldn't make out; he ignored it. "Did you go out last night?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "No, I did not go clubbing and take a million E's."

"Sometimes people can have their drinks spiked without their knowledge."

"You can see the trees as well as I can," I said. "Those aren't a delusion or a hallucination."

"True, but there's not so many of 'em that I couldn't

Toss something in there among the trees. See what happens.

see someone standing in the middle, now, am I right?"

"That's how it looks," I said. "But that's not the way it is."

The policeman stood up, flipping his notebook shut and sticking it in his back pocket. "If that were true, then it wouldn't be a police matter. You should call somebody like a UFO expert."

"Will you please go take another look?" I said. "Just one more before you go back to your headquarters and report there's a crank at this address?"

"Certainly." He didn't smile as he went back to the living room with me following. I put the tissue over my nose and mouth again. He noticed, and took a deep breath in through his nose. "I can't smell anything out of the ordinary" he said, almost apologetically.

"Does nerve gas have a smell?" I asked.

The notebook was back in his hand and open again.

"Do you keep weapons on the premises?"

"No," I said. "I just thought I'd raise the possibility of an odourless gas. Like carbon monoxide, for instance."

"Or oxygen," he added, and I could tell he'd had enough of me and my living room. "Which I believe is the end-product of photosynthesis. Not nerve gas or carbon monoxide." He circled the perimeter of the trees, looking them up and down, pausing to poke the plastic with the toe of his shoe, taking his time. When he finally got back to me, he flipped his notebook shut again, slid it back into his pocket, and shook his head.

"Just one more thing!" I said, grabbing his arm as he turned to leave. "Please. I promise this is the last thing. Really."

He gave a small sigh but didn't shake my hand off.

"Toss something in there among the trees. See what happens."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. A coin."

He looked pointedly at my bathrobe pocket; I showed him the tissue. He shrugged and found a pound in his own pocket. "Just as well," he said. "We don't want anyone saying I took money from a citizen now, do we." He pitched the coin underhand, aiming for the center of the grouping.

Now, I know what I saw, and I know he must have seen it, too, but denial is one of the strongest drives there is, maybe even stronger than sex or hunger, depending on the circumstances. What I saw was the coin *shrink* as it began its downward arc among the branches, and when it should have hit the floor, it had vanished completely.

The policeman frowned at the trees and then raised a suspicious eyebrow at me. "Neat trick, that."

"I didn't do anything."

"Landed in one of the pots, most likely," he said and took a step forward.

"No!" I said, grabbing his arm again. "Don't go in there, that's how my friend Julie disappeared. Wait, I'll find something bigger to toss in and then you'll see —"

Looking very put-upon, he removed my hand from his arm and stepped over the plastic boundary into the midst of the trees.

It was because he hadn't entered at the same place Julie had, was all I could figure. There must have been a minor slope or a dip or something. As I watched, he lost his balance and, arms pinwheeling desperately, he fell over sideways. He should have fallen on the nearest tree, of course, but instead I watched him shrink like the pound coin had, only much more quickly and dramatically, and wink out of sight in barely a second.

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That was two hours ago. Since then, I've been sitting right at the edge of the group of trees, hoping to see something, anything at all. I've written a few notes, weighted them with stones from the back garden, and tossed them in. Then I realized that I had better toss in something to write with as well, so I found a few pens and pencils and threw those in. Everything behaves exactly as the pound coin and the policeman did — they shrink and vanish. I don't know why Julie's disappearance was different — maybe it was the nature of the opening, or whatever it was she went through.

I suppose the police will be calling soon about the missing officer, and Julie's boyfriend will ring asking if I've seen her, and I don't know what I'll tell them. Maybe I'll just say they left and I don't know where they've gone, which is the absolute truth. I don't think the policeman's been able to call in by radio, as he's probably much too far out of range, which is why I haven't tossed in my cell phone.

The only other thing I've tossed in since I've been sitting here is the end of a length of old clothesline. I felt it catch on something and I gave it a pull, thinking I might pull whatever it is out into the living room, hoping that it might even be Julie or the policeman. But whoever — or whatever — was on the other end yanked back so strongly, I nearly got dragged in myself. So I let go, and the rest of the clothesline snaked into the trees and disappeared. I'm going to wait a little bit longer, to see if anything gets tossed back out from the trees —

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Just made a trip to the loo, or tried to. There's a beautiful potted tree where the commode used to be, and dangling from the branches is a bit of rope that I recognize.

I don't like the look of this.

END

Pat Cadigan is, to date, the only two-time winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the author of an even dozen books. The latest of these, *Dervish Is Digital*, will be out from Macmillan in the UK in October. Married to the Original Chris Fowler, she lives and works in scenic Haringey, where the trees grow out of the sidewalk.