

GAME

Bruce McAllister

Flash
Fiction Online

This game is called *Is Love Possible?* It's a virtual game—real cutting-edge interface software—that (1) draws on your life, hopes, and fears; (2) may or may not, my therapist says, have any therapeutic benefits; and (3) costs over two grand with my therapist's discount, and needs three more in hardware from Circuit City, Best Buy, wherever.

"Okay," I say, to make him happy.

When I start—the first level—my father is for the first time standing up to my mother. I'm at his side, five or six, and I'm standing up with him, too. He's taller and more confident, but handsome as ever, and with a winning smile he says, "I love you, but this can't go on, Dorothy. Don't you know how love works?"

In the second level I'm the oldest vampire, born the same night as God's Son and under unnervingly similar circumstances. I'm tired of being what I've been for 2000 years, and, because I want to be human, I've taken a stunning 30-year-old girlfriend and don't intend to bite her. This upsets the Brothers, my kids. When Great-Granddaddy flips, what's going to happen to them? "Don't you love us?" they ask.

In the third level I've been given a planet to rule. Perfect little marble in space, sapphire seas, emerald continents, puffy clouds, three moons. I'm 14 and I've got a girlfriend who looks like Kirsten Dunst who'll rule it with me. Very colonial. *Star Trek* meets *Babar and Celeste*. There are natives, of course, but we're enlightened; we rule benignly, and they just adore us because we're determined to keep the intergalactic conglomerates from exploiting this planet. It'll be a tough fight, but we've got our love—and theirs.

In the fourth level I'm myself and I've got an important mission—the kind you'd see in a thriller. I'll need a team to pull it off, so I Google my own name. When I've found fifty other Bradford Mackeys—there's a guy in Maine who makes rustic furniture out of twisted juniper, a Welshman who raises prize-winning pigeons that carry his (our) name, an RV salesman, a bush pilot in Alaska, a Calgary news anchor, the only police officer who's ever successfully sued a felon—I contact them and ask if they want to join me in my assignment, which is to



rescue a little boy from the Romanian orphanage that holds the record for training the most serial killers. A third say “yes.” One wants to come, and I tell him he can’t. He’s a horse trainer, has broken his back, and will be in a wheelchair for months. He starts crying and I relent. When we finally leave for Bucharest—from twelve different cities on four continents—there are fifteen of us. Interestingly, four have red hair, two are Jewish, four Catholic, two Buddhist, one a defrocked Baptist minister, and one a science fiction writer. We’ll make a great team, but can we save the boy? “Do we have enough love in us to pull it off?” the pigeon-raiser asks for the tenth time.

In the fifth level it’s 1965 and I’m working at Disneyland as a bus-boy. Peter Pan and the Big Bad Wolf are on acid. I’m telepathic somehow. Our supervisors are up on the Matterhorn watching us with binoculars, and their thoughts aren’t pretty. I’m dating this girl from the Fantasyland snack stand—who thinks I’m cute and loves to make out (I can read her mind, so I know)—but I don’t love her. My best friend, a crewcut engineering major at Whittier College, is the Magic Kingdom’s main hash dealer. Then we’re driving to LA to catch an art house film and I’ve never seen a roach-clip as long as his. He can drive with both hands on the wheel and still smoke. It’s impressive. The film, which is at least six hours long, is about a man who looks for love anywhere he can find it, and when he finally finds it (as an Army demolitions specialist) it blows both his hands off.

In the sixth level I’m a Hollywood agent standing on Beverly Drive betting another agent I can take any whore off the street and turn her into a star. It’s like *Pretty Woman*, kind of, and of course I fall in love with the woman, who looks more like Eric Roberts than Julia and takes me for everything I’m worth. It’s a love story, though, I think.

In the seventh level I’ve fallen in love with an Apache girl who, to become a woman, is dancing for three mind-altering days on a steer hide, the little scars on her arms recounting the years of her life. But I’m in love, or was—I remember this now—with a French girl in Montreal, where I lived for years to avoid a war. And before that (it’s coming back now) I was engaged to, and married, and lived happily with—until my death at 46—a deli owner’s daughter in Yonkers. As I watch the Apache girl dancing (I’m 18 and she’s 16, so

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it's okay—the reservation police look the other way) I see myself living another two grueling centuries during which I fall for sixty-six women, one of them not even from Earth. “Is it possible,” asks the shaman, who’s taken a break to have a Pepsi, “to love, really love, someone who isn’t your own species?”

“I don’t know,” I say, pulling out of the game, dizzy.

“You don’t know what?” my therapist asks, face blurry and way too close, his breath smelling of Pepsi.

“Whether you can really love someone of another species.”

“I didn’t ask that. I asked whether you beat it.”

“Beat what?”

“*The game, Mackey.*”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

He’s quiet for a second.

“Well, that’s okay,” he says at last, looking pale and tired. His wife’s left him, I remember. He cries at night. “It’s a start,” he says. ☹

BRUCE McALLISTER



Bruce McAllister
began publishing
fantasy, science

fiction, literary fiction, and poetry in another lifetime. His first story, written at 16, appeared in 1963 in Fred Pohl’s *IF* magazine and Judith Merrill’s *Year’s Best*. Since then his short fiction has appeared in numerous national magazines, literary quarterlies, and college readers. His novella “Dream Baby” was nominated for the Hugo award in 1988 and was a finalist for the Nebula and Locus awards; he later published a novel of the same name that has become a genre classic. (He has one other novel, titled *Humanity Prime*.)

He was away from writing for over a decade—the reasons too bizarre to synopsise—and is happy to be back. Stories recently in or accepted by *Aeon*, *Asimov’s*, *Descant*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Glimmer Train*, *Image*, *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet*, *SciFiction* and “year’s best” anthologies. His short story “Kin” was nominated for the Hugo in 2007, and can be read at the Asimov’s Web site or heard on Escape Pod. If you prefer paper, you can find “Kin” in his collection, *The Girl Who Loved Animals and Other Stories*, which was published in 2007.

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