

Eat My Stardust

Sarah Totton

Zif the magic beaver crawled out of the dam he'd burrowed in the duvet. He gazed at the 4-D polychromatic poster on the wall above his bed. It said:

The Reprehensible Ticktown Trio

Featuring:

Midway Evans on kazoo

The Ticktown Frog on the KitKat®

The Bird of Ticktown on the Bird of Ticktown

Playing October 5th only!

Riverside Park

The poster had blown through Zif's bedroom window one day, and over the course of several weeks, his imagination had run with the concept to such an extent that he had become not so much intrigued by the Reprehensible Ticktown Trio as a complete fan who would have had their babies, had he possessed the appropriate reproductive organs.

Today was October 5th. Today was the day the band would be playing in his hometown. Today was the day Zif planned to run away from home and become the Ticktown Trio's biggest groupie.

Zif extracted his knapsack from the depths of the duvet and checked its contents: a handful of maple twigs, (hidden from his mother who thought they were too good for

his teeth) a few of his favorite toys, and the jar of sperm that he normally kept at the foot of his bed for warding off fairies.

Checking complete, Zif crept to the edge of the bed and surveyed the carpet. It looked all clear, but one never could tell with carpet sharks. Zif hurled five chipmunks from the cache under his pillow into the depths of the deep pile of the carpet. With screams akin to a chainsaw biting into a silver birch, the chipmunks erupted in discrete, cinnamon tufts of fur. Apparently satiated, the carpet sharks lost interest, and the two uneaten chipmunks collected in a small huddled mass in the middle of the floor.

Zif judged it safe to cross, and after looking both ways for dorsal fins, he sprang across the carpet to the door. Nothing was going to stop him from seeing the Ticktown Trio. Not carpet sharks, not the 556 thumb tacks his mother had set on the stairs, not the footbath of hydrochloric acid she'd strategically placed at the bottom of them. But actually yes, this did stop him, or more properly, his mother did. Zif's acid-triggered screams reached the ears of his mother even under her industrial strength salon quality hair drier.

"Zif? Come here!"

Zif hop-hobbled into the kitchen where his mother was filing her fingernails to points.

"Have you finished your novel analogies yet, Zif? You know how much it's costing me to send you to that remedial school."

"Yes, I've finished them, mother."

"All right then." Zif's mother lifted a cereal bowl from the shelf and set it on the table. She poured a generous amount of hydrochloric acid into the bowl. It smelt like fresh vomit. With emphasis on clear enunciation, Zif's mother said, "Finish this sentence: 'Diamond is to tree as pearl is to oyster, *provided...*'"

Zif watched as his mother dipped a pointed fingernail into the acid and held it over his paw.

Zif took care to enunciate clearly; the size of his incisors caused him to lisp and that tended to make his mother even more cross than she usually was.

"Diamond is to tree as pearl is to oyster *provided...*" Zif looked to the floor tiles for inspiration. They were unhelpful. "...that..." Kitchen table, unhelpful. "that..." A bowl of apples, however... "Diamond is to tree as pearl is to oyster provided that diamonds are fruits, and I am a beaver."

His mother's expression remained neutral; she hadn't finished. With her acid-free hand she reached into the pocket of her housecoat and held out a small, unidentifiable rounded piece of plastic. "And what is this?"

"Einstein's earlobe?" said Zif.

Zif's mother regarded him with her disappointed expression. *You are never going to amount to anything*, said that look.

Zif wanted to tell her; *You're wrong. I am going to amount to something. I am going*

to run away and become the Ticktown Trio's biggest groupie. Zif kept this to himself, however, because his mother's acid-wet fingers were still poised above his paw.

"Zif, go and make yourself less useless. Get out into the backyard and tidy up."

"Yes, mother." Zif limped-walked out the back door, at which point he fell straight into the secret pit lined with porcupines, which his mother had spent all morning preparing. Several minutes' worth of wailing and gnashing of teeth followed as Zif plucked out all of the porcupine quills, or at least the ones that he could reach. Thankfully most of those ones had stuck into his knapsack.

While he was doing this his mother came out onto the back porch with a dustpan and broom.

"Mind your feet!" She pointed to the soles of Zif's feet, which had been partially burnt from the acid footbath and been well perforated by the thumbtacks. "You're tracking excelsior all over the kitchen floor." She emptied the dustpan into the garbage. "I'll stitch them up later. Go out and rake the leaves. And don't you dare try to eat any of the trees."

Zif hopped over the porcupine pit and proceeded to wrestle with the rake. Standing up, he only came to about half the height of the rake, and that made it difficult to manipulate.

Zif's mother often justified her treatment of Zif by telling him that she was simply preparing him for the harsh realities of the wide world. She was thinking exactly this when she retrieved the flame thrower from the utility room and began taking aim at

him as he gathered the leaves. Zif had yet to experience the wide world, but as he scampered around the garden dodging intermittent jets of fire, he suspected it couldn't be much worse than this. He dove into the narrow crevice between the back of the garden shed and the garden wall seconds before the explosion.

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Zif blinked away the rubble from his face and assessed his situation. He found himself sprawled in a narrow laneway. Behind him, the garden wall had blown out and collapsed into a pile of stones. His mother must have deployed the grenade launcher and demolished the wall.

Zif picked himself up and shook the plaster and paint from his fur. He didn't appear to have sustained any further damage. Nor had his belongings, which he retrieved from the pile of rubble and stuffed back into the dusty knapsack.

He kept expecting his mother to call him back at any moment, but no sound emanated from the other side of the wall.

Zif made his escape down the lane, still blinking in amazement. After a bit of searching and meandering, Zif arrived at Riverside Park. He marveled at the acres of lawn too short to hide even the flattest of grass sharks. He frolicked across the open field. How peculiar it was to be able to move about without being chased, scolded or shot at.

He then heard the muffled boom of the loudspeaker announcing the concert's imminence. Zif scampered gleefully across the field, where a number of seats had

been laid out in front of a makeshift stage.

The first thing he encountered on his way was a ticket wicket. In the window, a large sign had been posted:

Sperm donors: front row

Zif rummaged in his knapsack and produced the jar of sperm. The usher escorted Zif to the center of the front row, the best seat in the house, then promptly took possession of Zif's jar of sperm. Zif was so close to the stage that he could hear the band warming up. In fact, if he leaned forward very quickly, he could hit the stage with his nose and break his glasses, which he discovered after a few moments by trial and error. Zif felt electric tingles of anticipation. He was about to be within sniffing distance of the Ticktown Trio.

After a few minutes, it occurred to Zif that the reason he could hear every note the band was playing backstage was because there was absolutely no one else in the park. Well, apart from a woodchuck pulling a paper bag out of the garbage bin nearby, and of course, the usher back by the entrance peering through a microscope, checking on the motility of Zif's sperm. But apart from them, Zif had the place to himself.

The band filed out. Midway Evans, in a splendid blue body stocking, cut an imposing figure standing on the stage above Zif. He stood a cool 15 centimeters, having grown almost four centimeters since his last birthday. The Ticktown Frog followed, then lastly the Bird of Ticktown alit between them.

Zif applauded frantically.

Then Midway favored Zif with a glance. "Sperm donor?" he asked him.

"Um...yes," said Zif.

"Superb," said Midway. "Hit it, boys."

Behind Midway, the Ticktown Frog leapt up and down on top of a KitKat® bar, the muffled sound of snapping chocolate providing percussion. The Bird twittered, and Midway blew on his kazoo to the tune of...

Had Zif been in a stadium full of people, he wouldn't have dared to do it, but what with the informal atmosphere of the concert, he felt compelled to satiate his burning curiosity.

"Ahem, excuse me," said Zif, "but is that Brahms?"

Midway paused with his kazoo in mid-blow. "Hell no," he said. "It's Mozart. Brahms sucks."

"I agree," said Zif.

The Ticktown Frog stopped tramping on his KitKat® bar, which had by now been reduced to a mucoid muck with wafer fragments sticking out of it. "Don't be such a yes-man," said the Frog. "There's nothing wrong with Brahms when it's played on a Belgian seashell. Mozart isn't as demanding. One could even play it on Canadian

chocolate. Of course I would never—"

"Ooo!" said the Bird. "You Frogs with your chocolate fixation. Brahms, my vent! And Mozart's brain was a little bent if you ask me. What we should be doing, Midway, is some white-throated sparrow, or maybe a bit of chiffchaff. Why do I always have to play myself anyway? I'm a taken bird. It's not like I can pick up any fellow birds."

The Bird of Ticktown stopped twittering, and the Ticktown Trio were suddenly all staring at Zif.

"And what are you supposed to be, anyway?" said Midway to Zif.

"I'm Zif, the magic beaver."

"Magic beaver." Midway addressed his band. "Hey boys, do you believe this? He's a *magic* beaver."

The Frog ribbeted in hilarity. The Bird chortled.

"You are *never* a *magic* beaver," said Midway.

"That is just a quasi-stupid remark," said Zif. "And if I had more sense than brain cells I'd dignify it with a response." He had to stop at that point to work out whether or not he'd just insulted himself. He suspected he had because Midway started laughing.

On the one hand, Zif was affronted – after all, there was nothing inherently wrong with being a magic beaver. On the other hand, this was actually *the* Ticktown Trio

favoring him with their full attention, which was really quite flattering, even if they were all laughing at him.

"Listen!" said Zif. "I can be whatever I want to be. That's what my mother told me."

"Your mother never said that to you," said Midway. "You heard that on the television. Admit it: you're a sad little animal whose mother has a God Complex."

"Medusa Complex," said Zif.

"Look," said Midway, and he put his kazoo in his pocket and sat on the edge of the stage. "We've all got issues with our mothers. Mine made me out of modeling medium."

"Really?"

"Premium quality of course."

"Me too," said the Frog.

"Don't listen to him," said Midway. "Hey, listen...what's your name...Zif? Do you want some coffee?"

"Um..." Zif's mother didn't allow him to drink coffee. It caused him to scream at random intervals, and she preferred being able to predict when he screamed. "Sure."

Midway snapped his fingers. "Bird, fetch us some, would you?"

The Bird rolled its eyes and flitted off.

"So," said Midway. "Who's your favorite band, besides us?"

"Smoking Zephyrtiti."

"Ah yes, Smoking Zephyrtiti," said Midway. "If I weren't married to a songbird of unusual hue and texture, I could be quite hot for Zephyrtiti." Then he ducked and looked skyward furtively. "My wife has a tendency to strafe me when I annoy her."

"Wife?" said Zif. "But..."

"Yes, he's a male bird," said Midway. "I suppose you're wondering what we do with each other in private."

"Er..."

"We amuse ourselves playing early bird gets the worm," said Midway. "Hours of fun. You're not a *real* beaver, are you?"

"Well..." said Zif, "I could be. My mother made me out of a novel analogy coupled with a selective combination insight."

"That's as may be," said Midway. "But you're a stuffed animal."

"I happen to be stuffed with premium excelsior."

"Oooo!" said Midway. "Posh."

"I didn't mean to imply I was better than you. I'm sure there's nothing wrong with being made out of Plasticine."

"Premium modeling medium, not Plasticine," said Midway. "And anyway, it's not what you're made of. It's what you do with yourself. Look." He pulled up his shirt. "I can draw designs on my body and then rub them out afterwards."

"Oh, that's interesting," said Zif, noting that Midway had chosen to draw chest hair on himself.

The coffee arrived.

"I really shouldn't have that," said Zif. "It makes me scream."

"Have a shot anyway," said Midway.

Zif did. Midway looked thoughtful. "Can you scream in tune, perchance?"

"In tune? I suppose if I tried I could...Ahhhhh!!!"

"B Sharp," said Midway. "Not bad. Give me a D Flat."

Zif stared at him stupidly for a moment. "Oh, you want me to...Ahhhhh!"

"Needs work," said Midway. "But you've got potential." He put his arm around Zif.

"Do you know what I'm thinking?"

"No," said Zif.

"I wish I could read minds," said Midway with a smirk, "because then I'd know what I was thinking."

"I know what you're thinking," said the Bird. "The corruption of young minds."

"I think you're thinking," said Zif, "that the Ticktown Trio needs more mammals."

"Technically," said the Frog. "We need balance. A reptile would be ideal, if we want to cover our taxonomic bases. Or a fish."

"That is a Classist remark," said Midway.

"And then there is the mesofauna-microfauna gap," said the Frog.

"Which I would be closing if I joined you," said Zif. "And I have a flame-retardant pelt, should the audience get a little rowdy."

"We're all flame-retardant," said the Bird. "Acid-resistant, too."

The Bird and the Frog looked at Zif expectantly. Midway's expression said, *It's up to you.*

"All right," said Zif. "From a metaphysical standpoint...I put it to you that you are all figments of my imagination, and as such, you need me as much as I need you." He hopped onto the stage and slapped the remains of the KitKat® bar with his tail, sending a chocolate finger sailing across the park to land neatly on the usher's lap. The usher took a bite.

"If you put it that way..." said Midway.

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The next week, a poster flew through the bedroom window of one Deek Dondle while he was trying to release himself from the bear trap his mother had set in his bed that night.

The poster read:

The Reprehensible Ticktown Quartet

Playing, Thursday, July 5th. Only!!

Featuring:

Midway Evans on kazoo

The Ticktown Frog on KitKat®

The Bird of Ticktown on himself

Zif the Magic Beaver on coffee

When she's not out vaccinating the charismatic mesofauna (aka stray dogs) of India, Sarah Totton lives in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Her stories have appeared in *Writers of the Future Vol. XXII*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Polyphony 5*. She is the Regional Winner (for Canada and the Caribbean) in the 2007/2008 Commonwealth Short Story Competition.