



Zen
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About Bixby:

Drexel Jerome Lewis Bixby (January 11, 1923 Los Angeles, California – April 28, 1998 San Bernardino, California) was a American short story writer, editor and scriptwriter, best known for his comparatively small output in science fiction. He also wrote many westerns and used the pseudonyms D. B. Lewis, Harry Neal, Albert Russell, J. Russell, M. St. Vivant, Thornecliff Herrick and Alger Rome (for one collaboration with Algis Budrys). He is most famous for the 1953 story "It's a Good Life" which was the basis for a 1961 episode of *The Twilight Zone* and which was included in *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983). He also wrote four episodes for the *Star Trek* series, *Mirror, Mirror*, *Day of the Dove*, *Requiem for Methuselah*, and *By Any Other Name*, and he co-wrote the story upon which the classic sci-fi movie *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), television series, and novel by Isaac Asimov were based.

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IT'S difficult, when you're on one of the asteroids, to keep from tripping, because it's almost impossible to keep your eyes on the ground. They never got around to putting portholes in spaceships, you know—unnecessary when you're flying by GB, and psychologically inadvisable, besides—so an asteroid is about the only place, apart from Luna, where you can really see the stars.

There are so many stars in an asteroid sky that they look like clouds; like massive, heaped-up silver clouds floating slowly around the inner surface of the vast ebony sphere that surrounds you and your tiny foothold. They are near enough to touch, and you want to touch them, but they are so frighteningly far away ... and so beautiful: there's nothing in creation half so beautiful as an asteroid sky.

You don't want to look down, naturally.

I HAD left the *Lucky Pierre* to search for fossils (I'm David Koontz, the *Lucky Pierre's* paleontologist). Somewhere off in the darkness on either side of me were Joe Hargraves, gadgeting for mineral deposits, and Ed Reiss, hopefully on the lookout for anything alive. The *Lucky Pierre* was back of us, her body out of sight behind a low black ridge, only her gleaming nose poking above like a porpoise coming up for air. When I looked back, I could see, along the jagged rim of the ridge, the busy reflected flickerings of the bubble-camp the techs were throwing together. Otherwise all was black, except for our blue-white torch beams that darted here and there over the gritty, rocky surface.

The twenty-nine of us were E.T.I. Team 17, whose assignment was the asteroids. We were four years and three months out of Terra, and we'd reached Vesta right on schedule. Ten minutes after landing, we had known that the clod was part of the crust of Planet X—or Sorn, to give it its right name—one of the few such parts that hadn't been blown clean out of the Solar System.

That made Vesta extra-special. It meant settling down for a while. It meant a careful, months-long scrutiny of Vesta's every square inch and a lot of her cubic ones, especially by the life-scientists. Fossils, artifacts, animate life ... a surface chunk of Sorn might harbor any of these, or all. Some we'd tackled already had a few.

In a day or so, of course, we'd have the one-man beetles and crewboats out, and the floodlights orbiting overhead, and Vesta would be as exposed to us as a molecule on a microscreen. Then work would start in earnest. But in the meantime—and as usual—Hargraves, Reiss and I were out prowling, our weighted boots clomping along in darkness.

Captain Feldman had long ago given up trying to keep his science-minded charges from galloping off alone like this. In spite of being a military man, Feld's a nice guy; he just shrugs and says, "Scientists!" when we appear brightly at the airlock, waiting to be let out.

SO the three of us went our separate ways, and soon were out of sight of one another. Ed Reiss, the biologist, was looking hardest for animate life, naturally.

But I found it.

I HAD crossed a long, rounded expanse of rock—lava, wonderfully colored—and was descending into a boulder-cluttered pocket. I was nearing the "bottom" of the chunk, the part that had been the deepest beneath Sorn's surface before the blow-up. It was the likeliest place to look for fossils.

But instead of looking for fossils, my eyes kept rising to those incredible stars. You get that way particularly after several weeks of living in steel; and it was lucky that I got that way this time, or I might have missed the Zen.

My feet tangled with a rock. I started a slow, light-gravity fall, and looked down to catch my balance. My torch beam flickered across a small, red-furred teddy-bear shape. The light passed on. I brought it sharply back to target.

My hair did *not* stand on end, regardless of what you've heard me quoted as saying. Why should it have, when I already knew Yurt so well—considered him, in fact, one of my closest friends?

The Zen was standing by a rock, one paw resting on it, ears cocked forward, its stubby hind legs braced ready to launch it into flight. Big yellow eyes blinked unemotionally at the glare of the torch, and I cut down its brilliance with a twist of the polarizer lens.

The creature stared at me, looking ready to jump halfway to Mars or straight at me if I made a wrong move.

I addressed it in its own language, clucking my tongue and whistling through my teeth: "Suh, Zen—"

In the blue-white light of the torch, the Zen shivered. It didn't say anything. I thought I knew why. Three thousand years of darkness and silence ...

I said, "I won't hurt you," again speaking in its own language.

The Zen moved away from the rock, but not away from me. It came a little closer, actually, and peered up at my helmeted, mirror-glassed

head—unmistakably the seat of intelligence, it appears, of any race anywhere. Its mouth, almost human-shaped, worked; finally words came. It hadn't spoken, except to itself, for three thousand years.

"You ... are not Zen," it said. "Why—how do you speak Zennacai?"

It took me a couple of seconds to untangle the squeaking syllables and get any sense out of them. What I had already said to it were stock phrases that Yurt had taught me; I knew still more, but I couldn't speak Zennacai fluently by any means. Keep this in mind, by the way: I barely knew the language, and the Zen could barely remember it. To save space, the following dialogue is reproduced without bumbings, blank stares and *What-did-you-says?* In reality, our talk lasted over an hour.

"I am an Earthman," I said. Through my earphones, when I spoke, I could faintly hear my own voice as the Zen must have heard it in Vesta's all but nonexistent atmosphere: tiny, metallic, cricket-like.

"Eert ... mn?"

I pointed at the sky, the incredible sky. "From out there. From another world."

It thought about that for a while. I waited. We already knew that the Zens had been better astronomers at their peak than we were right now, even though they'd never mastered space travel; so I didn't expect this one to boggle at the notion of creatures from another world. It didn't. Finally it nodded, and I thought, as I had often before, how curious it was that this gesture should be common to Earthmen and Zen.

"So. Eert-mn," it said. "And you know what I am?"

When I understood, I nodded, too. Then I said, "Yes," realizing that the nod wasn't visible through the one-way glass of my helmet.

"I am—last of Zen," it said.

I said nothing. I was studying it closely, looking for the features which Yurt had described to us: the lighter red fur of arms and neck, the peculiar formation of flesh and horn on the lower abdomen. They were there. From the coloring, I knew this Zen was a female.

The mouth worked again—not with emotion, I knew, but with the unfamiliar act of speaking. "I have been here for—for—" she hesitated—"I don't know. For five hundred of my years."

"For about three thousand of mine," I told her.

AND then blank astonishment sank home in me—astonishment at the last two words of her remark. I was already familiar with the Zens' enormous intelligence, knowing Yurt as I did ... but imagine thinking to qualify *years* with *my* when just out of nowhere a visitor from another

planetary orbit pops up! And there had been no special stress given the distinction, just clear, precise thinking, like Yurt's.

I added, still a little awed: "We know how long ago your world died."

"I was child then," she said, "I don't know—what happened. I have wondered." She looked up at my steel-and-glass face; I must have seemed like a giant. Well, I suppose I was. "This—what we are on—was part of Sorn, I know. Was it—" She fumbled for a word—"was it atom explosion?"

I told her how Sorn had gotten careless with its hydrogen atoms and had blown itself over half of creation. (This the E.T.I. Teams had surmised from scientific records found on Eros, as well as from geophysical evidence scattered throughout the other bodies.)

"I was child," she said again after a moment. "But I remember—I remember things *different* from this. Air ... heat ... light ... how do I live here?"

Again I felt amazement at its intelligence; (and it suddenly occurred to me that astronomy and nuclear physics must have been taught in Sorn's "elementary schools"—else that *my years* and *atom explosion* would have been all but impossible). And now this old, old creature, remembering back three thousand years to childhood—probably to those "elementary schools"—remembering, and defining the differences in environment between *then* and *now*; and more, wondering at its existence in the different *now*—

And then I got my own thinking straightened out. I recalled some of the things we had learned about the Zen.

Their average lifespan had been 12,000 years or a little over. So the Zen before me was, by our standards, about twenty-five years old. Nothing at all strange about remembering, when you are twenty-five, the things that happened to you when you were seven ...

But the Zen's question, even my rationalization of my reaction to it, had given me a chill. Here was no cuddly teddy bear.

This creature had been born before Christ!

She had been alone for three thousand years, on a chip of bone from her dead world beneath a sepulchre of stars. The last and greatest Martian civilization, the *L'hrai*, had risen and fallen in her lifetime. And she was twenty-five years old.

"How do I live here?" she asked again.

I got back into my own framework of temporal reference, so to speak, and began explaining to a Zen what a Zen was. (I found out later from Yurt that biology, for the reasons which follow, was one of the most

difficult studies; so difficult that nuclear physics actually *preceded* it!) I told her that the Zen had been, all evidence indicated, the toughest, hardest, longest-lived creatures God had ever cooked up: practically independent of their environment, no special ecological niche; just raw, stubborn, tenacious life, developed to a fantastic extreme—a greater force of life than any other known, one that could exist almost anywhere under practically any conditions—even floating in midspace, which, asteroid or no, this Zen was doing right now.

The Zens breathed, all right, but it was nothing they'd had to do in order to live. It gave them nothing their incredible metabolism couldn't scrounge up out of rock or cosmic rays or interstellar gas or simply do without for a few thousand years. If the human body is a furnace, then the Zen body is a feeder pile. Maybe that, I thought, was what evolution always worked toward.

"Please, will you kill me?" the Zen said.

I'D been expecting that. Two years ago, on the bleak surface of Eros, Yurt had asked Engstrom to do the same thing. But I asked, "Why?" although I knew what the answer would be, too.

The Zen looked up at me. She was exhibiting every ounce of emotion a Zen is capable of, which is a lot; and I could recognize it, but not in any familiar terms. A tiny motion here, a quiver there, but very quiet and still for the most part. And *that* was the violent expression: restraint. Yurt, after two years of living with us, still couldn't understand why we found this confusing.

Difficult, aliens—or being alien.

"I've tried so often to do it myself," the Zen said softly. "But I can't. I can't even hurt myself. Why do I want you to kill me?" She was even quieter. Maybe she was crying. "I'm alone. Five hundred years, Eertmn—not too long. I'm still young. But what good is it—life—when there are no other Zen?"

"How do you know there are no other Zen?"

"There are no others," she said almost inaudibly. I suppose a human girl might have shrieked it.

A child, I thought, when your world blew up. And you survived. Now you're a young three-thousand-year-old woman ... uneducated, afraid, probably crawling with neuroses. Even so, in your thousand-year terms, young lady, you're not too old to change.

"Will you kill me?" she asked again.

And suddenly I was having one of those eye-popping third-row-center views of the whole scene: the enormous, beautiful sky; the dead clod, Vesta; the little creature who stood there staring at me—the brilliant-ignorant, humanlike-alien, old-young creature who was asking me to kill her.

For a moment the human quality of her thinking terrified me ... the feeling you might have waking up some night and finding your pet puppy sitting on your chest, looking at you with wise eyes and white fangs gleaming ...

Then I thought of Yurt—smart, friendly Yurt, who had learned to laugh and wisecrack—and I came out of the jeebies. I realized that here was only a sick girl, no tiny monster. And if she were as resilient as Yurt ... well, it was his problem. He'd probably pull her through.

But I didn't pick her up. I made no attempt to take her back to the ship. Her tiny white teeth and tiny yellow claws were harder than steel; and she was, I knew, unbelievably strong for her size. If she got suspicious or decided to throw a phobic tizzy, she could scatter shreds of me over a square acre of Vesta in less time than it would take me to yelp.

"Will you—" she began again.

I tried shakily, "Hell, no. Wait here." Then I had to translate it.

I WENT back to the *Lucky Pierre* and got Yurt. We could do without him, even though he had been a big help. We'd taught him a lot—he'd been a child at the blow-up, too—and he'd taught us a lot. But this was more important, of course.

When I told him what had happened, he was very quiet; crying, perhaps, just like a human being, with happiness.

Cap Feldman asked me what was up, and I told him, and he said, "Well, I'll be blessed!"

I said, "Yurt, are you sure you want us to keep hands off ... just go off and leave you?"

"Yes, please."

Feldman said, "Well, I'll be blessed."

Yurt, who spoke excellent English, said, "Bless you all."

I took him back to where the female waited. From the ridge, I knew, the entire crew was watching through binocs. I set him down, and he fell to studying her intently.

"I am not a Zen," I told her, giving my torch full brilliance for the crew's sake, "but Yurt here is. Do you see ... I mean, do you know what you look like?"

She said, "I can see enough of my own body to—and—yes ... "

"Yurt," I said, "here's the female we thought we might find. Take over."

Yurt's eyes were fastened on the girl.

"What—do I do now?" she whispered worriedly.

"I'm afraid that's something only a Zen would know," I told her, smiling inside my helmet. "I'm not a Zen. Yurt is."

She turned to him. "You will tell me?"

"If it becomes necessary." He moved closer to her, not even looking back to talk to me. "Give us some time to get acquainted, will you, Dave? And you might leave some supplies and a bubble at the camp when you move on, just to make things pleasanter."

By this time he had reached the female. They were as still as space, not a sound, not a motion. I wanted to hang around, but I knew how I'd feel if a Zen, say, wouldn't go away if I were the last man alive and had just met the last woman.

I moved my torch off them and headed back for the *Lucky Pierre*. We all had a drink to the saving of a great race that might have become extinct. Ed Reiss, though, had to do some worrying before he could down his drink.

"What if they don't like each other?" he asked anxiously.

"They don't have much choice," Captain Feldman said, always the realist. "Why do homely women fight for jobs on the most isolated space outposts?"

Reiss grinned. "That's right. They look awful good after a year or two in space."

"Make that twenty-five by Zen standards or three thousand by ours," said Joe Hargraves, "and I'll bet they look beautiful to each other."

We decided to drop our investigation of Vesta for the time being, and come back to it after the honeymoon.

Six months later, when we returned, there were twelve hundred Zen on Vesta!

Captain Feldman was a realist but he was also a deeply moral man. He went to Yurt and said, "It's indecent! Couldn't the two of you control yourselves at least a little? *Twelve hundred kids!*"

"We were rather surprised ourselves," Yurt said complacently. "But this seems to be how Zen reproduce. Can you have only half a child?"

Naturally, Feld got the authorities to quarantine Vesta. Good God, the Zen could push us clear out of the Solar System in a couple of generations!

I don't think they would, but you can't take such chances, can you?

—JEROME BIXBY

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