

Wicked Smart

by Alan Lightman

It is early evening and I am putting my daughter to bed. She sits beside me in her yellow pajamas, with her head against my shoulder. For the third time, we are making our way through the *Just So Stories*. My daughter wants to know if the magic Djinn in charge of All Deserts could really cause the Camel's back to puff up so suddenly, and what good is the hump anyway. She has asked this before. Tonight, I am prepared, having looked up camels in the library and talked to some knowledgeable friends. The hump, I explain, is made of fat, which all animals need to live on when they can't find food. The camel keeps all its fat in one place, on its back, so that the rest of its body can cool off more easily. Staying cool is important in the desert. The penguin, on the other hand, needs to stay warm, and it spreads its fat in a thick layer all over its body, like a blanket. I tuck my daughter in.

"Daddy, camels are wicked smart, aren't they," she says, yawning.

"Not really," I say. "Camels didn't figure things out on their own. Nature spent millions and millions of years working on camels, making lots of mistakes until they came out right."

I turn off the lights. The streetlight outside shines through the bedroom window. I think of my visit to New York last week, coming into the city at night on a bus, the buildings and towers all lit up, slender and beautiful and fragile, like miniatures. And then, on the Queensboro Bridge, with the streetlights passing one by one, the light pulsed on the vinyl seat in front of me, making it look like throbbing skin, the very thin skin on a person's throat, quivering with each pulse of blood in the veins beneath.

My daughter sneezes. "Guess what I made in school today, Daddy," she says.

"What?"

"A Pilgrim, for Thanksgiving. And before that, I climbed up the fourth rung of the ladder. The fourth rung. Mrs. Gauthier saw me."

I kiss her and walk to the window. "Come look at the moon with me," I whisper. She gets out of bed and tiptoes barefoot across the carpet. We open the white shutters.

"Men have gone to the moon and walked on it," I say. "Just a few years ago."

The night is broken by the sound of a car down the street.

I look at the moon again, hanging in space, and I imagine giant wheels of steel rotating silently in the darkness overhead. I imagine thousands of satellites whizzing around the planet in all directions, narrowly missing one another, the new toys of new creatures. I imagine smooth cylinders suddenly launched upward, lighting the night with the red fire from their engines, arcing toward cities. And below, the ancient earth waits.

"Back to bed," I whisper to my daughter. I tuck her in again, folding the blanket carefully across her chest.

"Daddy," she says, "will you read to me again about the Djinn, and how he made the hump puff up with magic?"

"Another night," I answer.