



**JEANETTE  
WINTERSON**  
**THE STONE  
GODS**

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The Stone Gods  
by  
Jeanette Winterson

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# *Planet Blue*

This new world weighs a yatto-gram.

But everything is trial-size; tread-on-me tiny or blurred-out-of-focus huge. There are leaves that have grown as big as cities, and there are birds that nest in cockleshells. On the white sand there are long-toed clawprints deep as nightmares, and there are rock pools in hand-hollows finned by invisible fish.

Trees like skyscrapers, and housing as many. Grass the height of hedges, nuts the swell of pumpkins. Sardines that would take two men to land them. Eggs, pale-blue-shelled, each the weight of a breaking universe.

And, underneath, mushrooms soft and small as a mouse ear. A crack like a cut, and inside a million million microbes wondering what to do next. Spores that wait for the wind and never look back.

Moss that is concentrating on being green.

A man pushes forward with a microphone – ‘And is there oxygen?’ Yes, there is. ‘And fresh water?’ Abundant. ‘And no pollution?’ None. Are there minerals? Is there gold? What’s the weather like? Does it rain a lot? Has anyone tried the fish? Are there any humans? No, there are not any humans. Any intelligent life at all?

Depends what you mean by intelligent. There is something there, yes, and it’s very big and very good at its job.

A picture of a scaly-coated monster with metal-plated

jaws appears on the overhead screen. The crowd shrieks and swoons. No! Yes! No! Yes!

The most efficient killing machine ever invented before gunpowder. Not bad for a thing with a body the size of a stadium and a brain the size of a jam-jar.

I am here today to answer questions: ‘The lady in pink –’  
‘Are these monsters we can see vegetarian?’

‘Ma’am, would you be vegetarian with teeth like that?’

It’s the wrong answer. I am here to reassure. A scientist steps forward. That’s better. Scientists are automatically reassuring.

This is a very exciting, and very reassuring, day.

We are here today to witness the chance of a lifetime. The chance of many lifetimes. The best chance we have had since life began. We are running out of planet and we have found a new one. Through all the bright-formed rocks that jewel the sky, we searched until we found the one we will call home. We’re moving on, that’s all. Everyone has to do that some time or other, sooner or later, it’s only natural.

My name is Billie Crusoe.

‘Excuse me, is your name Billie Crusoe?’

‘That’s me.’

‘From Enhancement Services?’

‘Yes, Every Day a New Day.’ (As we say in Enhancement.)

‘Can you tell viewers how the new planet will affect their lives?’

‘Yes, I can. The new planet offers us the opportunity to do things differently. We’ve had a lot of brilliant successes

here on Orbus – well, we are the success story of the universe, aren't we? I mean to say, no other planet hosts human life.'

The interviewer nods and smiles vigorously.

'But we have taken a few wrong turnings. Made a few mistakes. We have limited natural resources at our disposal, and a rising population that is by no means in agreement as to how our world as a whole should share out these remaining resources. Conflict is likely. A new planet means that we can begin to redistribute ourselves. It will mean a better quality of life for everyone – the ones who leave, and the ones who stay.'

'So a win-win situation?'

'That's right, winning numbers all the way.'

Through the golden arches that are the city gates, the President of the Central Power is arriving. The arches stand like angels, their wings folded back against the lesser lights of the skyline.

The laser-gates, which look so solid, appear and disappear, like the wall that rings the city, a visible and invisible sign of progress and power.

Look in the light – the slight shimmer is their long energy. They are the aura of the city: emblem and warning, its halo and shield.

The President's cavalcade has reached the Circle. Flags, carpets, flowers, flunkeys, hitmen, pressmen, front-men, back-up, support, medics, techies, crew, rig, lights, sound, real-time, archive, relay, vox-pop, popcorn, polish, makeup, dust-down, ready, green – GO.

The President is making a speech. The Central Power has funded the space mission for hundreds of years, and it is

understood that any discoveries belong to us. He compares us to the men who found the Indies, the Americas, the Arctic Circle; he becomes emotional, he reaches for a line of poetry. For a moment, there it is, in handwriting that nobody can read, slanting under the images of Planet Blue – *She is all States, all Princes I . . .*

The President is making a speech.

Unique moment for mankind . . . unrivalled opportunity . . . war averted . . . summit planned between the Central Power, Eastern Caliphate, and our friends in the Sino-Mosco Pact. Peaceful compromise promised. New planets for old. Full pictures and information across the twenty-two geo-cities of the Central Power by tomorrow morning. New colonizing mission being made ready. Monsters will be humanely destroyed, with the possible exception of scientific capture of one or two types for the Zooeum.

Into the Circle come the spacemen themselves, in shiny titanium pressure suits, oversize helmets under their arms. These are men glamorous as comets, trailing fame in fire-tails.

There's a robot with them – well, a *Robo sapiens*, incredibly sexy, with that look of regret they all have before they are dismantled. It's policy; all information-sensitive robots are dismantled after mission, so that their data cannot be accessed by hostile forces. She's been across the universe, and now she's going to the recycling unit. The great thing about robots, even these *Robo sapiens*, is that nobody feels sorry for them. They are only machines.

She stands there, while the silver-suited saviours shake the President's hand. She's going to tell us all about the chemical and mineral composition of the new planet, its atmospheric readings, its possible history and potential

evolution. Then, when the public part is done, she'll go backstage, transfer all her data, and open her power cells until her last robot flicker.

The End.

It's a kind of suicide, a kind of bleeding to death, but they show no emotion because emotions are not part of their programming.

Amazing to look so convincing and be nothing but silicon and a circuit-board.

She glances over to the Support Stand and catches my eye. I can't help blushing. I think she has read my mind. They can do that.

This is a great day for science. The last hundred years have been hell. The doomsters and the environmentalists kept telling us we were as good as dead and, hey presto, not only do we find a new planet, but it is perfect for new life. This time, we'll be more careful. This time we will learn from our mistakes. The new planet will be home to the universe's first advanced civilization. It will be a democracy – because whatever we say in public, the Eastern Caliphate isn't going to be allowed within a yatto-mile of the place. We'll shoot 'em down before they land. No, we won't shoot them down, because the President of the Central Power has just announced a new world programme of No War. We will not shoot down the Eastern Caliphate, we will robustly repel them.

The way the thinking is going in private, we'll leave this run-down rotting planet to the Caliphate and the SinoMosco Pact, and they can bomb each other to paste while the peace-loving folks of the Central Power ship civilization to the new world.

★

*The new world – El Dorado, Atlantis, the Gold Coast, Newfoundland, Plymouth Rock, Rapanau, Utopia, Planet Blue. Chanc'd upon, spied through a glass darkly, drunken stories strapped to a barrel of rum, shipwreck, a Bible Compass, a giant fish led us there, a storm whirled us to this isle. In the wilderness of space, we found . . .*

My name is Billie Crusoe. Here comes my boss, Manfred. He's the kind of man who was born to rise and rise: a human elevator.

'Billie, have you voiced through the downloads?'

'Yes, everything is there – sketches, diagrams, and a step-by-step explanation of how Planet Blue will change all our lives.'

'We have to present this positively.'

'It is positive, isn't it? Are you saying there are presentation problems with the chance that everyone is dying for?'

'Don't use the word "dying".'

'But Orbus is dying.'

'Orbus is not dying. Orbus is evolving in a way that is hostile to human life.'

'OK, so it's the planet's fault. We didn't do anything, did we? Just fucked it to death and kicked it when it wouldn't get up.'

'I know how you feel. I don't say you're entirely wrong in your analysis, but that isn't the way we can present the situation. The President has sent a memo this morning to instruct Enhancement Services and Media Services to work together on this. We don't want any stupid questions – any difficulties. The last thing the Central Power needs now is any unrest of our own. There will be trouble enough with the Caliphate and the Pact.'

‘Because you’re not giving a ride to either the Believers or the Collective?’

‘When did they ever do anything for us?’

The Central Power is trying to live responsibly on a crowded planet, and that bunch are still scanning the skies for God, and draining the last drops of oil out of the ground. They can go to Hell.’

Manfred looked down at my notebook. He frowned his older-man-thinker-type-sexy frown. ‘Billie, if you weren’t so eccentric, you’d fit in better here. Why are you writing in a notebook? Nobody reads and writes any more – there’s no need. Why can’t you use a SpeechPad like everybody else?’

‘Notebook. Pencil. They have an old-fashioned charm that I like.’

‘And I like the present just as it is. You still living in that bio-bubble thing?’

‘You mean the farm? Of course I am. If I’d been able to make it pay I wouldn’t be working for you. But a world that clones its meat in the lab and engineers its crops underground thinks natural food is dirty and diseased.’

‘It is.’

‘Yeah. And pigs are planes. So the farm is leased to Living Museum and I am enslaved to you.’

‘You don’t get many scientists coming across to work in Enhancement . . . It’s not exactly a career move.’

I had a feeling that something else was here – one of those ice-bound conversations that skate over the corpse in the lake. ‘Is there a problem with my work?’

Manfred shrugged. ‘Like I said, a Science Service high-flyer doesn’t need to take a job with Enhancement.’

‘You work for Enhancement.’

He was getting impatient. ‘Billie, I’m going to be running the whole shooting match within two years. I have a graph. I have a Promotion Plan. I’m heading for the top floor.’ (Yep, there he goes, Penthouse Man.) ‘You aren’t heading anywhere. You could have been promoted to Management within six months, but you’re still on the ground, visiting people in their homes.’

‘That’s me, a cross between a District Nurse and an Insurance Salesman.’

‘What’s a District Nurse?’

‘Never mind. History is a hobby of mine. It’s not illegal, and neither is the farm, and neither is wanting a simple life. No graph, no Promotion Plan. OK?’

‘OK. OK.’

He held up his hands. He turned to leave. ‘Oh, you should move your Solo. Enforcement just gave you a ticket.’

‘But I have a permit!’

‘Take it up with Enforcement.’

‘Manfred, this has been going on for a year – I clear them, they start again. I’m not paranoid, but if someone is out to get me, I would like to know.’

‘No one is out to get you. But move the Solo. I would if I were you.’

He swung his handsome body and handsome head out and away to higher things.

Manfred is one of those confident men who have had themselves genetically Fixed as late-forties. Most men prefer to Fix younger than that, and there are no women who Fix past thirty. ‘The DNA Dynasty’, they called us, when the first generation of humans had successful recoding. Age is information failure. The body loses fluency. Command stations no longer connect with satellite

stations. Relay breaks down. The body is designed to repair and renew itself, and most cells are only about a third as old as our birth years, but mitochondrial DNA is as old as we are, and has always accumulated mutations and distortions faster than DNA in the nucleus. For centuries we couldn't fix that – and now we can.

Science can't fix everything, though – women feel they have to look youthful, men less so, and the lifestyle programmes are full of the appeal of the older man. Everybody wants one – young girls and gay toyboys adore Manfred. His boyfriend has designed a robot that looks like him. Myself, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

I went downstairs, through the clotted ranks of Security and Support, officially known as Enforcement Services and Enhancement Services, but the SS has a better ring to it than the EE. We work together a lot of the time, soft-cop hard-cop kind of thing. It's my job – that is, our job – in Enhancement to explain to people that they really do want to live their lives in a way that is good for them and good for the Community. Enforcement steps in when it doesn't quite work out.

I know all the guys in Enforcement. I wave and smile. They nod, and let me pass.

Outside, there's a line of Solos and a line of Limos.

S is for Solo – a single-seater solar-powered transport vehicle. L is for Limo, a multi-seater hydrogen hybrid. S is for short-distance. L is for long-distance. Single-letter recognition is taught in schools.

In front of one of these vehicles, and one only, a CanCop is punching numbers into the Coder wired into his arm. CanCops are always around for back-up at high-security

events – all they are is robots, soup cans with the power of Arrest.

On one of the long line of vehicles – and only one, mine – a bright yellow laser-light is covering the windshield. That's my penalty notice. Unless I press the yellow button on the parking meter next to it, I will not be able to drive away because I will not be able to see out of my glass. It's a clever system – you have to accept guilt before you can drive away and protest your innocence.

P is for Parking Meter. Slide up to the kerb, get out, look around, and the shiny solar-powered parking meter says to you, in its shiny solar-powered parking-meter voice – *Hi there! You can park here for thirty minutes. I will bill your account directly. Welcome to the neighbourhood.*

The meter then photographs your licence plate, connects to your Parking Account, which you must keep in credit at all times, and sends a digital receipt to your HomeScreen or your WorkScreen, whichever you have nominated. That's all there is to it, unless you run late, in which case the meter will laser-light your windshield in such a way as to make it impossible for you to drive off without accepting the Penalty.

So here I am – and I've been booked, even though I have a great big permit on the front of the car, with the date and time of my arrival and the impressive symbol of the Central Power.

I have been booked – again. If I were the paranoid type, which I am, I might almost start to believe that . . . Believe what?

I wave my arms at the CanCop, and point to the permit. He shrugs his tin shoulders. The guys from Enforcement are laughing – it's true this kind of cock-up, or cop-up,

happens all the time, and it's a bore but not a problem . . . The trouble is that, for me, it's becoming a big problem.

I get out my Omni – the phone that does everything – and it automatically accesses the Parking Bureau Help Line. A sympathetic face flashes up in blonde pixels on my phone. 'DUE TO . . .' I slam her off before she gets any further.

D is for Due to. Whenever anybody calls to complain, a sympathetic person – well, a sympathetic robot, actually, because they are programmed to be more sympathetic than persons. Anyway, this sympathetic robot says, 'DUE TO', and you know that due to a high volume of calls, due to heavy demand, due to staff shortages, due to difficulties, due to system failure, due to freak storms, due to little green men squatting the offices, well, DUE TO, nobody is going to speak to you, at least not in this lifetime.

Fuck it fuck it fuck it. F is for Fuck it.

And in the middle of this hi-tech, hi-stress, hi-mess life, F is for Farm. My farm. Twenty hectares of pastureland and arable, with a stream running through the middle like a memory. Step into that water and you remember everything, and what you don't remember, you invent.

My farm is the last of its line – like an ancient ancestor everyone forgot. It's a bio-dome world, secret and sealed: a message in a bottle from another time.

The soil is deep clay and the cattle make holes in it where they herd to feed. The holes fill with water, then ice over, and the birds crack open the ice to drink. The woodland belts that hold the fields are thick with branches thick with birds. At evening the sky above the wood is dark with the wings of birds.

The rough fences, the uneven ground, the tussocks of grass, the tiny blue violets that grow where the cattle go, the poppies that change the furrowed earth into a red sea that hares part. The distance the eye follows to whatever moves and dives, the life that fills every bit of uncultivated hedge and verge. The burrows, tunnels, nests, tree-hollows, wasp-balls, drilled-out holes of the water voles, otter sticks, toad stones, mice riddling the dry-stone walls, badger sets, molehills, fox dens, rabbit warrens, stoats brown in summer, ermine in winter, clean as bullets through the bank. The trout shy in the reeds. The carp dozing on the riverbed. Dragonflies like Annunciations. A kingfisher on wings of blue light. A green-headed duck and a white swan dropping under the white-foamed fall of the green water to the bottom of the clough where the frogs wait patiently to be in a fairytale.

There is no magic wand here. If I don't move the Solo in the next five minutes, yellow will change to orange will change to red, not the way the sun changes, to mark the day, but so that my fine gets bigger. Press the button, Billie. Press the bloody button. B is for Billie, button and bloody.

*THANK YOU!* says the parking meter. *You are ready to drive away.*

There won't be any parking meters on the new blue planet. That alone makes the visit worth the trip.

I have an appointment today with a woman who wants to be genetically reversed to twelve years old to stop her husband running after schoolgirls. It's possible, but it's illegal. She wants to take her case to the Court of Human Rights. She's already seen a psychiatrist and a Consultant

specializing in Genetics. Now she has to talk to me, woman to woman, because Enhancement is here to Listen when You have Problems.

I key in my destination co-ordinates, and the Solo makes its way across to the Business Lane. This is peak-hour driving and I am paying the price mile by mile. In the Leisure Lane, nobody is paying at all but, then, nobody is moving either.

The first pictures of Planet Blue are beginning to appear on the smart-skins of the buildings. It's as though we are driving straight towards it. There it is, pristine, diamond-cut, and the zooms show miles and miles of empty beauty. Everyone on the highway is watching. It doesn't matter: magnetic rebuff stops anyone driving into anyone else. We just stay in line and get there some day. Yeah, we'll get there some day, blue planet, silver stars.

The Solo is beeping. Voice Announce tells me to turn right, and the wall-screen on the corner of the road flashes a picture of a bell. This must be Belle Vue Drive. Etymology was one of the victims of State-approved mass illiteracy. Sorry, a move towards a more integrated, user-friendly day-to-day information and communications system. (Voice and pictures, yes; written words, no.)

As I make the turn, I drive straight towards a BeatBot.

*BeatBots*: direct descendants of a low-paid State Functionary that used to be called a Traffic Warden. As everyone knew, these types were inhuman, and it made more sense to build them than to hire them, so as soon as the technology became available, that was what we did.

The BeatBot waves me over, and buzzes out his question in his trademark synthesized voice that sounds like wasps in a dustbin. BeatBots don't have to sound like this, but

they do: Why was I hesitating on a busy turn from a main highway?

I tell him I was just waiting to see the road sign. He mumbles something into the radio that is an extension of his chin, and the next thing I know, a couple of Nifties are checking out the underside of the car with mirrors.

*Nifties*: annoying little micro-Bots that scuttle around in drains and fix underfloor heating. Most people keep a couple in the car in case they want something picked up off the floor or need a foot massage. Nifties have no personality, and they look like a box on wheels with a retractable aerial at each corner. They were designed for busy people on the move – which is all of us, because staying still is so last-century.

‘What’s the problem?’ I ask the Bot, but he won’t answer, because BeatBots have very limited powers of speech.

I must not get paranoid – Bots are a typical happening on a typical road here in Tech City, because Tech City is where every single robot in the twenty-two geo-cities of the Central Power is designed and made. Naturally, or unnaturally, I suppose, we have a lot of them.

R is for Robot.

There’s Kitchenhand for the chores, Flying Feet to run errands or play football with the kids. Garagehand – that’s the big hairy one that’s good with a spanner. There’s Lend-a-Hand too, for the temporarily unpartnered.

We have Robo-paws, the perfect pet – depending on your definition of perfect. We have TourBots, for hire when you visit a new place and need someone to show you round. We have bottom of the range LoBots, who have no feet because they spend all their time on their knees cleaning up. And we have BeatBots. Yeah.

Mine has finished chewing over the car, and issued an Offence Code. I don't know what my offence is – but I do know it's impossible to argue with a BeatBot. I'll have to take it up with the Computer later.

The BeatBot shuffles off in his oversize nano-parka with intelligent hood. The hood is the bit that processes information – the rest of the Bot is just a moving lump of metal – which is what all robots are, when you come down to it, until the big breakthrough.

*Robo sapiens.*

As far away from a BeatBot as Neanderthal Man is from us. No, I have to revise that because we are regressing. Oh, yes, it's true – we have no need for brains so our brains are shrinking. Not all brains, just most people's brains – it's an inevitable part of progress.

Meanwhile, the *Robo sapiens* is evolving.

The first artificial creature that looks and acts human, and that can evolve like a human – within limits, of course.

There are not very many of them, and they are fabulously expensive to make. If you want the ultimate piece of personal-wealth display, you get a *Robo sapiens*. The President of the Central Power keeps a pair who work as his PA and BodyGuard. They remember everything – faces, information, numbers, conversation – and they can make connections. These are robots who join the dots. Ask them for advice, and they will give it to you: impartial advice based on everything that can be known about the situation.

Ask them what you were doing this time two years ago, and they will tell you. Ask them what you ate at your wife's first G party and they have the menu off by heart. Except that they don't have hearts.

★

Heartless. Gorgeous. Even so, I have never seen one as impressive as the one they took with them to Planet Blue. She was built especially for the job, but did she need to be so beautiful too?

Inter-species sex is punishable by death.

Looking down the street at the numbers, it seems that my client is throwing a G party. In the past, people had birthdays. I have charted all of that through the Central Archive. Now birthdays don't matter because they mark the passing of the years, and for us years don't pass in the way that they once did. G is the day and year you genetically fix. It's a great day to celebrate.

I park the Solo on the meter outside the house. *Hi there!* says the hateful familiar voice. I ignore it and key in my override code, which Enhancement officers can do when on work-related calls. *All set! See you later!*

I kick it for fun. Nothing happens, of course.

The house – number twenty-nine – is festooned with pink pumped-up balloons. There are enough balloons on this house to qualify it for personal take-off. Batting aside the ones in my way, like giant mammaries, I lift the knocker.