DAVID T. ISAAK

Earthly Vessels

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ISAAK COLLECTION

My husband, David Isaak, and I first met in January of 1969, in ninth grade world history class. When I saw him walk into class, I immediately decided we needed to be the best of friends. He had similar feelings. Our first date was to an Iron Butterfly concert in February of that same year.

David and I were together for over fifty years, ever since that first concert, and I thought we'd have lots more time together. That was not to be. He was only sixty-seven when he died—he turned sixty-seven laying in a hospital bed after a massive stroke. He died three weeks later, and did not come home to me. However, he left behind a treasure: five glorious novels. I won't judge you if you feel like I may be biased. I am. His novels *are* great, though. Here is what fellow author and creative writing professor, Raymond Obstfeld, says about David's writing:

"In my over 40 years of teaching creative writing, I've had the pleasure of witnessing many writers flourish, whether as amazing artists or successful authors, or both. David Isaak was that rare writer who was both. He wrote with wit and charm that entertained, but he also gave us sophisticated insights worthy of our best writers. I envy the readers who are about to experience David's writing for the first time because they are entering David's world, a world that is filled with compelling characters, poetic style, laugh-aloud humor, and a way of looking at the world like no other. Congratulations. Reading is about to get a lot more fun."

—Raymond Obstfeld, co-author of *Becoming Kareem:* Growing Up On and Off the Court

My mission in life now is to ensure that this literary treasure is David's legacy. We did not have children, but David encapsulated some of his fine mind in the form of these thought-provoking, amusing, diverse, passionate stories.

These five books form *The Isaak Collection*. In addition to the magical realism of *Earthly Vessels* (with the forces of light and dark battling on Earth), the collection includes: *Tomorrowville* (dystopian science fiction), *A Map of the Edge* (a coming-of-age story with some dark elements), *Things Unseen* (a murder mystery with metaphysical underpinnings), and *Smite the Waters* (a political thriller with a twist).

Here, in David's writing, you can hear the voice of a man who is now silent, but whose words will live on—reaching across time. Words that speak loudly of David's passions, of his sense of social justice, and of his appreciation for other humans and the complex relationships we have with one another. Please join him—and me—as he continues his journey.

Thank you.

David's wife, Pamela Blake Huntington Beach, CA July 2022



East Coast People Are Weird

The guardians of the traditional religions might not admit it, but the key to the meaning of life, to the *Mysterium Tremendum*, is real estate. Location, location, location. Everything that exists has to have somewhere to be. Even space takes up space.

Yet any realtor can tell you that the value of real estate changes with time. In 2031 BC, for example, the most coveted property on Earth was the huge flint mine in Britain, the mounds and tunnels now known as Grimes Graves. Jump forward to 1348 AD, and the most jealously guarded holding on the planet was the island of Murano in Venice, home to the fabled Venetian glass industry.

A little time changes everything. By 1969, despite the fact the farmland had been covered by concrete and the oyster beds ruined by pollution, despite the lack of any deposits of valuable minerals, despite the absence of any strategic industries, despite the distinct proximity of New Jersey, the most prized piece of land anywhere on Earth was the island of Manhattan.

A puzzle, but not one that concerned most people. Nor did they much care it was 1969. "The Sixties" was a misnomer: the period where America came unglued, when anything seemed possible, when bones bent and walls flexed, began with the release of *Sgt. Pepper's* in 1967, and ended with Nixon's resignation in 1973.

Hendrix, Morrison, and Joplin were still alive and going strong. The Beatles' album *Abbey Road* swamped the airwaves, individual tracks taking all the top slots. Despite the scorn of the critics, all over America people in highly altered states lined up to see *2001: A Space Odyssey*. When Armstrong walked on the Moon, the main reaction was, *Hey, what took so long?*



1969 wasn't the end of the sixties. It was the crest of the wave.

If 1969 had been awarded a coat of arms, Crystal Keeling would have been engraved upon it. Glossy straight black hair and radiant skin: at the end of a decade of perms, flips, bangs, and Dippity-Doo, she was a vigorous seedling pushing her way through a crack in the concrete to stand upright in the sun, glowing with natural health. Her only concession to makeup was a daily touch of Slicker gloss, leaving her lips wet as though she'd just taken the first bite of the forbidden fruit.

With her friend Sheila, she'd hitched from San Diego to the Big Apple by way of New Orleans: a six-month-long detour where they'd lived in a garage with three musicians as the trio groped toward the jazz-rock blend that would become Fusion.

Sheila's friend Skazz had promised them a place to stay in the Village, but by the time they finally arrived in New York he was in the process of getting evicted. They spent a couple of nights in sleeping bags on his floor—he'd already sold his furniture—and then Sheila and Skazz piled into his van to head for a commune in Vermont. Crystal was invited along, of course; but she decided to hang around the big city for a while.

Spring had just touched the Village, but you could smell Washington Square Park for a mile in any direction, the blend of pot and patchouli overwhelming even the leaded-gasoline fumes of the Yellow Cabs. With her good looks and California Love Child attitude, Crystal was welcome in every cluster of guitar-players, pot-puffers, or wide-eyed acidheads; she'd been passed so many bomber joints of low-potency Iowa ditchweed that her throat was getting raw before noon.

She bought a hot chocolate from a street vendor and sat down on a bench, trying to sense the rays of the struggling Manhattan Sun. The flap pocket of her pack held a secondhand paperback copy of *Cat's Cradle*. She opened it to the latest dog-ear and tried to get back into it.

"So you believe in Sexual Liberation?" a voice asked.

She looked up. The speaker was a middle-aged man, portly, wearing clothes that suggested the aliens had landed at last: a wide-lapeled three-piece suit in light blue, with a paisley Apache tie.

Things sure were different Back East.

She smiled. "Sure."

"Well, howabout sharing some of it with me?" He flushed as he said it, and then added, "There's fifty bucks for you in it."

Crystal shook her head. It was insulting, sure, but the desperation in his eyes ran so deep that, for a brief moment, she considered going somewhere with him and giving him a decent charity fuck.

At least until he said, "A hundred, then."

She stood up and slung her backpack over one shoulder. "Man," she asked, "what is your *trip*, anyway?"

Crystal stalked away, and found a place on the steps by the Arch where she could lean against her backpack and read. She was pondering the pronouncements of the Books of Bokonon when she realized that her butt was freezing off against the cold concrete.

Her eyes sought the Sun with an accusative squint. She'd read that the Aztecs had torn out the hearts of hundreds of sacrificial victims each year when the Sun was at its weakest, using the blood to feed the Sun, to encourage it to bloom again.

Hell, that was in Mexico City, not far from the tropics.

Good thing the Aztecs didn't live in New York. They would've needed millions of sacrificial victims each winter solstice, an assembly-line of heart-gougers, a regular Detroit of cardiac surgeons.

A handful of antiwar protestors marched through chanting, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh," the ones in front carrying a banner that she couldn't read. Around the park fists rose in solidarity, and there were whistles and hoots of support.

"A granfaloon, I fear," a male voice behind her said.

She turned to look up at the speaker. It was impossible to tell his age—he might have been thirty, he might have been fifty. His black hair was slicked down; his dark beard was trimmed in a neat goatee. Despite the hint of a Midwest twang, Crystal thought there was something European about him.

He sat down beside her and gestured at her paperback with an elegant hand. "I couldn't help noticing..." A heavy lace cuff dangled from the sleeve of his Victorian jacket.

"You're right," she said. "I was just reading about it. They're a *granfaloon*—even if I'm on their side." She chewed her lip for a moment. "But, I guess all organizations are *granfaloons*, aren't they?"

He gave a sardonic smile. "No, though one might be forgiven for thinking so. No, for those who can see a little deeper than the common run of man, the real connections become clear. And you, my dear..." He interlaced his fingers with hers and sat her hand down in his lap, patting it with his free hand. "You, my dear, just might be part of something very real indeed."



That was how Crystal came to Anton Reginald LaMarr and The Children of Pan.

The Children lived together in a soaring townhouse off Abingdon Square. And, although most of them dwelt four or even five to a room, Anton gave Crystal—a Guest, rather than a Child—a room of her own, high up against the gabled roof.

Crystal was never initiated into The Children, and her understanding of their theology remained fuzzy. What she understood was that, like her, they were launched on a spiritual quest, and that they shunned traditional, husband-wife, ownership relations. There seemed to be a deep undercurrent of nature worship in their ceremonies, and Crystal wondered at this; New York City seemed a strange venue for a nature cult.

For their part, The Children treated her sweetly, with an attitude that verged on deference. They understood she too was a seeker, and though their code forbade drugs, they didn't judge her; when she came

home from parties with her pupils wide, smelling of pot and wine, they merely smiled. The strangest feature of life with The Children was that no one, neither male nor female, approached her sexually; and when she made overtures toward a few of them, they retreated like dogs shying from being petted.

She tried to help in the kitchen, but someone always eased her out, taking over whatever chore she attempted. She offered to clean up around the house, or even get a job and chip in some rent, but she gradually came to understand that her help wasn't wanted. So she read—*Cat's Cradle* (wonderful), *The Glass Bead Game* (curious), *The Harrad Experiment* (laughable)—partied at other Village houses, and deepened her meditation practice.

When Anton finally asked if she'd be willing to play a lead role in The Children's fertility rites, she felt she owed them something; and when she discovered it involved no more than a little friendly semipublic sex, she was happy to oblige. As the old world crumbled around her, Crystal was clear on the trends: By the year 2000, men and women would be equal in every way, race would matter no more than eye color, and sex would be something that happened all the time between friends.

Sort of like a decent back rub.



"I agreed I'd ball him, not that I'd shed all my fur," she said as they shaved her legs. The attention was fun: she'd been massaged, bathed, wrapped in hot towels, cleaned, and polished down to the tiniest crevice. But she had no desire to lose her leg hair—never plentiful, in any case—or the meager bushes under her arms. "It itches when it starts growing back..."

The three female Children attending her laughed like—well, *children*...and went right on trimming, soaping, and shaving. By the time they started on her pubic hair, the sensation had become intriguing. What the hell: sure, she'd spend a week scratching, but in the meantime why not enjoy it for what it was worth?

By the time they were done she was hairless from the neck down, and the very molecules of the air were tiny Ben-Wa balls, dinging against her skin. Talk about naked...

"Far out," Crystal said.

When they started painting symbols atop her chakras, it began to seem ludicrous. Crystal had done body painting before—had even made love with a San Diego artist whose canvases were nothing more than the trysting sheets where he and his lover of the moment writhed, coated in poster paints. But The Children were so damn serious about the whole thing...and the sigil they inscribed around her belly button tickled.

As for the indigo sickle of Saturn on her perineum—well, come on.



The Children's communal dining room—undoubtedly a ballroom in the heyday of the townhouse—had been cleared of furniture. The walls were festooned with fresh-cut pine boughs that wafted their resinous scent through the room, and a pentagonal platform eight feet across had been erected at the end of the hall, opposite the great double doors.

By the time two strong Children carried Crystal into the room, their arms crossed beneath her buttocks to form a chair, the room was lit by the flames of a half-dozen oil lamps suspended from the stamped-tin ceiling by long chains. To either side of the impromptu aisleway, The Children stood—a greater crowd than lived in the house, a hundred or more. Their shapes were wreathed in muslin shrouds, men and women indistinguishable in the shadows.

An insistent drumming started somewhere. Crystal's bearers carried her to the platform, turned to face the crowd, and then lifted her, standing her upright to look out across them.

In the next moment, they whisked away her robe.

Her first sensation was the cold of air on her naked, shaved body. The next was one of heat, as she felt hundreds of eyes upon her.

Kind of a turn-on, really.

The drums stopped. Then, like a wave passing across the crowd, the onlookers peeled back their muslin shrouds. A hundred bodies stood there, naked to the waist—black or white, breasted or hairy, every chest rising and falling with arousal.

Maybe these Children know how to party after all, Crystal thought. And then the crowd sprouted a forest of a hundred upraised arms, each fist clutching a short whip, and in unison The Children lashed them down upon their own backs, a soft hiss ending in an ugly, reverberating smack.

Way too weird. Crystal stood and watched the self-flagellation as the flails rose and fell, rose and fell, and she found herself counting in sick fascination.

Thirty-two. Thirty-two, or maybe thirty-three.

A palate-tickling smell of blood fingered its way through the room.

Then the drums started up again, and there was a sigh of anticipation as the Hornéd One entered through the double doors and strode down the hall.

Halfway to the altar he threw aside his robes and lifted his arms high into the air, and the crowd roared approval.

The maneuver reminded Crystal of pro wrestling on TV, but she knew what was expected. She lowered herself to the top of the altar and lay on her back, waiting.

The goat-head mask loomed over her as the god clambered onto the altar.

The audience quieted as he positioned himself atop her.

Without pause, he thrust himself easily into Crystal's waiting body.

When she responded with a yummy sound, it seemed to disconcert the Hornéd One, who'd perhaps expected more amazement from her.

She was sorry to disappoint; but if he'd wanted her to be less prepared, he should have jumped her about three hours before. And maybe skipped all the massages, and the whole shaving scene.

Whatever the Hornéd One was thinking, he decided to make the best of it, and, supporting himself on his arms, he drew back and thrust deep once more. Crystal hummed, lifted her legs wider, and, as he

drew back, reached around to grab onto his buttocks to pull him down harder.

The goat-headed man survived this treatment for a half-dozen thrusts before he groaned and pumped his sperm deep inside her, making a dying sound with each spasm.

The crowd roared its approval.

Crystal had learned to be philosophical about premature ejaculation; there must have been a dozen over the years who hadn't even gotten all the way in before they came. It was easy enough to get them up again, usually...though she hadn't tried it in front of an audience.

She was wondering what to do next when the Hornéd One slid out of her with a grunt. Strong hands seized her, and four men hoisted her up to shoulder level and carried her away from the platform.

For a moment this was both scary and exciting—she didn't know what they had planned, and in her state of mind, she might have gone along with just about anything...

But they just carried her back to her room and left her there.

Hours of preparation, and then no orgy?



For a moment, she thought about just doing herself and then going to sleep; but the more she thought about it, the more pissed off she became.

Popping off prematurely: hey, it could happen to anybody.

Popping off prematurely and not giving a shit: bad manners.

Popping off prematurely and having her carted off to her bed when it happened in front of a roomful of aroused people, male and female, any number of whom would probably have been happy to leap into the breach: now that was just plain fucking selfish.

Talk about feeling used.

Come to think of it, she wasn't sure she'd had anybody bang her in a decent, considerate, hot, nasty way since she'd crossed the Mississippi.

She paused, trying to figure out which side of the Mississippi New Orleans sat on. She shrugged, rooted through the wad of clothes in her

backpack, and pulled on an Indian print top and a pair of elephant bellbottoms. She hoisted the backpack over one shoulder and pushed open the door.

One of The Children, the guy called Will, stood outside.

"I'm sorry, Mother," he said, "but I can't allow you to leave."

"Mother?" she said.

"You will be the Mother to the god; and then, you will be Mother to us all."

"I'm not going to be 'Mother' to anyone," she said.

He shook his head, smiling. "The seed entered you tonight. Didn't you feel it?"

"I didn't feel much, actually. But maybe I stopped paying attention for the, oh, *ten seconds or so* that it took."

He refused to acknowledge her tone. "I am honored to be the one sent to watch over you, as you grow heavy with his seed."

Crystal dropped her backpack to the floor. "Are you saying I can't leave?"

"Not until the Promised One comes, Mother. I am here to serve you. But I cannot let you leave."

She leaned close. "Listen. I'm not pregnant, if that's what you think you mean. I'm on the fucking *Pill*. So there's no way that I got knocked up tonight by Mister Speedster. No way."

Will tilted his head back, smiling beatifically. "Still. It has happened. Nothing anyone does now can interfere with it."

"Nothing can interfere with it?"

Will shook his head, a wide, happy grin on his face.

"And, other than letting me go, you're here to serve me?"

He nodded, still smiling.

Crystal reached out and grabbed him by his collar. "Then I'm sure you won't mind," she whispered, "coming in here and fucking me until my nose bleeds."



In point of fact, her nose never bled. And, in point of fact, on his first pass, he didn't manage to stay with her any longer than the Hornéd One.

The second time around, he stayed with her long enough that she started to have some fun.

The third time took forever—long enough that Crystal started to worry that Will's shift might end, and he'd be replaced.

They worked through a good third of the extended version of the Kama Sutra before he gave out, but Striking With the Flat of Hand While Sitting on Hams did him in.

He snored as she dressed. She had just lifted her backpack by one strap when he spoke.

"Crystal?"

"Yeah, Will?"

There was a long pause, as if he'd fallen completely asleep again; and then he said, "I love you..."

"I love you too, Will," she whispered.

She stepped into the hallway and, with all the stealth she could muster, raised the window in front of the fire escape.

When her feet hit the bottom flight, where the last stairs of the escape needed to swing downward to allow egress, there was a horrendous screeching of iron as hinges rusted in place broke free.

She ran to the street, her thumb out.

Her first ride only intended to go crosstown, but instead he drove her as far as an onramp in Brooklyn in exchange for her phone number.

Well, for *a* phone number.

It took her two more rides to get out of New York City.

Larry, the third one who picked her up, was headed back to the Rockies. "You ever been to Boulder?" he asked.

"No. Is it cool?"

"Mindblowing. There's these *huge* rocks, and they're just...well, *huge*." He shook his head as if clearing it. "Spent too long here. Need to get back home."

"Tell me," Crystal said. "East Coast people are weird."



When it happens at all, conception typically comes between twelve and forty-eight hours after the Greek Fleet of ejaculate sets sail toward Troy.

Twelve hours is about the minimum swim time; and forty-eight hours is about the maximum survival time for sperm, intrepid little sailors who set forth on their journeys without packing a lunch.

Several variables affect the length of this voyage, not least of which is Helen's smile itself: during a woman's orgasm the cervix comes alive, dipping its head down into the pooling semen and dilating slightly, swallowing hundreds of thousands of sperm at each gulp. A few decent contractions can cut the needed swim time by more than half.

The woman's cycle also affects the trip; as estrus approaches, the mucus in the cervical channel thins to a watery consistency. Earlier or later in the month, traveling through the cervical canal can be like struggling through a bowl of congealing oatmeal...but time it just right, and it can be like diving into the pool at the Tropicana on a hot summer day.

Then, of course, they say sperm motility is critical. Fertility researchers place great weight on sperm motility, like fishermen searching through the bait tray for the liveliest worms. The fact is that, until recently, almost all fertility researchers were men, and men just had to believe their manly vigor has something to do with the whole thing, that sperm had to be, if you will, spunky.

The real truth is, it doesn't matter whether the sperm charge out with all the enthusiasm of a high-school production of *Oklahoma!* or sulk in their tents like Achilles. The process is like swimming the Pacific, and success has more to do with the condition of the ocean than with the conditioning of the swimmer.

Forget about sperm motility. Just get over it.

A final factor, which all women instinctively understand, is the cussedness of the universe.

If pregnancy is unsought, inconvenient, preferably even disastrous, then it happens readily and almost instantaneously. If the woman is only thirteen, or is having a secret affair, or has finally received a long-desired promotion to a high-pressure job, or has just won the 400-meter race in the Olympic qualifying trials—under any of these conditions, the woman in question can become pregnant even while menstruating, despite using six different forms of FDA-approved contraception simultaneously.

The cussedness factor—known to researchers as OSNNS (Oh-Shit-Not-Now Syndrome) or the OSNWHC (Oh-Shit-Not-With-Him Conundrum)—continues to baffle scientists.

The cussedness factor may account for the fact that, snoozing in the passenger seat on Interstate 80, Crystal conceived, a mere six hours after the ceremony in Greenwich Village. Had she known at the time, she would have been righteously pissed: How can you get pregnant on the Pill?

The Children wouldn't have been surprised.

The lucky single sperm adhering to the oocytic cell membrane dropped its tail, saying farewell to everything but its packet of DNA. Once it began to fuse with the cell membrane, the egg's thick coat of the zona pellucida suddenly began to granulate and swell, straightarming all other suitors back into the waters of the womb. *Closed, Cerrado, Out of Business. Try one of our other fine locations.*

Textbooks love to say we acquire half our biological traits from our father, half from our mother. This is usually described in two words: *Equal Inheritance*.

Here's two better words: Phallocentric bullshit.

From our fathers, we inherit half of the DNA in the cell nucleus.

From our mothers, we inherit our mitochondria, our ribosomes, the cell spindles, the nuclear walls, the Golgi bodies, all of the transport structures built into the cell walls, and our entire Starter Set of metabolic proteins and enzymes.

And, oh yeah, the other half of the nuclear DNA.

You can't even say we inherit half our DNA from our fathers. Just the *nuclear* DNA. Mitochondria, the powerhouses of the cell, have their own DNA, and reproduce like independent little organisms inside the enormous cells of our body.

Dad contributes some mitochondria to the reproductive process at first: they sit there in the tail of the sperm, running the waving flagellum like the motor of a powerboat.

But these are discarded like used Band-Aids when the sperm drops its tail: *Nuclear DNA Only Past This Point*.

So what was growing now in Crystal's belly was mostly Crystal. Mostly Crystal, but with something special added.

As the nuclei of egg and sperm fused, occultists all over the Northeast of the US felt a trembling pass through them, and those that were abed came suddenly awake.

In the Olympic Mountains of western Washington a dozen mountain goats, hunkered down in a snow drift, rose suddenly and peered about, their shaggy white coats bright against the night sky...

In a radio studio, rehearsing for the next day's broadcast, a famous evangelist was afflicted with such a sudden and rampant erection that he threw down his headphones and ran for the bathroom...

In a basement of an Alphabet City tenement on the island of Manhattan, Gary Masello decided not to kill himself, and put the revolver down on the floor beside his mattress. There was something he was supposed to do...

In the house of The Children of Pan near Abingdon Square, Anton Reginald LaMarr raged and threw things, and ordered The Children out into the night to search for The Mother...

...but Crystal snoozed her way across Pennsylvania. She ate pancakes at an IHOP outside Akron, Ohio; bought four fingers of decent pot at a truck stop near Chicago; and she kept on heading west when Jerry, her ride, dropped her in Boulder.

She was in San Francisco when Gary Masello made the papers by breaking into The Children's townhouse and shooting everyone he could find in the top-floor bedrooms.

She was at a concert in Ashland, Oregon, when an arsonist set a fire that raged through The Children's townhouse in the night, killing a dozen of them, and gutting the building.

She was living in a treehouse near Mount Angel, Oregon, by the time that Anton Reginald LaMarr disbanded The Children and went into hiding.

Treehouses were awesomely cool, living up among the leaves. When Crystal found she was pregnant, she was more than a little irritated; but she couldn't imagine a better place to have a baby.

She wasn't sure whose baby it was—maybe Will's? Larry's?—but the whole fatherhood thing was so property-based anyway.

She was confident that, by the year 2000, nobody would care about the paternity thing anymore.

About The Author

David T. Isaak (1954-2021) was an American author of both fiction and nonfiction.

Dr. Isaak held a BA in Physics and MA and PhD degrees in resource systems. His professional work spanned the globe, taking him to over forty countries. He co-authored three technical, nonfiction books on oil and international politics, and wrote numerous papers, monographs, and multiclient studies.

David had an eclectic life. His first major in college was music, and he played piano and flute. He was a certified Bikram yoga instructor, an accomplished vegetarian cook, a creative mixologist, and an avid reader of fiction and nonfiction alike. He was driven by great characters and story, original voices, and especially by his love of the craft of writing, all of which are reflected in his own writing.

David passed away in April 2021. The five novels he left behind are as diverse as his life. These novels form *The Isaak Collection*.

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