



# HOVERLIGHT

FAY LAPKA RICHARDSON

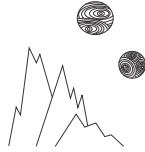
Sherri cried, “Look!”

They saw the end of the sky. Or so it seemed. A black horizon stretched across the land of perpetual day. It was as though they were looking at the negative of a sunset.

It held them there. Caro tore her gaze away from the hole in the sky. In the rearview mirror she studied the faces of the others. Sherri looked full of awe, perhaps a little apprehensive. Hal was tense, as if he were watching an unfamiliar animal. Ricky looked thoughtful, but eager. Uncle Lee? Lee was mesmerized. *Did he love it that much?* Caro wondered. This was so much more than scientific curiosity; this was passion. *What drew him here? He could be anywhere he chose—why the End? With us?*

# Fox Song Books Young Adult Fiction

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# **HOVERLIGHT**

**FAY LAPKA RICHARDSON**

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Hoverlight  
by Fay Lapka Richardson

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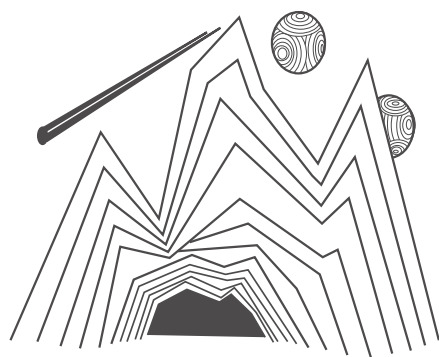


*For my nieces and nephews,  
each one a singular shining  
light in my journey.*

First Edition's Dedication:  
For Joy, Hope, Mark & Holly,  
who bring Light & Laughter  
into the darkest of tunnels.

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped  
for, the evidence of things not seen.*

*. . . and we beheld His glory . . .  
full of grace and truth.*



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March, 2456

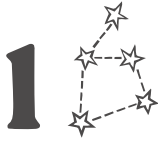
*Actaeon—*

*I received my orders today and, soon after, stole out onto the roof of the Genetics lab building and waited for the night to arrive. I watched the late afternoon moon, a pale flat ghost, take on the sun's light and, in an instant, become substance. For the first time I noticed that stars appear slowly: at first one by one, then small clusters glow into view, and finally large choruses spring into being. I saw Venus glimmering low on the horizon like a dropped diamond.*

*Somewhere, just this side of the glory of Saturn's rings, in Jupiter's fiery shadow, spins the planet Clytie: small, insignificant—thrown like a blob of excess wax during the giant's geological evolution. As though it senses it is nothing but Jupiter's leavings, the tiny planet has a stubborn streak: it is stuck in its revolutionary phase—the same side always faces the sun—and the resultant polar predicament spawns strange creatures. I am told that the wind blows with eerie precision, and the vegetation has evolved gaunt and bent. Birds and beasts are thickly skinned, scaled, feathered or furred to diminish the drying effects of either the fierce cold or eternal sun, and, always, the wind.*

*Actaeon, soon I will be walking the alien soil of this contrary planet. Although it is what I have longed for, without warning my vision blurs and the stars meld together in a shining wash of light. Already I am homesick for Earth.*

—Reginald



## *Friendly Giants*

**I**t was hot. Those three small words seemed to be the most repeated and least necessary words the summer of 2463 on Clytie's Main Base. The Atmospheric Officer was the only one in good humor; surely her name would go down in the Community History along with the record-breaking temperatures that she entered.

The sun, dimly seen through the thick atmosphere, radiated a fierce heat that penetrated the soil and shimmered off the porchlike roofs of the Main Base laboratories and housing units. In the brown hills, the Jonah trees, sculpted into gaunt arcs by the hot wind, appeared and disappeared behind curtains of thermal updrafts, and the round pools the trees ringed were glazed with oily muck. Clytie's lavender sky seemed to boil over the few scientists who dared to venture outside the cool of the stone labs, causing them to gasp and shiver with the heat.

Eleven-year-old Ricky appeared oblivious to the temperature; clutching his respirator to his side, he ran close to the parched ground, his mouth open, eyes narrowed, feet pumping, very aware that he could still be seen and apprehended by his Russian teacher.

Caro, from the window of the school library, watched him run. She shook back her dark hair, half wishing that she could be off with him, half wondering if it were her sisterly duty to report him. At fifteen—almost sixteen—she was used

to weighing out the ethics of when to Tell and when not to Tell. Ricky's short figure blurred in the shifting heat waves and disappeared from sight. Caro craned her neck trying to see him, but he had moved beyond view of the window. She shrugged. What the teachers missed was their problem. She leaned back in her chair, automatically pushing the wisps of hair from off her damp face and tried to settle back into her assigned animal behavior reading.

It was difficult to concentrate after lunch break. And the summer heat didn't help. The ceiling fans stirred sluggish air in circles throughout the school building; the whirr of the blades formed the background to every lecture, every lab. Tall jugs of ice-water, beading and running with condensation, rested on a desk at the front of each classroom. The water station provided a ready and welcome distraction for anyone—student or teacher—suffering from procrastination. And it was a handy meeting place to catch up on bits of hurriedly passed news.

Caro looked up as a group of preprimary students left the water station, tightly clutching their pastel-bright cups. The children marched raggedly in twos, a teacher before and after herding them to the picture-book terminals. As they passed Caro's study table, one stopped and stared at her.

Caro gave a tentative smile. The girl pointed a bony finger at Caro. "Look," she announced in high-pitched ringing tones, "an alien!" All the preprimaries stopped dead, cups sloshing, and gazed at Caro in morbid fascination, until the two teachers, their arms raised like wings, swooped down on the gawking children and drove them along. The teacher at the end of the line, smiling too brightly, looked back at Caro apologetically.

Caro heard the snickers coming from the table behind her. She felt one side of her face burn and the other side begin to itch; she tried to focus on the words on her monitor. *Just stay seated for a minute or two*, she told herself savagely, *then leave*. Caro forced herself to count to 100, and then 200. She glanced at the wall clock. Feigning horror at the time, she powered off her terminal, grabbed the magnetic bar, and hurried out of the library as though she were late for class.

In truth, the only thing left on her day's schedule was a tutorial with her Biology mentor, Dr. Lutes, and that wasn't for another thirty minutes. Caro headed into the washroom, dropped her book bag onto the floor, gripped the side of the sink and stared unflinchingly into the mirror.

The surgeons had done the best job they could. "Time," they said, "just give yourself time to heal." Caro stared at this stranger's face in the mirror. A harlequin's mask. A nut-brown complexion, half white plasti-graft with small patches of new-grown skin showing through. The hair at her left temple had been shaved for the graft; the regrowth was in the wild, wispy stage that shot out in all directions. Caro ground shut her eyes, catching the tears that tried to spill out of them and sending them back to where they originated.

"Hi-Ho," a voice boomed past her ear and footsteps crashed past her. Caro opened her eyes to catch in the mirror a tall girl in black leather shorts racing by. A stall door slammed behind her.

"I got my period in Computer Science—right in the middle of a sneak test—isn't that the greatest?" Sheila's voice echoed off the washroom tiles.

"Your what?" Caro asked cautiously.

"My period. Time of the moon . . . Woman's season . . .?"

Her face shot round the door of the stall, gazing incredulously at Caro's puzzled expression.

"I'm menstruating, chump," she boomed. "They called it a 'period' in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Wow, what a mixed-up century!" Her head abruptly withdrew. "Yeow! Caught my earring on the door knob." The door carefully opened and shut. "Once I ripped it right out of my earlobe," she said cheerfully. "Anyway, what's the conversion factor for the binary code? I was stuck on a question when I had to run for it. I was hoping someone smart would be in here."

"I thought you were ahead of me in Computer Sci—" Caro began.

"Yeah, yeah, but not when it comes to figuring out berserk stuff like binary code conversion—how stupid when a computer'll do it for you. But just give me a program to break into, I don't care *how* secure they make it—I can get into anything!" Sheila wound up excitedly. "Did you hear about the time I—"

The door opened and Dr. Menue entered, tapping her small foot on the floor. "Sheila? I trust you are ready to finish your test now?" Her staccato voice ended every sentence with an uptilt as if her words insisted on leaping towards the ceiling. She glanced at Caro, her eyes methodically skimming the girl's scarred face. Caro turned on the faucet and washed her hands, feeling every inch of the woman's scalpel-like gaze.

The toilet flushed and Sheila bounced out. She washed her hands as long as she dared, but Dr. Menue insisted on waiting for her. As Sheila followed the teacher out the door, she turned toward Caro, her eyeballs turned back into her head so that only the whites showed and her cheeks swelled out like two angry pufferfish.

Caro found herself grinning. For all of Sheila's bizarre fads—such as her obsession with 20<sup>th</sup> century reconstructed videos—she was a welcome relief from the rigid view most of her peers adhered to in regard to dress, language, and behavior.

Caro reached down for her book bag, caught a glimpse of her own face in the mirror, and her grin fled. Just a few short months ago, before the lumie incident at the End Base, Caro had fit in with all the rest of the high-school students. Now it was as if she and Sheila had traded places. Only Caro didn't merely look eccentric, she had become the freak.

She had never thought of herself as beautiful, for Caro lacked the classic bone-structure and pure complexion of what she considered to be true beauty. Nor did she have the startling dark eyes and fragile face of her best friend, Sherri. Yet Caro had moved easily within herself, had been at home in her body, feeling as rich and lithe and unique as a darkly golden deer in a wildflower meadow. Sometimes, when faced with a sudden reflection of herself, the girl had stopped, startled, as though seeing a stranger. She would have forgotten that her features tended toward squareness, that her brow was too heavily defined, and that her skin and hair ran together in a dull-brown blur.

Now, though Caro tried, she could not forget the false paleness of the plasti-graft through which the itching skin grew, nor the raw Z-shaped edge slashed from eye to jaw. This new image was branded too deeply within.

Throwing the bag over her shoulder, Caro wearily left the sanctuary of the bathroom and walked down the hall to Dr. Lutes' office.

There was a note waiting for her, written in Dr. Lutes'

precise, old-fashioned handwriting: *Caro please join me in the marine lab.* Caro smiled. How like Dr. Lutes to tape a handwritten note directly on top of the high-tech audio message minder mounted on his office door instead of using it to leave a verbal message for her. She picked up her pace and headed toward the stairwell leading down into the basement.

It was always cool in the lower labs. Caro pushed through the swinging doors into the marine lab and paused, pushing a wisp of hair back off her forehead, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dimness.

This was her favorite place at school—perhaps in all of the Main Base. The softly lit tanks bubbled gently, and the mist from the fountain of the large corner pool released a cool, ocean scent into the air. Caro breathed deeply, feeling the tightness in her stomach releasing. There was no room for tension in the steady rhythm of the underwater world. She smiled as the round, inky-blue pair of carapacefish bumped in a friendly manner against the side of the pool. Caro flattened her palm against the clear silicone plate and the creatures butted up against it. These two were her special friends.

Carapacefish, or carepies, were the friendly giants of Clytie's warmer ocean, the Pantropic. Although quite capable of growing four meters in diameter in the open ocean, if they remained in captivity these teen-agers would grow to only half that size. Their turtle-like faces seemed to beam with goodwill, and the circular fins that ringed their bowl-shaped bodies moved them gracefully through the water. For all their ponderous mass, the carepies maneuvered through the ocean like hummingbirds through air. Families of carepies could be seen hovering in the ocean, as though hanging in the depths, motionless except for

an almost imperceptible wave in their banding fins. And they could rise straight up, or sink directly down like elevators.

Wherever carpies gathered in pods it was safe to swim. Although they were vegetarians, feeding on vast amounts of plankton strained from the water through their beaks, for some unknown reason, the terrors of the sea, the whip-thin snakefish, were never sighted in their domain.

“Ah, there you are, my dear.” Dr. Lutes’ preoccupied voice floated down from the deck above the carepies’ tank. Caro looked up, blinking against the spotlight. The old, white-haired professor, wearing a damp-stained lab coat, trailed a green pole in the water. One end lay on the surface with a broad float. Clamped onto the other end, close by Dr. Lutes’ hand, was a small screen. He peered nearsightedly into it.

“Do you want me up there, Dr. Lutes?” Caro called. There was silence while the professor adjusted the screen.

“No,” he announced. “Please change into your gear and enter the tank . . . if you care to,” he added, a quick gleam lighting his eyes.

Caro smiled. “I’ll be ready in a minute. Or less.” Another favorite thing.

A short wetsuit pulled up over her swimsuit was necessary to stay for any length of time in the water. Caro slipped into the weighted vest that held her air reserve and drew over her head the attached clear hood. She pulled on the mass pockets, resembling stiff fingerless mittens and toeless socks, and then walked to the ladder.

Carefully she swung her body down the rungs leading into the carepies’ tank. Each step was hard work. Clytie’s briny ocean made buoyancy a problem unless you were heavily weighted.



The carepies surrounded her, beaming and bumping up against her, sending her flying through the water. Snug in her suit, Caro laughed, her voice sounding flat and tinny through the intercom speakers in the wall.

“It seems as though your friends missed you over the weekend,” Dr. Lutes commented.

“I missed them.” The girl smoothed her hands over the female carepie’s rigid, rubbery back. The male hovered benignly beside Caro, his banding fin rising and falling in a slow wave pattern.

“What are you measuring?” Caro asked as Dr. Lutes gazed raptly at the computer screen.

“The usual—heart rate, cellular respiration, body mass.” Dr. Lutes paused. “And an additional factor . . .”

Caro looked up through the water. Dr. Lutes’ face shifted and blurred and grew grotesquely long through the restless currents. Caro shivered. “What factor?”

“The proportion of oxygen directly breathed from the air to that taken in from the water.”

“I thought that carepies breathed air or water—that either was fine.”

“There is every indication that breathing air or water is not a random activity.” Dr. Lutes sounded uncharacteristically stern. “My immediate calculations seem to suggest that they breathe air approximately 43 times more than they breathe water.”

“Isn’t that stran—uh, surprising?” Caro chose her words carefully. “I mean, wouldn’t it be easier for them to breathe water rather than rising to the surface all the time? A more efficient use of energy?”

“We’ve taught you well, haven’t we child,” Dr. Lutes muttered sadly. “Come, come, Caro!” he added sharply. “Has your experience of living led you to believe that Life is nothing but a simple totaling of pluses and minuses?”

Caro said nothing, but rebelliously thought that life would certainly be a lot easier if it were a straightforward column calculation.

Dr. Lutes sighed. “Yes, it is surprising—and strange,” he said in his usual quiet voice. He began calling out orders to the girl to guide the carepies through various speeds and movements, and the tense moment was forgotten.

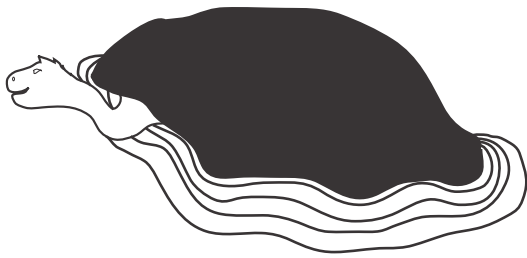
“Now, full speed, Caro—that is, as fast as this small tank will allow them to move,” he called.

They swirled gloriously through the water, creating wide eddies that caught up the girl and sent her helplessly in whirl after whirl. Caro loved the feeling of being bandied about by these huge, gentle beasts and the water that was their medium. The carepies’ fins, looking like fluid skirts, undulated in great waves that ringed their rotund bodies. The male abruptly dropped to the bottom of the tank, swam under Caro and rose just as suddenly, lifting the girl high above the water. She slid off his back and was shot off to the side by a circling wave of his fin. The carepie plummeted below the water again and Caro heard the thunderous slap as the new-formed eddy smashed against the sides of the tank.

She was again shot to the surface, and, trying to keep her seat on the slick, bobbing back of the carepie, she grinned up through her faceplate at Dr. Lutes. The small man was dripping with brine, his thin hair clumped in wet tails, water running off his shoulders. But he looked exultant, as joyfully moved by the experience as the girl.

“Can you imagine their play in the spaciousness of the ocean environment, Caro!” he exclaimed.

Caro nodded, her eyes shining. When she was with the carepies she was whole. The creature whirled like a top under her and Caro laughed as the cool water closed over her head.





April, 2456

Actaeon—

*The month journey to Clytie is only half over, but I feel as though the years of research at York have never been. It is my early years that, somehow, seem closer. Do you remember “Birdbeak”? Our absurd name for Dr. Robin Thrushton, our mentor at the museum in Paris? I can see him clearly: small, with tiny eyes and a chiseled nose. We were eleven then. He was nearly seventy and quite deaf, far more at home with the old volumes of literature that he catalogued than with small boys. I smuggled out all sorts of banned literature and read it in the old bomb shelter that was my hideout. Against all laws of childrearing and education, I became acquainted with the Bobbsey Twins, the Bastables, the Famous Four, and the Hardy Boys . . .*

*I marveled at the strangeness of Fair Play and Owning Up in spite of being Sent to Coventry or, what to me then seemed a far worse thing, To Bed without Supper. I longed to use the old words, “chum,” or “buddy,” to have friends that I could “stick up for” and not “squeal” on. I even wished for a “pesky kid-sister” to protect from the neighborhood bully . . . but there wasn’t even a neighborhood bully, was there, Actaeon? It was just the two of us. Always, just the two of us.*

—Reginald