

MEMORYVILLE BLUES

EDITED BY
**PETER CROWTHER AND
NICK GEVERS**



Alastair Reynolds
John Grant
Kit Reed
Lavie Tidhar
Mike Resnick
Ramsey Campbell
and others

30/31

The latest bumper *Postscripts* anthology, with new stories from twenty seven of today's finest speculative fiction writers:

The Kid at Midnight—Mike Resnick

What We Do—Robert Reed

Gapping—Darren Speegle

Red-Roofed Temples in the Mountains Beneath

Me—Forrest Aguirre

This Time of Day, This Time of Year—Lynda E. Rucker

Cleavage—Peter Hardy

Memoryville Blues—John Grant

Dreaming Kandresphar—Darrell Schweitzer

Wherein We Enter the Museum—Kit Reed

Marks and Coconuts—Anna Tambour

The Rapture—Jack Dann & Barry N. Malzberg

Index of Placebo Effects—Carol Guess

The Bell—Jeremy Adam Smith

Selections From The Expectant Mother Disin-
formation Handbook—Robert Guffey

The Valley of Wonders—Amber D. Sistla

Things That Never Happened—Scott Edelman

The Revelation of Jo Givens—Nancy Jane Moore

Blue vs Red—Sébastien Doubinsky

Man's Ruin—James Cooper

Kodokushi—Andrew Hook

The Key to Harry—Allen Ashley & Douglas
Thompson

Buried Eyes—Lavie Tidhar

The Lobby—Alastair Reynolds

The Providential Preservation of the Universal

Bibliographic Repository—Andrew Drummond

Behind the Doors—Ramsey Campbell



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CONTENTS

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS	
<i>The Lobby</i>	1
MIKE RESNICK	
<i>The Kid at Midnight</i>	11
FORREST AGUIRRE	
<i>Red-Roofed Temples in the Mountains Beneath Me</i>	26
LAVIE TIDHAR	
<i>Buried Eyes</i>	40
LYNDA E. RUCKER	
<i>This Time of Day, This Time of Year</i>	64
DARRELL SCHWEITZER	
<i>Dreaming Kandresphar</i>	82
ANDREW DRUMMOND	
<i>The Providential Preservation of the Universal Bibliographic Repository</i>	92
PETER HARDY	
<i>Cleavage</i>	112
JOHN GRANT	
<i>Memoryville Blues</i>	130
ROBERT REED	
<i>What We Do</i>	149
CAROL GUESS	
<i>Index of Placebo Effects</i>	166
ROBERT GUFFEY	
<i>Selections From The Expectant Mother Disinformation Handbook</i>	180
RAMSEY CAMPBELL	
<i>Behind the Doors</i>	196

ANDREW HOOK	
<i>Kodokushi</i>	217
AMBER D. SISTLA	
<i>The Valley of Wonders</i>	225
NANCY JANE MOORE	
<i>The Revelation of Jo Givens</i>	227
SÉBASTIEN DOUBINSKY	
<i>Blue vs Red</i>	247
SCOTT EDELMAN	
<i>Things That Never Happened</i>	252
ALLEN ASHLEY & DOUGLAS THOMPSON	
<i>The Key to Harry</i>	261
JACK DANN & BARRY N. MALZBERG	
<i>The Rapture</i>	271
JEREMY ADAM SMITH	
<i>The Bell</i>	287
JAMES COOPER	
<i>Man's Ruin</i>	296
KIT REED	
<i>Wherein We Enter the Museum</i>	322
ANNA TAMBOUR	
<i>Marks and Coconuts</i>	341
DARREN SPEEGLE	
<i>Gapping</i>	349

THE LOBBY

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

'Sometimes I have an idea for a story, and write it pretty much off the bat, and then I'm done with it,' Mr. Reynolds tells us. 'Others seem to require a much longer gestation period. This was one of the latter.'

'I'd had a vague idea for an SF story featuring a large, sinister building for quite some time. But I could not decide on the frame and scope of the piece. I made a false start, abandoned the piece, and then came back to it much later. At that point something had clicked and I was able to find my way through without too much difficulty. I've been writing short fiction for more than thirty years, selling it for more than twenty, and I still have no idea when I start a story of how much trouble it's going to give me. That, I think, may be part of the particular fascination of the form.' Yes, it's a fun life and no denying!

The author was born in Barry, South Wales in 1966. After a career in space science that took him abroad, he returned to the UK in 2008. 'I am now working on the sequel to Blue Remembered Earth,' he says, 'as well as a Doctor Who novel. I live in the South Wales valleys where I enjoy a life of tranquillity and rain.' Just like everyone else in the UK, Al. At least where the latter is concerned.

WHATEVER WE'D FOUND ON THE HOMELESS GUY WAS DOING sick things to my brain. That was why Rabbit was the first to see the building. He was up and ready to go, doing ollies and kickflips in the dirt, shielding his eyes as the sun rose over the wooden fence around the parking lot.

'Go and skate,' I said, appalled at his resilience. 'I need to get my head together.'

‘Pussy,’ Rabbit told me, grinning through his beard.

‘Whatever.’

Some days I could take Rabbit, some days I couldn’t. Whether he was stronger than me, or just had to make it seem that way, I could never tell. But I was sure that those pink pills had got to him. Even now, on the comedown, everything seemed different. Like walking around with movie goggles, only instead of making a film look three-dimensional, they were making the world look four-dimensional. The parking lot, the office blocks and tower cranes rising beyond the fence—everything seemed to have been flat-packed until now. The sky was solid quivering blue gel. My shadow wanted to suck me in like a sci-fi wormhole.

Rabbit was gone an hour. By the time he came back, stooping through the gap in the fence with his board tucked under an arm, I was starting to feel better. Rabbit didn’t look better, though.

‘Thought you’d be longer,’ I said, affecting maximum nonchalance.

‘You need to see this, Cooper.’ His eyes were wild and spooked, his hand clutching his board like it was his last link to sanity. ‘You need to see this and tell me I’m not going batshit.’

I hauled myself from the ground, scraping gravel from my jeans. ‘I’m still feeling a little wired.’

‘Not that,’ Rabbit said. ‘The skatepark.’

‘What about it?’

‘It’s gone, man. The park is gone.’

‘We were there yesterday evening. It can’t be ‘gone’. You mean it’s boarded off, padlocked.’

‘I mean it’s gone,’ Rabbit said. He nodded down at my backpack. ‘Grab your shit.’

I followed him through the gap in the fence, chewing over the possibilities. Rabbit was not a practical joker, so there was little or no chance that he was yanking my chain. Even if that had been his style, he was too bad an actor to have faked that crazy-eyed look. So what else was there? If Rabbit wasn’t overstating the simple fact of the skatepark being boarded off—maybe building contractors or city workmen could work that fast, although it seemed unlikely—then the only other explanation was that he’d somehow got disorientated, thinking he was in one part of the city while he was somewhere else. I knew Rabbit, though, and that didn’t seem likely. And if his sense of direction had been that scrambled, how had he ever found his way back to the parking lot?

As I followed him, I kept waiting for the moment when he'd take a wrong turn. But he stayed on course, the landmarks familiar. 'It *was* yesterday, wasn't it?' he asked, turning back to look at me. 'Tell me I'm not imagining it.'

'We were there.'

Calling it a skatepark was a stretch, and we both knew it. It was a square of undeveloped land, squeezed between office blocks on the edge of the business district. It was closed off behind high metal railings, but the gate wasn't normally locked until sunset. Inside were some plywood and concrete ramps and quarter pipes, some rails, benches and a crumbling graffiti wall. The place looked semi-derelict, with weeds and trash and drug apparatus in abundance. The park's status was unclear, and there'd long been street buzz about it being bulldozed and redeveloped. Cops were always sniffing around, but mostly they seemed to accept that if kids were hanging out at the skatepark, they weren't getting up to trouble elsewhere.

I guess neither Rabbit nor I would have been too surprised if we'd gone away for a week and then come back to find the place hidden behind high wooden screens. But to skate there one evening, and then come back the following morning and find the park gone . . . that most definitely wasn't on our radar.

Rabbit was right, though. The park wasn't there.

It wasn't just gone . . . it was *gone*. As if it had never existed.

Next to the park was a twenty story office block with mirrored windows and a savings and loan bank at street level, with a set of ATMs set into the wall next to the door.

That was normal. That was always there.

On the other side of the park, rising nearly as high as the bank building, was a white corporate slab with ranks of thin black windows and a basement parking garage with barriers that were always going up and down as cars came and went.

That was always there as well. It was normal. It fitted.

Between these two buildings, though, was something that didn't.

It was another office block, a similar size to its neighbours, give or take a floor. It was a dark glossy grey, almost black. From the outside, you couldn't tell if it had windows or not. It was just a rising slab of identical square panels, all the way to the top. There was an entrance at ground level—a revolving door, leading to what must have been the lobby—and

that was it. No signage, no advertisements, no hint as to who owned the place. And it was sitting right where the skatepark should have been.

I stared at it for a good thirty seconds before I was able to speak. We were standing on the other side of the street, boards under our arms, stupefied.

‘This is fucked.’

‘I agree,’ Rabbit said.

‘It’s not possible. There can’t be a building there. Buildings don’t just appear. It takes months, years.’ I was saying this aloud as if there was someone I needed to convince.

‘I thought maybe . . . I’ve made a mistake,’ Rabbit said. ‘First time. Like, taken a wrong turn. And somehow there’s a part of town where every other building looks exactly like one we know, down to the last detail.’

‘Down to the Starbucks across the street?’

‘I know, Cooper.’

‘Then we’re either insane, or . . . the world is insane. Take your pick.’

The thing that bothered me the most, other than the fact of the building being where it shouldn’t be, was that no one *else* seemed bothered. It was only me and Rabbit who were staring. Other people were just going about their usual business, as if the building had always been there. Stopping to use the ATMs next door. Cars coming and going from the underground garage. Men and women coming out of Starbucks with coffee and muffins, not giving the new building a glance.

‘We need to scope this out,’ Rabbit said, as if he had some grand masterplan in mind. He nodded at the Starbucks and dug into a pocket. ‘Scored enough change for a few coffees last night. You want anything with it?’

I still felt off-kilter, unwilling to face food. ‘Just get me a latte.’

Rabbit pushed through the glass-fronted door, handed me his board and indicated that I should take one of the bar stools along the window rail. I dumped the boards and my backpack on the floor and eased into the seat. A guy reading his newspaper two seats to my right eyed me and lifted the corner of the paper so I couldn’t catch a sneaky read.

‘Fucking asshole,’ I mouthed under my breath.

While Rabbit was at the counter, I studied the building across the street. People were coming and going through the revolving door as if there was nothing strange about it. I rubbed my forehead, squinting as if through

the blur of a radical hangover. I numbly counted the grey-black panels either side of the revolving door.

When Rabbit set the two lattes down on the rail, I said: 'It's more fucked than we realise.'

'Nothing's more fucked than a building appearing overnight,' Rabbit told me, pouring five sachets of sugar into his cup. He said this with the quiet authority of someone who'd had a lot of experience with this sort of thing.

'It's too wide.' I waited for him to say something, but Rabbit just sat there, stirring his coffee. 'The . . . space . . . between the two buildings on either side,' I said falteringly. 'It wasn't this big. The skatepark was never this big. There was never room for that building.'

I waited for Rabbit to contradict me, but all I saw was puzzlement and doubt. 'They can't have moved the buildings either side. If they did, they'd have had to move all the buildings down the block.' He paused. 'But you're right. Look how wide that thing is.' He was thinking of pipes and ramps, how sick the skatepark could have been if it had been as wide as the building.

'Something's really wrong.' I took a sip from my latte. 'Gotta be that shit we took last night.'

'Making us see something that isn't there?'

'No.' We were both keeping our voices low. 'The building is there; I'm pretty sure of that. But I think it's only us who see that it doesn't belong.'

Rabbit had flecks of coffee froth in his beard. 'Because of what we took?'

'I don't know. Maybe. It's like everyone is accepting that thing as normal, but we've been immunized.' I shook my head, grinning at how bugfuck I sounded, even to myself. 'In the parking lot this morning . . . everything looked different. I think that drug did something to the way we see stuff. Distances, dimensions. That . . . building . . . is messing with people's heads, making them accept that it belongs there, that there's room for it where we know there isn't. But it's not affecting us the same way.'

'We still see it.'

Rabbit had seemed to accept that the building fitted into the space more readily than I had. 'It's wearing off, maybe,' I said, thinking of how he had been up on his feet a lot more speedily than I had. Ready to skate, when all I wanted to do was curl up and puke.

'There's something else,' I said after a while.

‘What?’

‘I’ve been looking at the people coming and going through the revolving door.’ I nodded. ‘Look at that guy, in the FedEx outfit.’ The courier was fat, with a white cardboard package under his arm. We watched him slip into the revolving door and disappear into the building. A few minutes later a cute goth babe with purple hair followed him inside, then a skinny black woman in a hooded top with tight blue shorts and neon yellow running shoes. Every now and then someone would come out of the revolving door, onto the street.

‘You see?’ I asked.

‘People coming, people going. That’s what happens with doors.’

‘Every single person who’s come out,’ I said, ‘is wearing a suit. I’ve seen suits go in, and normal people. Men and women. But I’ve only seen suits come out.’

It only took a few more minutes of observation to confirm what I’d noticed. The men all wore suits; the women all wore business outfits, the same silvery grey as the suits. ‘I think it’s the same people coming in and out,’ I continued, when Rabbit had nothing to say. ‘There’s the FedEx guy now. But he’s in a suit. That’s what happens. It’s like they’re being converted.’

Rabbit sat there for a while. We didn’t have much money on us and needed to make our coffees last. Mine was stone cold by the time I slurped it down to the froth. That was when Rabbit pulled out a thumb-sized strip of silver plastic, with three pink pills still on it. He put it down by his drink, screening it from the rest of the coffee shop with his body.

‘What do you think, buddy?’ He popped two of the bubbles and spilled the pills onto the rail, before sliding one pill along to me. ‘You know we need to know what’s inside that building.’

‘No, we don’t.’

‘You said it yourself. That shit is wearing off fast. I’m already starting to feel that that thing belongs here, like it’s *always* been there.’

‘I thought it was just me.’

‘It isn’t. We got lucky, had enough immunisation not to get sucked in by that thing right away, like everyone else. But it’s not going to go on forever.’ He started to say something, then caught himself.

‘What?’

‘I’m trying to remember the skatepark. How it was laid out, how big everything was. Where the graffiti wall went. But it’s getting harder. It’s like something’s moving the pieces around in my head, trying to confuse me.’

‘You think the building’s doing that?’

‘Something is.’

I didn’t want to agree with him, but I felt it as well. My memories of the skatepark had been crystal sharp this morning. But now it was getting harder to hold them in focus; harder to be sure that the skatepark really had been here at all.

Maybe we were wrong about that. What was more likely, after all: that a building had interposed itself into a space where it didn’t fit, distorting the city around it, or that two stoned out skaters had finally burned out their sense of spatial orientation?

I put a hand on the pill. ‘We could just leave. Get out of town.’

‘It’ll still be there.’

‘Maybe we’ll forget about it, once we’re far enough away. Then it stops being our problem.’

‘You hope,’ Rabbit said.

I looked out the window again. The building gave every impression of having always been there. Why shouldn’t it, I wondered? I watched people coming and going through the revolving door. Nothing about that bothered me. It was what people did.

Why the fuck were we sitting in Starbucks, staring at an office block?

I lifted my hand from the pink pill. For a moment, concentrating hard, I could still hold onto the fucked-up nature of the building. But it took more and more effort to do so. A part of me just wanted to give in and accept the normality of it all. It would be so easy . . .

Rabbit popped his pill. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed it down. ‘I’m going in, buddy. Need to know what’s inside that fucker.’

‘Don’t,’ I said.

‘It’s a revolving door. I won’t even go into the lobby.’ The drug hit fast. He closed his eyes as it took hold, clutching the edge of the rail as if he was on a roller-coaster. ‘You coming?’

‘There’s no need,’ I said, gripped by a stone-cold certainty. ‘It’s just a building.’

‘Always said you were a pussy.’ Before I could react, he’d scooped up my pill as well. He swallowed it and tightened his grip on the rail as the double-dose took effect.

I tried to remember where the pills had come from, but it was hard. All I could be sure of was that I didn’t want Rabbit to go into the revolving door. Even as I felt drawn toward it myself, and would feel compelled to

enter the clean and welcoming lobby that I knew had to lie on the other side. I felt dirty in the clothes I'd slept in overnight. Just by going into the lobby, I would feel better. There would be black marble flooring, wall murals, desks with glass security gates, elevators with gold trim and full-height mirrors. Washrooms and dark carpets.

'Look after my things,' Rabbit said.

He pushed through the glass door, out onto the street. I watched him cross the road between traffic. Someone stood at the ATM, fishing for the right card. The barrier swung up to let a Prius out of the underground garage.

Rabbit turned back to look at me, squinting as if he couldn't quite see me through the coffee shop's frontage. He worked his shoulders, like warming up to do a handstand, and went into the revolving door.

I waited for him to come out.

And waited.

After a while I realised that I was sitting alone in Starbucks and I didn't know why. There were two empty coffee cups in front of me, a silver strip with a pink pill inside a clear bubble, and two skateboards and a backpack on the floor at my feet.

I grabbed the stuff and left the shop. I thought I remembered sitting with Rabbit, until he got up and went into that building, the one between the bank and the office block. What did Rabbit want with that place? On the other side of the street I caught my reflection in the moving panes of the revolving door. Multiple copies of me, zoned out and with two skateboards under my arms. I froze, for a moment, hit by the memory of something. I dropped Rabbit's board and dug into my pocket, until I found the hard edge of a strip of embossed plastic. I took out the strip and popped the last pink pill. It seemed necessary to do it, although I couldn't say why.

I waited a moment, then knelt down to grab the board. A black woman came out of the revolving door and for a moment I thought I recognised her from somewhere. Our eyes met, and I waited for some kind of reaction from her, some hint as to how we knew each other. But she was looking right through me, looking right through everything. Her stare cut through the city, out to the suburbs.

I got up and went through the revolving door.

It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the toned-down lighting. It was just a normal lobby. The floor was dark red marble, not black, and

instead of murals there were pink and scarlet abstract paintings on the walls. Other than that it seemed to fit my preconceptions. There was a rank of security desks with waist-height glass barriers between them, and beyond the security desks were elevator doors. Lots of people were waiting by the elevator doors, standing in ones and twos. I could even see Rabbit, with a visitor's pass clipped to his collar. I waved at him, trying to get his attention, but he wasn't looking in the right direction. I wanted to shout, but it didn't seem right. Everything was so hushed and calm and clean.

I moved toward the desks. I didn't have any business in the building but they'd be able to call Rabbit for me, before the elevator arrived.

I stopped in my tracks. My head felt wrong. I dropped the skateboards and fell to my knees. Distantly, I remembered swallowing something. Whatever it was was kicking in now. I closed my eyes, trying to push the dizziness away. The floor felt like it was dropping away at a million miles an hour. I steadied myself with the palm of my hand, but instead of cold hard marble it felt soft and warm. I realised then that when I'd dropped the skateboards they hadn't made much noise.

I forced my eyes open again. My head was still swimming, my stomach felt as if it was doing kickflips, but I needed to see.

I wasn't in a lobby now.

The red marble floor was a mattress of veined flesh. It curved up into the walls, knobby with gristle and fatty deposits. They climbed high, much too high. There was no ceiling to the lobby. It went all the way up, as if the inside of the building was totally hollow.

Not empty, though. There was something up there, some huge purple-pink mass like a stomach or bladder, suspended hundreds of feet overhead. It was breathing in and out, very slowly. It filled the upper level of the building, anchored into place by thick pink glutinous tubes, like windpipes or intestines.

The stomach-thing trailed dozens of tendrils, reaching all the way down to the red-veined floor. They were stretching and contracting, carrying stuff up and down from the stomach. At the end of each tendril was a kind of fleshy hand big enough to close around someone's head and upper body. Beyond the security desks, which were not really security desks, there were no elevators. But there were people waiting. The tendrils were collecting them, picking them up like chess pieces. The people didn't fight or resist, or show any visible fear. They just let the stomach pull them up into it, their arms hanging limply by their sides as they were drawn aloft. In its

billowing, sagging underside was a sphincter wide enough to swallow a car. The tendrils were popping people into the stomach. Now and then, they'd reach in and pull out a person in a suit, lowering them gently back to the floor. The suits were covered in a pink mucous.

Where the security desks had been was a wall of head-high fronds, like something you'd see in an aquarium. When the suits came through the wall, the fronds caressed them, sucking away the mucous until the suits looked dry. Then they walked past me, out of the building. The only part of it that hadn't changed was the revolving door.

Ahead of me, a visitor reached the row of fronds. She stood still and allowed the fronds to stroke her, to probe her face, to linger over her eyes. Then she went through, toward the groups waiting to be lifted into the stomach.

I vomited. It was a dry retch, not much coming up. The half digested pill landed on the floor, smothered in a mouthful of puked-up coffee. I stared at it numbly, wondering why it mattered so much.

After a few moments my head began to clear. Suddenly self-conscious, I used my sleeve to smear away the mess I'd made. I collected the skateboards, mine and Rabbit's, and pushed against the cold red marble, until I was back on my knees.

I'd had a weird turn, but it had passed as quickly as it came.

Rabbit was still waiting by the elevators. I went to the nearest security desk and smiled at the hot chick behind it. 'I need to reach my friend,' I told her, conscious of my scuzzy clothes, the skateboards tucked under my arms. 'Could I get a visitor pass?'

'Not a problem, sir,' she said, hitting me with a diamond smile. 'Just go on through.'

THE KID AT MIDNIGHT

A Harry the Book story

MIKE RESNICK

The author has produced about a dozen of these Damon Runyonesque Harry the Book stories, and he finds that the supporting characters are starting to generate more fan mail than Harry himself. 'The last two stories were about Gently Gently's weight problem (he is only minimally lighter and smaller than a boulder; a typical fan, in other words), and this one concerns, at least peripherally, Big-Hearted Milton's ongoing almost-romance with Mitzi McSweeny and his professional rivalry with Morris the Mage.' The Harry stories have become Mrs. Resnick's favourite, so he imagines he'll keep writing them as long as she lets him 'hang around'—'. . . which she's been doing for 51 years and counting.'

Mr. Resnick is, according to Locus, the all-time leading award winner, living or dead, for short fiction. Among his trophies are five Hugos (from a record 36 nominations), a Nebula, and other major awards from the USA, Poland, France, Spain, Croatia and Japan. He's the author of 71 novels, more than 250 stories, and three screenplays, and the editor of 41 anthologies. During the past decade he has been the science fiction consultant for BenBella Books, the executive editor of Jim Baen's Universe, and currently edits the Stellar Guild line for Arc Manor Books. In his spare time, he sleeps. But not too much.

SO THERE I AM, SITTING IN MY OFFICE, WHICH IS THE THIRD booth at Joey Chicago's 3-Star Tavern, sipping an Old Peculiar and trying to come up with a morning line on the big game between the Mainville Miscreants and the Galesburg Geldings, when suddenly Benny

Fifth Street looks up from his barstool and announces that he sees some business on the hoof approaching, and sure enough, Longshot Lamont enters the premises a moment later and walks right up to me.

‘Hello, Longshot,’ I say. ‘How are you on this fine day?’

‘I am well, thank you, Harry,’ he said, doing a deep kneebend to prove it, or maybe to pick up a quarter he sees lying on the floor, ‘and I am feeling very lucky today.’

This is music to a bookie’s ears, which happen to reside on each side of my head, because no one currently old enough to shave can remember the last time Longshot Lamont bets on anything that is less than 100-to-1, and most of them finish about where you would expect a 100-to-1 shot to finish. This is a guy who bets Eleanor Roosevelt to win the presidency as a write-in back in 1992, which is unlikely on the face of it and even more so when one considers that she has been dead and buried for 30 years at the time. This is a guy who bets Secretariat to go Best in Show at Crufts, which doesn’t even allow American dogs, let alone American racehorses. This is a guy who bets that Willie Mays scores more touchdowns than Red Grange.

So when he pulls out a wad of bills and slaps it down on the table in front of me, I immediately try to think of the longest shot in the city on this particular day, but even I am astonished by the next words out of his mouth, which are, ‘Harry, I am betting two large on Kid Testosterone to beat Bonecrusher McDade in the big fight tomorrow night.’

Benny Fifth Street’s jaw drops down to his belly button. Gently Gently Dawkins, who had just entered, almost chokes on the candy bar he is eating. And from where he is standing at the back of the tavern, Dead End Dugan utters the first laugh I have heard from him since he returns from that cemetery up in the Bronx.

‘I must be dreaming!’ says Dugan.

‘You are not so much dreaming as you are dead, sort of,’ says Dawkins.

‘I thought I just heard someone bet on Kid Testosterone,’ continues Dugan. ‘But the Kid has never made it to the third round in any of my lifetimes, so I know I must be dreaming.’

‘I do not think zombies can dream,’ says Dawkins.

‘Are you a zombie?’ demands Dugan.

‘Not the last time I check, no,’ says Dawkins.

‘Then do not make comments about what zombies can or cannot do until you become one,’ said Dugan, folding his arms, staring off into space, and going back to thinking dead thoughts.

‘This time the Kid will realize his full potential,’ says Longshot Lamont. ‘I can feel it in my bones, Harry.’

‘His full potential has not yet seen him to the third round in 42 tries,’ notes Benny Fifth Street, ‘and this is a ten round fight.’

‘O ye of little faith,’ says Longshot Lamont. ‘I will be back after the fight to collect my winnings.’ And with that he turns and walks back out into the street.

‘Has Lamont ever won a bet with you, Harry?’ asks Dawkins.

‘Just once,’ I say.

‘You must have been a long time recouping your losses,’ he remarks.

‘Not really,’ I say. ‘It is the Godiva Handicap, for fillies and mares, and he puts five C’s on Three-Legged Shirley to win.’

‘I remember her,’ says Joey Chicago, from behind the bar. ‘Is she not the reason that Belmont will not allow anything with less than four legs to answer the call to the post?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘People feel so sorry for her they begin to pool their betting money and start a fund to buy her and retire her to a life of ease.’

‘So how does she win?’ asks Dawkins.

‘She doesn’t,’ I answer. ‘She runs last, beat 937 lengths.’

‘Then I do not understand,’ he says.

‘We are standing side by side at the rail, and as they hit the far turn and she is already a furlong behind the field Lamont turns to me and says very bitterly that he can read me like a book and he bets a C-note I am feeling confident about winning his money. I feel so bad about taking his 5 C’s that I accept his wager, and then admit I am feeling supremely confident. I pay him his hundred dollars as the field hits the homestretch and I write it off as an act of charity on my income tax, but it just so happens that my tax auditor knows Lamont and argues that it is an act of mercy rather than an act of charity and will not allow the deduction.’

‘Well, today’s wager will certainly be the easiest two large you ever made,’ says Benny Fifth Street.

‘And he will need it,’ adds Gently Gently Dawkins, staring out the window, ‘for unless my eyes deceive me, and that only happens after my fourth double hot fudge sundae of the night, I see Lamont’s polar image walking down the street toward us.’

‘You see a snowman that looks like Lamont?’ asks Joey Chicago, turning to look out the window himself.

‘You mean his polar opposite,’ says Benny. He turns to me. ‘It’s Short

Odds Harrigan. Doubtless he is about to drop a pile on some one-to-three shot that is moving down in class.'

The door swings open and sure enough, it is Short Odds Harrigan, who has probably bet a five-to-one shot once or twice in his life, but not since the glaciers departed from California.

'Hi, Short Odds,' I greet him. 'Are you here for business or to sample some of Joey Chicago's whiskey?'

'I had some last year,' he says, making a face. 'I will lay plenty of one-to-five that it was watered.'

'I resent that!' says Joey Chicago.

'That is your right,' says Short Odds pleasantly. 'Just do not deny it or God may strike you dead.'

Benny South Street and Gently Gently Dawkins immediately begin arguing which way Joey Chicago will fall if God strikes him dead, and Short Odds listens for awhile and then turns back to me.

'I need the odds on the big fight tomorrow night, Harry,' he says.

'About three gazillion to one,' I reply.

'I am being serious,' says Short Odds.

'So am I,' I say. 'I do not think the computer has been built that can compute the odds.'

'I am a bettor,' he says. 'You are a bookie. It is against all the laws of Nature for you not to give me the odds.'

'All right,' I say. 'I will give you one to five hundred that he ends it in the first round.'

He considers it for a minute, then shakes his head. 'I am not certain he can win in the first round. What are the odds for his winning, period?'

'One to four hundred,' I say.

'So if I put down ten large. . . ?' he begins.

'I will pay you twenty-five dollars when the Boncrusher wins.'

He frowns. 'That is all very well and good, Harry,' he says, 'but I am betting on Kid Testosterone.'

I put a finger into my ear, expecting to find it clogged with wax, but all it is clogged with is my finger. 'Would you say that again, please, Short Odds?' I ask. 'I know it's crazy, but for a second there I think you say that you are betting on Kid Testosterone.'

'I am.'

'But you have never bet on anything but a favorite since they invented the wheel,' chimes in Benny Fifth Street. 'Maybe longer,' he adds thoughtfully.

'I just have a hunch,' says Short Odds.

'You will have to take your hunch to Mars, or maybe Jupiter,' I say. 'There is not enough money in the world to cover your bet if the Kid should win.'

'I will take the same odds you were giving me on Bonecrusher McDade,' says Short Odds.

'Joey,' I say, 'pull that phone out from behind the bar and call an ambulance. Our friend Short Odds has finally gone off the deep end.'

'I am the same charming and loveable character you have always known,' protests Short Odds. 'I do not need all the money in the world, although I admit it would be nice to have. I just need some action, so I will take a mere ten thousand to one odds, and I will bet a single C note.'

'How can we be sure he is not ready for the funny farm?' asks Benny, staring at him.

'Is he foaming at the mouth?' suggests Dawkins, who ignores the fact that he has foam from his beer all over his mouth and dripping down onto his shirt.

'Please, Harry?' pleads Short Odds.

'I will have to think about this,' I tell him.

He pulls a C note out of his pocket, pulls a pen out of his other pocket, and scribbles something on the C note.

'Bubbles La Tour's private phone number,' he says, covering it with his hand. 'Now will you take my money or not?'

'If Harry won't book your bet, I will,' says Dawkins.

'It is against my better judgment, but in keeping with my baser instincts,' I say, grabbing the C note. 'I will book your bet.'

He gives a triumphant shout that momentarily awakens Dugan from all the dead thoughts he is thinking, and then Short Odds is out in the street, and before I can puzzle out what is happening in walks Bet-a-Bundle Murphy and Pedro the Plunger, and they both want to put their money on Kid Testosterone.

'That's it!' I say. 'Something very strange is going on here. The book is closed!'

'You cannot do this to us, Harry,' says Murphy in hurt tones. 'It is your function in life to book our bets.'

'There is something very fishy about this,' I tell him.

'That is just the smell from Maury's Fish-and-Chip Shop next door,' says Dawkins helpfully.

‘It is an honest wager on an honest fight between two evenly-matched masters of the fistic arts,’ says Pedro.

‘Who would have believed it?’ says Benny.

‘Believed what?’ asks Pedro.

‘You manage to cram five lies into an 18-word sentence,’ answers Benny.

‘Maybe we should give him a door prize,’ suggests Dawkins.

‘I do not want a door!’ yells Pedro, who becomes very literal-minded when he is upset. ‘I want to lay my money down on Kid Testosterone!’

I look him in the eye—the blue one, not the red one—and I say, ‘I told you: the book is closed.’

‘But *why*?’ pleads Murphy.

‘Last month the Kid gives an exhibition of shadow-boxing in his training camp,’ I say. ‘His shadow knocks him out in 43 seconds.’

‘An aberration,’ shrugs Pedro.

‘In the fight against Brutal Boris three months ago,’ chimes in Benny, ‘he makes it through the first round. As he is coming back to his corner, his trainer sloshes water on him, and it knocks him down for the count.’

‘Last year the referee has him touch gloves with Yamamoto Goldberg and he breaks his hand,’ adds Dawkins.

‘And this is the guy you think can beat Bonecrusher McDade?’ I conclude.

‘I just got a feeling about it,’ says Pedro defensively.

‘Take your money and your feeling elsewhere,’ I say. ‘The book is closed.’

They complain a little more, and finally they leave.

‘Where is Milton?’ I ask.

‘Where else?’ says Joey Chicago in bored tones, jerking his thumb in the direction of Milton’s office, which happens to be the men’s room.

Big-Hearted Milton is my personal mage, and he has chosen as his office the one place on Joey Chicago’s premises where every Tom, Dick and Harry won’t be able to study and perhaps even memorize his spells. It doesn’t quite work out that way, but at least his spells are safe from being overheard by every Teresa, Doris and Harriet.

I enter his office, and there is Milton, standing on the tile floor, surrounded by five black candles that have burned themselves down to nubs. He is chanting something in an ancient lost language of the mystics (or maybe French), and suddenly he claps his hands, the flames on the candles go out, and he gives a triumphant laugh.

'*That'll show her!*' he cackles.

'Mitzi McSweeney again?' I ask.

He nods his head vigorously. 'She slaps my face just because I give her a friendly pinch in the elevator.' An outraged expression crosses his face. 'I do not even draw blood.' He dabs at his nose with a handkerchief. 'But *she* does.'

'What horrible curse have you placed upon her this time?' I ask in bored tones, because in truth Mitzi McSweeney seems to survive Milton's almost-daily curses far better than Milton survives her almost daily face-slappings.

'I have added an inch to each of her high heeled shoes,' he says happily. 'Next time she wears them out in public, which is every day, she will probably fall on her face.'

'That is indeed a very terrible curse, Milton,' I say. 'So if she falls, some thoughtful gentleman will help her to her feet and brush her off here and there as gentlemen are inclined to do, and doubtless earn her undying gratitude, and if she doesn't fall but manages to locomote with them she will wiggle even more than usual.'

'Why don't *I* think of that?' complains Milton.

'I would give plenty of ten to one that anyone in the bar except maybe Dugan could tell you, but they are all too polite,' I say. 'Now, if you are all through cursing Mitzi McSweeney for today, we have business to discuss.'

'One minute,' he says, closing his eyes and mumbling another spell. 'Okay, Harry,' he says when he is done. 'Her shoes are all restored. Instead, I have made her belts too tight, so she will think she is gaining weight.'

I decide not to tell him that if she does not wear her belt and her skirt or slacks are on the loose side, she will not only be a maiden in distress but also in undress, because past performances have taught me that we can spend all day before Milton comes up with a spell that will have a deleterious effect on anything except Milton's love life.

'All right,' says Milton at last. 'What is it that could possibly be more important than finding a way into Mitzi McSweeney's heart?'

'Maybe if you would stop looking for it in strange places she would stop slapping your face,' I say.

'She does not slap my face every time,' answers Milton with a chivalrous display of loyalty. Then he grimaces. 'Sometimes she kicks my shin.'

'How do you think Kid Testosterone would do against her?' I ask, subtly moving the conversation back to business.

‘She would take him out in straight falls,’ says Milton with absolute certainty, ‘and she would do it with such grace and style that the referee would award her both ears and the tail.’

‘What if I tell you that Longshot Lamont just placed two large on the Kid to beat Bonecrusher McDade?’

‘I would say that in a field of slow learners, Lamont ranks somewhat behind a crippled snail,’ answers Milton.

‘And what if I further tell you that Short Odds Harrigan also puts money down on Kid Testosterone?’

‘Curious,’ mutters Milton with a frown. ‘It is sunny and pleasant out all day. It does not look like the world is coming to an end.’ Milton stares at me. ‘I hope you know a short prayer, because I am not sure you have time for a long one.’

‘Is there no other explanation?’ I ask, and I wait for him to calm down, because Milton is an excitable sort.

‘I have counted to 20 and the world is still standing,’ announces Milton. ‘If this is not the End of Days, then there is only one other possible explanation: the hex is in.’

‘Of course the hex is in,’ I say. ‘How else can the Kid win? In the fight against Guido van Gogh last summer, Guido throws a haymaker that misses and the wind knocks the Kid down for a seven count.’

‘I remember the fight, but I think it is Guido Guardino.’

‘That is his moniker before his girlfriend bites his ear off when she catches him cheating.’ I stop the sentence right there, because if I go any farther the next three words will be ‘with Mitzi McSweeney’, and then it will take another ten minutes to get Milton to concentrate on the problem at hand, and a serious problem it is, because there is probably not enough green in all of New York to pay Longshot Lamont what I will owe him if Milton cannot counteract the hex.

‘Well,’ says Milton after giving the matter some thought, ‘at least we know the culprit.’

‘We do?’ I say.

He nods sagely as the overhead light makes patterns on his balding head. ‘It will take the most powerful spell in the universe and points north to bring the Kid home a winner. There are probably only two magicians alive who can cast such a spell, and I very much doubt that any dead magicians, powerful though they be, really care who wins a boxing match.’

‘Do we know these two geniuses?’ I ask.

He pulls himself up to his full height, which is about five feet eight inches with lifts in his shoes. 'You are looking at one of them,' he says with dignity.

'And the other?'

'Morris the Mage, of course.'

'Well, you've gone up against Morris before,' I say hopefully. 'So can you counteract the spell?'

'I do not know yet,' says Milton. 'How much time do we have?'

'The main event is scheduled for ten o'clock tomorrow night,' I say. 'The Kid is in the wrap-up bout, which they will hold when everyone's getting up and leaving, as the only point of interest in one of his fights is how many rows deep into the audience will he be knocked this time.'

'Okay,' says Milton, checking the little hourglass he wears around his neck. 'It looks like I've got 26 hours to break the spell.' He lowers his head in thought. 'I will need two newts, some oil of horned toad, a cup of dragon's blood, some black mustard seeds, a bat wing with or without the bat, and a bag of jelly beans.'

'Jelly beans?' I ask, surprised.

'So I like a little knosh while I work,' he answers defensively. 'Sue me.'

I spend a few hours gathering what he needs while he goes over his ancient books of magic, and I send Benny Fifth Street into Milton's office every half hour to make sure he hasn't sneaked a copy of *Playboy* inside one of the tomes, and finally Milton emerges at about ten in the morning and plops himself down opposite me.

'So what do you find out?' I ask.

'It is a real stinker of a spell,' he says wearily. 'It couldn't be cast without a tooth from a tree-dwelling crocodile. Where the hell did he find one in Central Park?'

'Get to the point,' I say. 'Can you break it?'

'Not today,' says Milton.

'Breaking it tomorrow won't do me any good,' I point out.

'It's that damned tooth,' says Milton. 'It makes the spell absolutely irreversible until midnight.'

'We are in deep trouble,' says Dawkins, who is munching on a bowl of bar pretzels. 'The main event won't last past eleven, and the Kid can't last past thirty seconds of the first round.'

'If we cannot make a deal to buy the Denver mint before ring time, we are doomed,' says Benny Fifth Street.

‘I have been doomed many time,’ offers Dead End Dugan from the back of the tavern. ‘After awhile you get used to it.’

‘I do not have awhile,’ I say, looking at my watch. ‘I have thirteen hours and forty-two minutes.’

Milton checks his hourglass. ‘Fourteen hours and ten minutes,’ he corrects me.

Benny and Dawkins look at their watches.

‘Harry is right,’ says Benny. ‘I have ten eighteen.’

‘Me, too,’ says Dawkins.

Milton looks at his hourglass, then taps it with a finger and sand begins to gush to the bottom. ‘Damned thing needs a new battery,’ he says apologetically.

‘How far away can we get from here in thirteen hours?’ asks Benny.

‘We are not going anywhere,’ I say, at least partially because I realize it is hard to hide in a crowd if I am to be accompanied by my flunkies, one of whom is no more than a biscuit shy of 400 pounds and another of whom is a zombie. And suddenly a thought occurs to me, one of the few I have in the last hour that does not begin with a picture of a grave and all my friends throwing flowers and unredeemed markers into it. ‘Milton,’ I say, ‘if the Kid doesn’t fight until midnight, can you break the spell then?’

Milton grimaces. ‘I have a chance, at least,’ he says. ‘But even then, I will need the claw of a Subterranean Fish Eagle.’

‘Benny, Gently,’ I say, ‘your job is to bring Milton that claw. We will meet at ringside at eleven o’clock tonight.’ I pause. ‘Milton, go home and get some sleep. I want you at your very best tonight.’

‘And what will you be doing, Harry?’ asks Milton.

‘I will be arranging for Kid Testosterone not to enter the ring before midnight,’ I say.

I wait until they all leave, and then I walk over and ask Joey Chicago for his phone. He lays it on the bar and I pull out the bill that Short Odds Harrigan gives me, and I call the number on it. A minute later Bubbles La Tour picks up the phone, and even though I am Harry the Book and am interested only in odds and money, my throat goes dry and my palms start sweating, because as everyone knows Bubbles La Tour is the Secretariat or Babe Ruth of women, an exemplar of the gender who has curves in places where most women don’t even have places.

I explain who I am, and before I can get any farther she wants to know

the morning line on her repeating as Miss Lower South Manhattan next month, and I tell her she is currently a one-to-ten favorite but that the serious money hasn't come in yet and I expect her to wind up at about one-to-fifty. Finally she asks what I want, and I tell her, and she says that it is an interesting proposition but she can't do it for free and what will I offer her, and I give her my very best offer which is that I will offer to cross her phone number out on the C note Short Odds gave to me and never call her again, and she says 'See you at eleven!' and that is that.

Then it is just a matter of killing time until the fight. Gently Gently Dawkins also kills four pizzas, a Belgian waffle, two bowls of chili, an 18-ounce steak, and a triple hot fudge sundae (but because he is on a diet, he does not eat the cherry that sits atop the sundae).

Benny challenges Joey Chicago to an afternoon of tiddlywinks, but they start arguing about which came first, the tiddly or the wink, and by the time the dust clears it is eight o'clock and they have both forgotten to eat. This does not seem to be Dead End Dugan's problem, because he cannot remember whether zombies eat or not and he decides to be on the safe side and do without, though I cannot quite figure out exactly what a zombie can be on the safe side *of*.

Big-Hearted Milton wanders in nursing a black eye and a bloody nose, and Joey Chicago grins and says, 'I see she is still mad at you.'

'A vile canard,' says Milton. 'I apologize to her when we meet for dinner, and she forgives me.'

'Then explain the eye and the nose,' says Joey Chicago.

'I reach out to shake her hand and show her we are still friends,' answers Milton. 'I am a little near-sighted, and that is not what I wind up grabbing and shaking.' Suddenly he grimaces. 'If you want to see a real fight, put Mitzi McSweeney in the ring against Bonecrusher McDade. I figure she takes him out no later than the fourth round.'

Benny, who has seen Mitzi in action, opines that Bonecrusher cannot make it through the third round, and that reminds me that we have a fight to watch, and we walk over to the Garden, and arrive there at five minutes to eleven, just as the ring announcer is informing the crowd that Jupiter Zeus has just won a split decision over Murderous Malcolm Malone. Murderous Malcolm congratulates the winner and accidentally kicks a full water bucket onto the three judges as he is preparing to leave the ring. He holds his arms out to proclaim his innocence and that it was an accident, and in the process accidentally knocks out three of Referee Fair-

Minded Freddie's teeth. Then, with a satisfied smile, he climbs out of the ring and heads off to the dressing room.

'Why have you bought seven seats?' asks Benny as we approach our seats at ringside.

'Two for Gently Gently,' answers Milton, 'and one each for Harry, you, Dugan and me.'

'That is only six,' says Benny, who is really good with math until he runs out of fingers and toes.

'Say, that's right,' replies Milton. He turns to me. 'Who is the seventh seat for, Harry?'

Before I can answer a hush falls over the crowd, and about ten seconds later there is a cheer that is so loud that all the mirrors in the public restrooms shatter, to say nothing of all the eyeglasses being worn anywhere in the arena. We all turn, and undulating down the aisle is Bubbles La Tour, who is wearing something very tight and very revealing that cannot possibly weigh eight ounces total. Finally she stops at the edge of our aisle and waves to the crowd, and there is another cheer, even louder than the first. She bows to acknowledge the cheers, and the seven closest men faint dead away, and everything comes to a halt while we wait for the ambulances to come and cart them off to the cardiac unit. She walks to the door with them, holding one man's hand, then walks back down to still more cheers, though I notice that almost none of the ladies in the audience are cheering, and indeed most are frowning, and a few are dabbing on lipstick and make-up.

'What time is it?' I ask.

'Eleven forty-nine,' answers Benny.

'Milton,' I say, 'we need eleven more minutes.'

'Probably only eight or nine,' replies Milton. 'The fighters have to make their way to the ring, and then the announcer introduces them, and then we sing the national anthem (or did we do that already?), and then—'

'Milton,' I yell at him, '*do something!*'

'I could vanish her clothes,' he suggests, 'which are about 93% vanished already.'

'There will be riots and cardiac arrests and police arrests and the fight will never come off, but just be rescheduled, and I cannot use this particular ploy to postpone it an hour the next time,' I say.

'I'll think of something,' says Milton.

Bubbles La Tour reaches our aisle and begins wiggling her way past

Dawkins and Dugan and Benny, and then she sidles her way past Milton and utters a shriek and pivots around and slaps his face.

The crowd screams in outrage, though I get the distinct impression that most of them are outraged that *they* didn't get to give her a friendly pinch, and then Bubbles unloads a thousand-word diatribe to Milton, of which at least 17 of the words can be printed in a family magazine, and then she pivots and wriggles her way back to the aisle and stalks out of the arena.

'Eleven fifty-nine,' announces Benny.

'See?' says Milton proudly as he wipes the blood from his nose. 'Nod eberythig requires magig.'

A minute later, at exactly midnight, Kid Testosterone climbs up the stairs to the ring. He trips on the top step, as usual, and cracks his head against the ring post. Usually this would knock him out for the next three hours, but tonight he just smiles a self-deprecating smile, and waves to the crowd. Then Bonecrusher McDade, who looks like a walking ad for steroids, enters the ring, and the referee gives them their instructions—no biting, no kicking, no rabbit punches, no hitting below the belt, and this being Manhattan, no kissing—and then they go to their corners, and a few seconds later the bell rings, and out comes Kid Testosterone, and he doesn't look any tougher than usual, but Bonecrusher McDade lands a one-two to the Kid's belly and a left hook to his chin, and the Kid just shrugs it off.

'Okay, Milton,' I say, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice. 'It's past midnight. *Do something!*'

Milton mutters a spell, the Kid brushes off a haymaker that should put him to sleep for a week, and Milton tries a different spell.

'Nothing is happening,' I say as the Kid misses with a left and right, and absorbs three quick punches to the ribcage, and laughs in the Bonecrusher's face.

'I cannot break through the spell,' says Milton unhappily.

'It must be a real doozy,' offers Dawkins sympathetically.

'It is,' answers Milton. He points to Morris the Mage, who is sitting next to Short Odds Harrigan on the other side of the ring. 'Look at that smug bastard,' he growls.

I do look, and Morris is so caught up in the fight that he's throwing punches in the air even as he sits there. He is bobbing and weaving just like Kid Testosterone, sneering whenever the Kid sneers at McDade, and I see a way out of our dilemma and turn to tell Milton about it, but Milton has seen it at the very same time, and is already chanting a spell. It goes on for

almost half a minute, during which time the Kid is pummeled mercilessly but painlessly, and finally he yells 'Abracadabra!' and suddenly the Kid shrugs off a shot to the belly but Morris moans and doubles over in his seat.

'Watch!' says Milton with a happy smile.

McDade lands a shot to the Kid's head. Nothing happens in the ring, but Morris goes flying back out of his chair.

Morris is knocked down three more times as he tries to get up, and finally we see him turn to Short Odds, and while I cannot read his lips I know what he is saying, which is that he isn't getting paid enough to take this kind of beating and he is redirecting it back to the person it is being aimed at, and he makes a mystic gesture with his hands, and the next haymaker McDade throws at the Kid knocks him out of the ring and has absolutely no effect on Morris. The referee looks out at the floor to see if the Kid can make it back by the count of ten, but it is obvious that the Kid cannot even wake up by the count of ten to the thirty-seventh power, and that is that and I do not have to pay off any bets, and I resolve to tell all the other bookies never to deal with Short Odds Harrigan again, and then I think why should I make life easier for them, so we all of us except Milton, who sees Mitzi McSweeney in the crowd and goes over to patch things up, return to Joey Chicago's to celebrate not going broke.

Milton walks in half an hour later, holding a bloody handkerchief to his nose.

'So she's still mad at you,' I say.

'Well, yes and no,' answers Milton, dabbing gingerly at his nose.

'What do you mean?' asks Benny Fifth Street.

'I explain to her that I have been a cad, and I apologize for all offenses I have given her, and she is clearly softening and liking what she hears, and so I throw myself at her mercy.'

'That sounds like a humble approach,' says Benny. 'Why should a woman get upset when you throw yourself at her mercy?'

'I miss her mercy,' explains Milton, 'and you cannot believe how displeased she is with what I hit.'

Just then who should walk in but Mitzi McSweeney. I would say she has blood in her eye, but that would be misleading, because what she had is blood on her hand, and there is no question but that it comes from Milton's nose.

'Where is he?' she demands.

I look around, and Milton is nowhere to be seen, but I can hear a voice muttering behind the door of Milton's office, saying, 'I should have let Kid Testosterone fight her when he and I still had a chance.'

Mitzi hears it too, and in another twenty seconds she puts on an exhibition that would be the envy of both the Kid and the Bonecrusher.

RED-ROOFED TEMPLES IN THE MOUNTAINS BENEATH ME

FORREST AGUIRRE

The author tells us that the following story came out of a strange confluence. 'It was a "negotiation" that I had with my oldest son regarding cell phone use late at night,' he says, 'coupled with a series of National Public Radio reports on rural China and the desertification of farmland that is taking place there at this time.' Oh really? Do tell us more. 'Well, I've never been to China,' Mr. Aguirre confides, 'but the feelings I have for each of my own children, along with a bit of research, helped me to transcend, at least in my own mind, this experiential gap. While every story is at least subconsciously autobiographical, by the nature of being written by a human being, the writing of them has rarely moved me so much as the writing of "Red-Roofed Temples in the Mountains Beneath Me".' Read on and you'll see why.

Mr. Aguirre's work has been published in more than fifty venues. Lately, his writing time has been split between his first true science fiction novel, Solistalgia, building his e-book mini-empire at www.smashwords.com/profile/view/forrestaguirre, and waiting to hear back from several publishers regarding his fantasy novels Panoptica and Heraclix & Pomp.

KAIYÜ CAME HOME FROM SCHOOL ONE DAY WITH A CELL phone.

'Where did you find that, son,' I asked. 'Have you asked around to see who owns it?'

‘I own it,’ his voice cracked. Fourteen was that awkward age when you finally start to have the words and conviction to say exactly what you want to say, but your voice does all it can to demoralize you. Conquering that voice is a stepping-stone toward adulthood.

‘But you did not buy it. How did you get it?’ Pending adulthood notwithstanding, some father’s questions demanded answering.

‘The headmaster gave them to us.’

‘Us? All of you?’

‘Everyone at school got one.’ He was trying to hide the smile that indicated his pleasure at being one step ahead of me, his poor, simple farmer-father.

‘Why?’ The question was not really directed at him.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Something about the rising generation and how our governor loves us. The same old stuff.’

The same old stuff, I thought, that had been said, but not acted on since . . .

I shut the thought out of my mind.

Changing the subject, I said, ‘Fine. Go out back and help your mother fetch water.’ Besides, my wife needed the help. Since the desert began salting our prairies with sand, she had to make more frequent trips to the well to get water for the garden and for our crops. It wouldn’t hurt the boy to work the dirt for a bit, either. It would give him some grounding.

The land, weary of changing hands so often in the last century, was losing its lifeblood. We, our family, were always here tending our stretch of wheat fields. We were the barrier between the ground and whatever authority ruled the region. First, the nationalists, then the communalists, then, after idealism had given way to the lure of industrial money, the provincial authority, each of these in turn took a piece of the earth’s soul for their own ends. We were rarely affected directly by the national authorities, whatever their complexion, but the land knew when evil was present. It would wither under bad influence, and the desert snuck in to the back of our wheat fields, nipping at the edges of our livelihood like dogs at the heels of a wounded pig. Still, we were ultimately ‘in charge’.

That soon changed.

A firm knock sounded at the door one late afternoon. No one in these parts knocks, I thought as I opened the door to see what might drive a stranger to our distant town.

A man, dressed in a sharp black suit, well-pressed, stood there holding Kaiyü by the arm. My boy was sullen, but silent.

‘Mister Yan’an, this is your son?’

‘Yes, but who are you?’

‘I am the truant officer.’

I didn’t even know we had a truant officer.

‘Your son,’ he continued, ‘was found with a friend reading prohibited material.’

‘Prohibited . . . ?’

‘Yes!’ he cut me off. ‘Magazines.’

‘What sorts of magazines?’ I could imagine, quite vividly, what kind of prohibited magazines a fourteen-year-old boy was reading. I found it difficult not to laugh at the truant officer’s austerity.

‘Geographic magazines.’

I felt a momentary chill crawl down the back of my neck. ‘You mean the ones with the yellow cover? With the bare-breasted women in them?’ Sometimes, I admit, I can hardly help myself. The hint of a smirk showed on Kaiyü’s face, but he quickly erased it.

The truant officer’s face twisted up in an expression of disgust.

‘No, sir.’ He paused for a moment, confused. ‘No, sir. He and his friend were looking at magazines that contained maps.’

‘Maps?’

‘Yes, sir. Maps.’ Then, anticipating my next question: ‘Maps of regions where rebellion has fomented in the past. And others...’ He left the sentence open as if, by the exclusion of specifics, he held some advantage over me.

‘Consider this a warning,’ he said, pushing Kaiyü at me. ‘Here is your boy. It is up to you to discipline him as you see fit.’

That night, after an obligatory discussion of the matter over dinner and a good laugh at the truant officer’s expense, I lay in bed drifting back to my younger years when my father would, on special occasions, take out a small stack of *National Geographic* magazines and thumb through them with me and my sister, Jen. He never told us where or how he had

obtained them, but we did not question these facts until we were ourselves adults.

We couldn't read English and our father couldn't read at all, but we delighted in the maps and photographs of far-off places. On these nights, and many following, we would elaborate on the pictures, extrapolating and expanding on the images, inventing whole histories, mythologies, and cultures as we lay in the dark. Our heroes and heroines travelled vast distances through lands where dwellings were carved into cliff-sides, bizarre wild animals roamed freely on city streets and, yes, bare-breasted women hunted lions with spears made for them by their docile husbands. They righted wrongs, enforced justice, and toppled the corrupt from their stations of power and though the backdrop for their adventures would change with each retelling, the one constant in these naively-invented tales was the underlying theme of freedom, freedom to think with an unfettered imagination, to burst the barriers of time, space, and logic with the greatest weapon ever invented: imagination.

When father died, our imaginings had to be put on hold. My sister, fearful of the repercussions should an investigator find the magazines, burned them up in our fireplace. With the nourishment for our dreams gone, the window to our alternate reality slowly closed. There were other, more practical matters to worry about, like tending to the family farm and helping mother, in the absence of her husband.

I married, my sister did not. Then, when the desert began to creep closer to our land and we saw the inevitability of slow starvation, she moved east, to the big cities to try to find work in the toy factories. I have not heard from her since.

In the weeks following Kaiyü's incident with the truant officer, I thought often of my sister, Jen. Her nephew had not yet been born. They could run into each other in the city and be none the wiser about their relationship to each other. I knew that Kaiyü's imagination, as evinced by the exaggerated tales he told as a young child, would increase her chances of identifying him, as would his long Yan'an chin. But this presupposed that this encounter would last more than a few seconds, which it could not in the bustle of the city. All was a mad rush to build out there, or so I was told.

Out here, however, we had time to think. So I thought about how, after these many years, I could find her. I mentioned my thoughts to my wife.

‘Well, you can’t leave the farm to me and Kaiyü.’

‘I would never do that to you. I remember too well how mother struggled after father died.’

‘Perhaps.’ She was not ignoring my comment, only deflecting it so that she would not be forced to have to say something so embarrassing as *I love you*, though I knew she did. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘you can use that cell phone and call her.’

‘But I don’t even know if she has a phone.’

‘Everyone in the city has a phone!’

‘. . . and I don’t know her number.’

‘You’ll be able to find it. You are very good at figuring these things out. You are a smart farmer.’

This was her way of saying *I love you*.

Kaiyü had fallen into one of those deep teenage slumbers, the kind you never have again after you’ve stopped growing. His cell phone was on the floor, next to his mattress. I picked it up and flipped it open, hoping that it wouldn’t make any noise. The only noise was my own nervous breathing, contrasting with Kaiyü’s deep, steady inhalations and exhalations.

Maneuvering through the phone’s buttons was easier than I thought it would be. The icons mostly made sense, and the sound was turned completely off so that when I did make mistakes it did not wake my sleeping son.

My sister’s name was not among the contacts. How silly of me to think that every phone would hold the number of every other person in the country. It was a simple thought, too simple even for a man of my education.

Still, after I was satisfied that I could not find Jen’s number on the phone, I continued to work through all the phone’s features. An old man can, after all, still learn a few new things on his own. Among other things, I learned that these phones also have a camera and a rudimentary video recorder. One could keep entertained for hours with this little wonder.

I moved through the stock photos of the hammer-and-sickle-embossed flag, the soldiers standing at attention, and the central dam-works (where was the Great Wall?). Beyond the propaganda was a series of photos apparently taken by Kaiyü.

But they were impossible.

I searched my memory for the names of the places that I thought I saw there: Switzerland? Tibet? But not quite Switzerland or Tibet. This place seemed an odd mixture of them both. The pictures were taken from a vantage point near the summit of a mountain, or from a gondola or helicopter. Beneath, a series of gargantuan buildings clung to the mountainside in steps, like some giant had carved a makeshift ladder into the granite. Each building was roofed in some red material—baked terracotta, I assumed. The buildings' facades, or what I could see of them, were carved right from the cliffs themselves, glass and wooden windows fitted into the stone cavities. Far below, at the bottom of the chasm, an ice-blue river, frosted in some places with foam like lace, meandered between the granite walls. Potted plants hung from underneath the eaves, cascading vines hanging down where they could not cling to the buildings. The sun beamed with white light, casting sharp shadows on some of the buildings and brilliantly illuminating others. I thought I could vaguely make out the figures of some people standing behind the windows of several of the buildings, waving at the camera. Though I could not see their faces, their gestures indicated that they could see their photographer and that they were comfortable beneath the camera eye.

Their clothing, though difficult to bring into focus, seemed to be primarily floor-length robes, like those worn by the nobles of the old dynasties. Many wore a head dress, likely a matching fez if I interpreted the tiny shapes correctly. Purple and orange seemed to be the favored colors, with a sprinkling of white here and there. All were intermingling freely with each other, with no open indication of caste.

There were four pictures in all, each one from a similar vantage point, though one of the photographs was taken with the camera aimed up toward the sky. In this last one, a roof very much like that of a pagoda loomed overhead. The rays of the sun sprayed out from behind a horn-shaped cornice, which was decorated with immense yellow tassels that seemed to be swaying in a gentle breeze. The sky was free of clouds and intensely blue, like our sky would be if it weren't for the dust.

The next morning, before school, I spoke with Kaiyü about what I had found. He was very angry at me for having looked at his phone.

'You shouldn't be getting into my things! Don't you trust me?' It's not

a matter of trust,' I explained. 'I was hoping to find my sister's phone number in there and call her.'

He mumbled something indistinct, but it might have been 'simpleton.

'You can't take my phone,' he said, more forthright.

'I am your father. I can take it.' I answered the challenge.

'The government gave it to me. You'll be in trouble with them if you take it.'

Stalemate.

Silence.

For days, we didn't speak. Kaiyü would return home from school and immediately began helping my wife with chores. In fact, he took to them with vigor, working well past the time he would normally have left off. She had no problem with this, as she was able to enjoy his company and she needed the help. I, on the other hand, felt an emptiness creep inside, a yearning to be reconciled to my boy, stopped only by the need to maintain order in our family.

Then, one night, we were given reason again to break our mutual silence.

A familiar knock, the only knock to ever come to my door, was repeated.

There stood the truant officer holding Kaiyü's arm, as if they had never left my doorstep. Only this time there was a young soldier standing behind him, a very young soldier, probably only a few years older than Kaiyü. He stood at attention, very smart in his pressed uniform. His AK-47 looked perfect, shining like a suit of lacquered brown and black armor.

'Mister Yan'an,' the truant officer said. 'Again, your child has become a source of trouble.'

Kaiyü scowled, eyeing the little truant officer sidelong, as if waiting for an opportunity to strike the man. But the presence of the soldier seemed to prevent it, for the time being.

The truant officer held up Kaiyü's cell phone with his spare hand. 'Your son has been making unauthorized phone calls . . .'

What?' Kaiyü interjected.

' . . . from illegal locations,' the truant officer finished.

I held the palm of my hand up toward Kaiyü, indicating that he should let me handle this.

'From *which* illegal locations?' I asked.

The truant officer looked over his shoulder at the young soldier, who

shot him a significant glance and communicated only with a slight tilt of the head and a change of expression.

‘I am unauthorized to say.’

‘Then how can I know he’s been there?’ I asked.

The truant officer seemed to steel up with confidence. Handing the cell phone to me, he spoke curtly, but clearly: ‘I am unable to say, except that it was from an illegal location. You will see to it that this never happens again.’ He turned away and, with the soldier in tow, left us.

I sent Kaiyü to help his mother as soon as I thought the officials were far enough away. I then sat in the kitchen and turned on the cell phone. The background, which had earlier been blank, was now emblazoned with a stylized hammer and sickle, made to look bright and attractive to young eyes, as if McDonald’s had now licensed the flag. I found it gaudy and unimaginative, even boring in its excess.

Having been through the menu once, I quickly found my way through to the sent and received call notification sections. I recognized many of the names as those of schoolmates and friends. But at night, it seemed Kaiyü had received some calls from an ‘unknown service area.’ I went back and discovered that this had been taking place for some time now. He had also made several calls during the night hours, but the numbers on each of these outgoing calls were replaced by a series of dashes. A pattern emerged as I looked more closely: the calls coming in from the unknown area began not long after the time that Kaiyü normally went to sleep—or so I had thought—and the outgoing calls seemed to occur as morning approached. Each call, incoming or outgoing, only lasted about five minutes, with a long empty space throughout most of the night, in which there was no recorded activity.

I found it disconcerting, angering, even, that my son would sneak out after having gotten into bed, then leave early in the morning, probably as I was feeding the pigs, to receive and make these calls. Then he had the audacity, after each secret rendezvous, to slip back into bed long enough to make it look like he had been sleeping the entire time.

Suppressing my anger for a moment, I found my way back through the maze of menus to his photographs. There were more this time, though the other breathtaking vistas remained. The new photographs showed what must have been the inside of the buildings I had seen earlier. I looked for

some text on the pictures, something to indicate what magazine they were taken from, which publication he and his friend had photographed to get these images, but I was disappointed in my search for evidence of the deed. These boys knew how to carefully crop the shots to cut out any identifying text.

The first of these pictures showed a vast hall, much larger than the nearest community gymnasium and, it appeared, much older. The walls were made of smooth cut granite or some other dark stone on the lower half. The upper half looked like a polished sandstone alternating with the polished granite in tan and grey stripes up to a deep-hued, red ceiling. A set of vast windows looked out at another building like the ones in the earlier photos, but at a face-on vantage, rather than from above. The windows themselves were very tall, perhaps thirty feet at their highest point, and arched, like one might see in a western cathedral.

To either side of these immense windows stood a ladder. Atop each ladder a person—man or woman, I could not tell—was busy hanging long yellow tassels like the ones I had seen in a previous picture. They streamed halfway down the walls to the spot where the last stripe of sandstone stood atop the granite base. The workers were dressed in silk robes, one a deep purple, the other an iridescent white. The purple-robed one wore what looked like a tall fez of the same color as the robes, with a smaller version of the yellow roof-tassels sewn into the crown of the hat. The other figure, in the white, had straight dark hair that barely grazed the shoulders. Though the angle hid their faces from me, I could see their hands. Each of the four hands was heavily tattooed with strange circular, triangular, and arrow shapes in different arrangements, unlike any writing I have seen, though I had the impression that the symbols were meant to represent a language of some sort.

There were a couple more pictures of the cliff-side city, these taken, I guessed, from the windows in the previous picture. The perspective was a bit different from the first few pictures I had encountered, more embedded in the chasm than far above it. I could begin to discern more facial features on the people in the pictures, but still could not see them too clearly. Some, I thought, were adorned with tattoos on their faces similar to the ones I had seen on the decorators' hands. Of course, this made it even more difficult to see their faces in the grainy pictures. One thing I could see was that they were all, without exception, smiling broadly and gesturing their welcome with open arms.

The last picture showed a table, a huge wooden table that must have been carved from the largest of trees, filled with baskets of strange fruit and platters of even stranger meats. Three-lobed ruby-colored pears with a white flower sprout at the top seemed common, what looked like pyramid-shaped green grapes were heaped in great piles, an eight-legged pig and something that looked like a cross between a bird of paradise and an octopus steamed the air. Several chairs with tall, thin backs sat before each place, which was, in turn, set with brightly-painted porcelain bowls and chopsticks. At least *something* looked familiar!

I closed the phone just as Kaiyü came in from his chores.

‘Kaiyü, please tell me where these pictures came from, what magazine you photographed to get them.’

He remained silent, standing in the kitchen, avoiding my gaze.

‘I want to help you, Kaiyü, but you need to talk to me.’

He fidgeted for a long time, gathering his thoughts, planning his unsaid words.

‘Those are pictures of my dreams.’

‘Son, I understand you have dreams. I have dreams, too. But I also understand the practicality of keeping the rules. If you don’t try to understand and work within rules, you won’t find the freedom you need to pursue your dreams.’

He listened intently, rolling the words over in his mind.

‘There are a great many things you do not understand about dreams and freedom, father.’

He walked into his room and lay down on his mattress, quickly falling asleep.

I sat on the kitchen chair and found myself fading into that same state.

The buzzing of the cell phone in my hand woke me up. I looked down at the tiny screen, which read ‘unknown service area’ in the caller ID field. I hesitated for a moment, then opened the phone and answered.

‘Hello?’

A voice, a female voice, spoke in a language I could not understand. It, the language, I mean, had a high tone with floating syllables, like a leaf on a gentle breeze or the coolness of a gentle sun-shower rain on the face, melodious.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘I can’t understand . . .’

But the voice, that sweet, happy voice, continued as if I had said nothing. There were pauses where the person on the other end seemed to be listening, but they came at all the wrong times, never in synchronization with my repeated pleas for clarity. When she was not speaking, I could hear laughter and conversation in the background, warm music, and occasional cheering, as if a big social gathering was taking place.

Her voice, however, never seemed distracted by the revelries. It was solely attentive to the non-voice on the other end, the voice that should have been mine, but was not.

After about five minutes, she said something short, as if saying goodbye, then hung up.

I tried the callback function, but was informed by a nasal electronic voice that my call could not be completed as dialed.

My head was full of too many questions, so I simply went to bed, taking the cell phone with me. Maybe Kaiyü was right. Maybe I was just a simpleton.

I awoke later than usual in the morning, but still early enough that Kaiyü should still be in bed. I checked in on him and he was sleeping soundly, breathing deeply. I could see his eyes twitching beneath the lids, then slow again as he began to stir, only to relax again into a deep sleep.

The phone, which I had in my hand and had intended to place by his mattress before he woke, buzzed again. I stepped out of his room and into the kitchen to answer it.

This time it indicated that a video file was being sent. I opened the file, curious to see what his friends might be sending him at this odd hour of the morning. Then I realized that the video file was being sent from the phone, not to it. Had I accidentally pressed a button I shouldn't have? Impossible. I had only been holding it, not pushing any buttons.

I opened the 'sent files' folder and looked at the most recent message. It indicated that the file had been sent two minutes before, right at the time the phone had begun buzzing in Kaiyü's room. I opened the video file, expecting to see a clumsy filming of our floor or the palm of my hand.

Something much more profound and disturbing showed on the screen.

I immediately recognized the inside of the room from the pictures I had viewed the night before. This time, however, the room was full of people and their faces showed. Two revelers, each with purple robes and fezzes

bracketing their tattooed faces, stood to either side of a bare-chested, unmarked youth: my son. He was smiling, laughing, not in that bitter way of one who finds humor in misfortune and darkness, but as one who has found a zest for life and a love for people, a laughter that simply cannot be contained. His companions, arm-in-arm with him, smiled and laughed with him in some sort of celebration.

I stood to walk into Kaiyü's room to see what kind of dummy or mannequin he had stuffed under his sheets to aid the deception, but I kept my eyes on the screen as I walked.

Someone—the camera's operator, I supposed—was reaching out and handing him a set of robes and a hat, fiery orange silk shimmering in the candlelight. His laughter faded to a solemn smile, he nodded, as if saying thanks, and spoke something in that tongue, which sounds like clear mountain air gently sliding through pine needles or a silver trout in a cool stream.

I entered his room and reached out to remove the blankets that covered the pile on his bed.

Kaiyü reached out to take the phone from the camera operator. The room spun.

I grabbed the blanket.

The camera started to settle on the other person, the original camera operator. The face began to un-blur. This face also had no tattoos on it, like Kaiyü's.

I pulled the blanket.

The phone's screen went blank.

Kaiyü was under the blanket. He stirred, rolled over, and looked up at me with bleary eyes.

'What?' he started.

The door knocked.

The sun had not yet risen.

As I walked to the door, the knocking became more insistent and a voice came through from the other side.

'Open up!'

Not that I could—they bashed open the door and poured in, four of them in uniform and one, who gracefully walked in behind them, in a neat black suit.

'Mister Tan'an, your son has been making phone calls from an unauthorized location.'

‘Where?’ I asked, incredulous.

‘We suspect he is working with imperialist elements,’ he said, ignoring my question.

‘Where were the calls made from?’

‘Far away, though I am not at liberty to say exactly where.’

‘Then how can you accuse him if you don’t know?’

‘It is an unauthorized location,’ he said, expecting his logic to convince me. It didn’t.

‘But he was here with me all night.’

‘You say you were with him at this unauthorized location all night?’

‘No, I . . .’

‘That would be most unfortunate, if it were the case.’

By this time the soldiers were dragging Kaiyü out, kicking and screaming. My wife was also kicking and screaming, trying to drag the last of the soldiers back into our house. We could hardly see our son between the uniforms and the glimpses that we did catch were streaked with red.

‘Where are you taking him?’ I yelled, pulling my wife off the soldier.

‘Laogai.’

‘No,’ I said, my voice barely audible.

‘No!’ my wife screamed.

‘Yes,’ the man in black said with finality. He walked out after the scrum of Kaiyü and the soldiers, holding the phone aloft as if it held all the evidence he needed to justify my child’s imprisonment. They melted into the dark, becoming one with the empty night. We were left with the word, Laogai, a beautiful name for the ugliest of prisons, like a pomegranate that has rotted on the inside while it’s smooth red skin has remained unscarred. We had heard tales of those who had been incarcerated there, though never from those who had survived it. We didn’t know of any who had.

The desert grew more aggressive, driving its sandy tendrils further into our land, clawing through the heart of our wheat crop and into our family garden. It became apparent that we could not stay there. As my thoughts projected forward, my dreams projected outward, yearning for something, though I could never quite remember their substance. I woke, frequently, with the distinct feeling that I was on the verge, ever at the edge of something much larger than myself, something more promising than

my menial existence, more fulfilling than the emptiness that had carved its way into my land and into my heart.

One day, in the winter, when we carved roots from the ground because nothing could grow above it, a postcard arrived.

I recognized the handwriting immediately:

‘Mother, Father,

‘Please don’t worry about me. I am doing fine. In fact, I’ve never been happier. I love you both and hope to see you soon.’

I flipped the card over. There, again, was Kaiyü between the two friends, this time dressed in the orange fez and robes. To one side, a sliver of a face showed, a non-tattooed face that might have been the same one I saw blurred in the video image before the government came to take Kaiyü away. She was a middle-aged woman, close to my age, with a peculiarly long, thin chin, a distinctive family trait that declared the woman’s relation to my son, and to me.

‘Love,

‘Kaiyü

‘PS: Aunt Jen sends her love. We miss you. See you soon.’

I could not read the strange postmark, but I knew that Kaiyü could, and that he would soon teach us all its meaning.

BURIED EYES

LAVIE TIDHAR

This second outing for Lavie's immoral, junkie gunslinger, Gorel of Goliris, follows his appearance last year in a previous volume of Postscripts. Here, Gorel teams up with an old friend to liberate a precious cargo of magical stones—but finds more than he bargains for in a remote ghost town.

Gorel is set to return soon in a special collection from PS, Black Gods Kiss, a companion volume to the British Fantasy Award-winning novella Gorel & The Pot-Bellied God, which we published previously. Lavie's other books for PS include the novella Cloud Permutations, the World Fantasy Award-winning novel Osama, and the recent novel Martian Sands.

THE HALF-DRESSED GIRLS PASSED SILENTLY BETWEEN THE lying figures, their bare feet making no sound as they stepped on the sand. Low-lying metal braziers cast a shifting glow and made the girls' shadows move as of their own accord. Gorel of Goliris lay on his back on the thick rich carpet under the stars and what he saw no one could tell.

One of the girls stopped and knelt beside him. 'Are you comfortable?' she asked. She took his hand and put two long, graceful fingers against his wrist. 'It is time for another one?'

She waited; presently, Gorel closed and opened his eyes. The girl, used to such minute communication, took it for assent.

The long thin needle was almost translucent but the nature of the material passing through it had stained it in fantastical whorls of yellows and reds. It was the quill of a small desert dweller; Gorel had captured and eaten several of its kind. The girl held his arm and her practiced

fingers searched his naked flesh. Gorel's lips moved, though little sound escaped. The girl stroked his hair. 'Soon now,' she murmured. 'Soon. Hush now.'

Finding a suitable place, she pressed the needle into his arm with one practiced motion. The needle was attached by a long thin tube to a contraption of metal and glass standing upright beside Gorel and the girl. The bottom component was a glass jar filled with water. A pipe ran up and into a metal bowl. The girl moved her hand over the bowl and murmured words, too quiet to be made out. The bowl began to smoke. The smoke had a sweet, pungent smell. Everyone at the place knew it intimately. The water in the jar began to bubble. The girl took hold of a bulb attached to the side of the device and began to pump it. The water bubbled harder, and the smoke grew more intense. A sluggish substance began to drizzle down the long tube and into the needle. Gorel sighed, a weak exhalation of air, and closed his eyes. The girl continued to pump, and with her other hand stroked Gorel's hair. 'Better now,' she said. 'Everything is fine now.'

There was no past any more, and no future, for Gorel. There was only now, a now in which the craving subsided and he was content. A now that required no thought, only acceptance. He sighed again, at peace, and closed his eyes against the stars' brightness.

Hours—days—passed. Gorel knew nothing beyond the glow of the low braziers, the murmured assurances of the girls, and the sweet, omnipresent atmosphere of the narcotic.

Days—hours—later, a commotion awakened Gorel from his stupor. Shouts erupted near the enclosure. There was the sound of drawn steel and, following that, someone laughing. The sword sounds were repeated. The laughing voice said something unintelligible. Then there were gunshots.

There were screams then, but they cut short. There were no more sword sounds. The next noise was of someone treading heavily between the lying figures, speaking as if to himself, and gradually coming closer. 'Yes, that's a nice ring, I think I'll take that—you wouldn't mind, would you? No, I didn't think so. So kind. And this—a genuine pendant of protection from the wizard Bergon of Bilal? Yes, I do believe that is his mark there—nice workmanship, I must say. Not doing you much good though, is it? Of course, I am not actually doing you any harm in removing it from your possession, so I assume it works—well, well, what have we here?'

The voice had come close to Gorel. ‘I know these guns,’ the voice said. ‘Six-shot, hand-crafted, with the silver inlay on the grip of a seven-pointed star—where did you steal these, you bastard?’ and a face bent down to Gorel’s level, and a hand reached and lifted his eyelids and a breath heavy with the smell of drink and of smoke and, strangely, the tang of the sea, blew on his face and the voice said, wonderingly, ‘In the name of the Drowned God, is that you?’

Gorel opened his eyes. The face looming above him kept going in and out of focus.

‘What *happened* to you?’

Gorel smiled at the face. Then he passed out.

He came to on hard ground but when he opened his eyes the looming face was still there. It was a remarkable face. The skin was a bluish-green, the flesh craggy like the deeps and rises of an underwater landscape. The eyes were milky-white but hooded—it was as if a film was cast over them. The face smiled, the landscape moving as in a slow-motion volcanic eruption, and teeth emerged like islands from the deep. ‘You look like shit,’ the face said.

‘It’s nice to see you too, Jericho,’ Gorel said. He felt the craving return then, as desperate a need as ever it’d been, and he tried to rise but the other man’s arms effortlessly held him down. ‘You’re not going anywhere, Gorel. I don’t know how you got yourself in this shape but I need you functioning.’

‘Then get me some dust.’

‘There is no more dust, Gorel.’

‘Get me some dust or get your hands off me!’

‘What are you going to do, Gorel—fight me?’

Gorel strove against the iron arms that held him captive. ‘Let go, fish man!’

Jericho laughed. ‘Is that the best you can come up with?’ He looked down at Gorel and shook his head. ‘I’ll tell you what, man of Goliris. When you can force me to release you—then I will let you go.’

All that day and that night Gorel was in the throes of delirium, and he raved and screamed and tried to fight his friend, and the curse of the

goddess Shar held full sway over him. But Jericho Moon had found a simple solution: he bound Gorel's arms, and his legs, and left him hanging from the thick branch of a tree, while he sat nearby and smoked the strange, translucent-blue pipe of the Aquatic people, the Merlangai, holding it one-handed and inhaling the smoke of the sea-weed they call Derin or Gitan, and which is found in abundance in the gardens of the Merlangai, the water-folk, who have the monopoly of it and guard it jealously. To make his wait more comfortable Jericho simply put large mufflers over his ears. So the day passed, and the night. The next morning Gorel's fever broke but so, it seemed, did he. He would not speak, nor accept food, and his eyes were dull and listless.

On the third morning Jericho Moon looked into the eyes of Gorel of Goliris and knew the futility of his attempt. And so he disappeared, leaving Gorel tied up, and returned much later, and when he came back there was a small white packet among his possessions.

He showed that packet to Gorel. 'Ah, I thought so,' Jericho Moon said as he watched his friend thrash silently, 'so that got your attention. All right.' He took a deep breath. At his neck, the two small gills on each side opened and closed briefly. 'Gorel, I am not a physician. Nor a priest. You want the dust, and that's fine with me. But. Can you function on it? Or will you go back to lie amidst the others like you, in that place I found you, where many come but few ever leave?'

'Give me the dust.' The words were barely a whisper.

'Can you manage it? For a while? I need you for a job.'

Gorel bared his teeth. It could have been a grin, it might have been a snarl. Jericho Moon, unconsciously, took a step back. 'Give me the dust and give me my guns and you've got yourself a partner, Moon.'

'I don't need a partner,' Jericho Moon muttered, but he opened the packet carefully and dipped his finger inside it and returned with the fine powder that was there, and put it under Gorel's nose. 'I just need someone to take orders for a while.'

Gorel inhaled.

And his whole body relaxed. For a moment, nothing else happened. Then, in his old voice, Gorel said, 'Untie me, Jericho.'

'Sure thing,' the half-Aquatic said. He pulled out a long, thin blade and cut the rope. Gorel fell down to the ground. Jericho Moon laughed, and then he knelt beside Gorel and cut the knots that still held Gorel captive.

'Guns.'

Jericho Moon, without a word, went away and returned with Gorel's gun-belt. The half-naked man strapped the gun-belt on. He drew both guns simultaneously, spun them, cocked them, uncocked, spun them again and returned them to their holsters. 'Give me a drink and a cigar,' Gorel of Goliris said, 'and I'm ready to listen to your offer.'

'It's nice to see you too,' Jericho Moon said.

They sat around the fire and drank, and talked about the old days. The packet of dust remained with Jericho. 'I was surprised to find you at that place,' Jericho said at last. 'Are you going to be able to function?'

'Do you mean, can I still shoot?' Gorel said.

His friend smiled. Then he said, 'There's a lot of gods' dust floating around these days. It used to be they settled for faith, but now—'

He didn't complete his thought, and Gorel smiled, though not in amusement. 'Itinerant gods,' he said. 'Not bound by a place or a people. It was an itinerant god that—'

He too did not complete his thought. They drank some more. Gorel lit a fresh cigar. The fire burned low.

Gorel said, 'What's the job?'

'There's an old town three days' ride from here called Prosperity.'

'*Prosperity?*'

'I'm hoping that would be *our* prosperity, Gorel,' the half-Merlangai grinned, then continued. 'Used to be a few Merlangai there, working underwater mining in the river-mouth. Used to be lots of mining down there.'

'What sort of mining?'

'You know the dark-blue stones they call Buried Eyes? Small round things—'

'Yes,' Gorel said, and his voice was quiet. 'I saw them used for totems' eyes, in the Romango wastelands.'

'The Mesina campaign?'

'Yes.'

'So you know what they're worth.'

Gorel knew. He remembered the silent, immense figures rising out of the fog, out of nowhere, silent and unmoving and watchful, ancient evil figures whose eyes were a dark blue nothingness. He had been moving through the wastelands with a platoon of other soldiers-for-hire, and the

fog was so thick they had to hold hands not to be separated. There was a scream from the man ahead of him, and he let go of Gorel's hand. There was a gust of wind then, and in the sudden clearing of the fog Gorel saw a ring of totems, open at one end, and his friend running blindly and entering the ring, and the silent onlookers seemed to close around him. The fog shifted again. Gorel had never seen him again, nor anyone else from his platoon.

'Look, Gorel, they're precious stones. Gems. They're *valuable*. Gems aren't intrinsically good or bad. They just are.'

'Like gods.'

There was a short silence. Then, 'Gorel, are you interested, or do I need to find someone else for the job?'

Gorel drank from the bottle and felt the alcohol numbing, if only a little, the much deeper, stronger layer of cravings that resided in him. 'I'm still listening,' he said.

His friend grinned. 'Right. Guy used to run things there? Old sorcerer. Don't know his name. The Merlangai I spoke to just called him Boss. He used to run the mining operation and the selling, though they said there'd never been much outside trade. If they're right there should be a store of Buried Eyes still there, just waiting for someone to come and pick it up. Someone like *us*, Gorel.'

'And the old guy? The Boss?' Gorel said. He didn't voice the thought that came, unbidden, to his mind. The words the goddess Shar had said to him, before enslaving him, before he killed her. 'On the vast sandlands of Meskatel I met an old sorcerer. . . .'

An old sorcerer who might have knowledge of Goliris.

'What's one old wizard?' the half-Aquatic said, and he grinned, and his eyes were hard. 'If he's even still alive. We could take him easy.'

Gorel had to smile. 'Guns against sorcery?' he said, and his friend clapped him on the back and said, 'Just like in the old days.'

They rode across the desert at day-break, travelling while it was yet cool to move under that great open expanse of sky, before the sun could reach high enough to become a burning eye that remorselessly found anything that dared to move. They rode the great travelling beasts of the sandlands of Meskatel, swift multi-legged desert-dwellers whose tough carapaces turned a fetching green colour as the animals absorbed the

energy of the sun. They were called graal. At this early time of the morning they moved slowly, but Gorel and Jericho were not in a hurry: travel in the desert was a matter of endurance, not speed. Before they left Gorel had taken more dust. It was plentiful in Meskatel; the desert, it seemed, was a natural lode-star for itinerant gods. So now he rode, settling back into the familiar rhythm of the journey, as the beast's multiple leg-pairs scuttled smoothly over the sand and the creature, every so often, breathed, releasing the noxious gas that had collected inside it and replacing it with air.

When they had crested one of the tall sand dunes they stopped, and let the beasts drink. These were domesticated graal, and the two poison glands in their tails had been removed, but it was still an awesome and frightening sight to watch them as they raised their tails in the air and lowered their heads. It was early enough yet for them to drink, and Gorel watched as slowly, slowly water condensed on the graal's tail and slid, drop by drop, down its body to the head.

The graal drank. Jericho Moon looked at them and sighed. 'Wish I could do that,' he said.

'How *did* you end up here in the desert?' Gorel said, and the half-Aquatic shrugged and said, 'It's a long story.'

He was dressed from head to toe in a blue cloak. His head was cowed. He looked less like a gun fighter than a monk (which he once was, in the service of the Drowned God) but Gorel knew not to underestimate him. They had fought side by side before. He said, hating the words, 'Do you have more dust?'

'No.'

'I need a little more, Jericho. Just a little.'

The gun materialised in Jericho's hand as if by sorcery. It was a big, ugly, organic-looking device, from the foundries of the Merlangai, who use the soft silver-coloured alkali metals to smelt their materials in big bright controlled underwater explosions. It was made of the metal and wood of sunken ships, beaten into shape with potassium and caesium, and carrying slugs loaded with the spirits of drowned sailors. It was a nasty piece of workmanship, and the former monk's most prized possession. 'Are you going to be a problem, Gorel? Just tell me once, but make it stick. I need someone I can trust.'

Gorel squinted at his friend. The craving burned, burned, but underneath it was still pride. He thought he had lost it for a while. He was

surprised to discover it was still there. He said, 'You think you can shoot faster than I can draw?'

The half-Aquatic grinned. 'You want to try?'

They circled each other. Their beasts stood stock still, gathering the precious moisture, absorbing the rays of the sun as their carapaces turned a deeper shade of green: they looked like jade statues, carved and left on top of a dune by a long-vanished people.

'You know I can take you.'

'Maybe you can, at that.' Jericho Moon sighed and the gun vanished. He said, 'What about it, Gorel? Can I trust you?'

Gorel stood as motionless as the graal. The craving was there, that sweet, terrible curse put on him with a god's kiss—but there was also pride—and stubbornness. And the thought, above all, of vanished Goliris, that which he had lost and had sworn to win again, his birthright and his fall. He nodded his head, once, a fraction.

'Let's ride,' he said.

The next day the landscape changed. The dunes remained behind and the land turned into sandy prairie. Before noon they found a brook and stopped on its bank. The two graal, disdaining so much water, went and sat in the sun, their legs folded beneath them, their tails drawn, until they resembled two large gemstones that turned gradually darker. Jericho Moon jumped into the brook and didn't surface. He lay motionless underwater, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling in a slow, steady rhythm. Gorel cursed him, waded in himself, and washed. He drank from the fresh, cooling water, and then lay in the shade and smoked a cigar and watched the barren land that seemed to stretch to forever before hitting a distant horizon.

They rode again as the sun sank low in the sky, the graal picking up speed, and made their camp in the crook of a hill, and built a fire, and slept beside its embers.

On the third day the land changed little but there were some signs of habitation, or the remnants of such. On a hill in the distance they saw what appeared to be an abandoned windmill. A little further on they came across a small settlement. Two wooden houses, roughly-built. A small outhouse. A fenced area that might have served for cattle had there been any. They approached cautiously, guns drawn, but the place had the silence

of disuse. When they disembarked and went inside they found the same basic, austere lack. In the second house they discovered a table laid out for six, and plates and pots on the table filled with a black-grey gunk. Jericho stared at the tableau mournfully. 'Looks like they had just sat down to eat,' he said. 'And—got called away? Had to leave in a hurry?'

'Who would live in a place like this?'

'No one now,' Jericho said.

Gorel turned, and turned again. He felt uncomfortable. The closeness of this wooden shack oppressed him. He felt the walls trying to close in on him. There was a dusty, dead smell to the place. His palms itched, and the craving threatened to drown him. 'Give me some dust,' he said, huskily, and Jericho didn't argue this time. He wordlessly passed the packet to Gorel.

When the gods' dust hit he felt immediately different: alert, conscious, focused. But the sense of wrongness remained. He handed the packet back to Jericho, equally wordless, and began to prowl the cabin, his hand trailing the wooden walls. The wood felt rough, unvarnished. On his second pass around the room his finger caught on a wood splinter and it pricked his skin.

The sense of wrongness intensified. He raised his eyes but could see nothing in the wall before him. And yet . . . something was there, something was *watching* him, and Gorel felt himself shudder. He raised his finger and slowly, carefully, passed it against the wall, drawing a line of blood.

A face peered at him from the texture of the wood and he jumped back, his hand coming to rest on the butt of his gun. Nearby Jericho, too, had tensed. 'What is it?' he said.

Gorel looked into the revealed face. Two dark blue eyes stared back at him, expressionless. He took a further step back, hand still on his gun. 'It's an ikon,' he said. 'I think.'

'What?' The half-Aquatic came closer and peered at the face. 'So it is.'

It was a picture, embedded into the wall. The face that stared out wasn't human. What it was . . . it was traced into the wood—no—it was—Gorel looked closer, trying to avoid the gaze of those horrible blue eyes. 'Sorcery,' he said. The ikon had been worked into the wood itself. It had not been visible until—until his blood awakened it. He shuddered and pulled out his gun. The dark blue eyes stared at him impassively. The face was strange—shrivelled and blotchy at once, like something that had been left to die in the desert sun only to then be finished off in a violent drowning. And the eyes—he knew those eyes.

Gemstones. Buried Eyes. And he knew they were aware of him.

He was going to shoot that face. Bullets were the only cure for magic, as far as Gorel was concerned. He drew the gun, then—

‘Jericho, what are you doing?’

The half-Aquatic turned and grinned. There was a long, thin blade in his hand. He was rooting in the wood, twisting the knife from side to side—

One of the Eyes came out of the socket in the wood and plopped into Jericho Moon’s hand. ‘I’d say I’m making a start,’ he said. He tapped the knife gently against the stone. ‘Beautiful. Look at that polish work.’ He turned his attention to the other Eye, and this time drove the knife straight into the drawn eye-socket—

‘Jericho, I don’t think—’

There was a shriek of terrible strength. The gem fell into Jericho’s hand, and now both Eyes stared up at him mournfully. The face in the wall—changed.

The contours of the wood shifted. The grotesque face expanded, staring blindly from its timber prison. The Eyes swivelled in Jericho’s hand, this way and that, *seeing* him, seeing Gorel. The face opened a mouth, began to form words. The voice that came out of the old wood was itself like old, rotting timber. It screamed. ‘Go away,’ it said.

‘Eat lead,’ Gorel said, and he raised the pistol and let out two shots, the twin explosions loud in the small space. The bullets hissed when they penetrated the ikon. Jericho jumped back and his hand closed on the two gemstones. The face in the wall froze in mid-grimace and was still.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Gorel said.

They rode slowly after that and when they saw signs of settlement they steered clear away. The geography of the place was one of almost total desolation. Life had come here, had attempted to settle, and had horribly failed.

Towards nightfall they came to the town.

They had crested a hill when they came upon the place. It lay in a shallow valley, an assortment of wood and stone houses and beaten-metal shacks, ramshackle and haphazard in their construction, leaning-to on each side of a narrow, serpentine river the colour of a boiled eel. There were no lights down there. Directly in front of them was a tree, and from the tree hung a corpse.

It was a corpse like old leather. It had the same dried, followed by drowned, look of the ikon they had seen. Its eyes had been taken out. In their place were the blue gemstones.

As the corpse came alive it began to twitch on the end of the rope. It began to speak, getting as far as 'Go a—'. It was Jericho who used his gun this time, shooting the rope and dropping the corpse to the ground. He then knelt beside it and used his knife to extract the two Eyes from its sockets. The corpse twitched feebly against him at first, then subsided. Jericho slipped the two stones into a little pouch and closed it tightly. 'That makes four in total,' he said.

'And that makes two warnings in total,' Gorel said. 'How many more do you think we're going to get?'

The half-Aquatic shrugged. 'That's two more than you'd usually get,' he said.

They spurred their beasts down the hill. The sun was setting and in the fading light the town looked abandoned and forlorn, like a decrepit old man sleeping his last sleep. Yet as they approached it, and the darkness grew and threatened to engulf the town, an unexpected thing happened, and made them slow their mounts. Lights, faint but clear, and growing gradually in strength, were winking into being amidst the old buildings, moving as if with a life of their own, here and there, until the town took on an enchanted aspect, the lights like residents strolling through the narrow, dusty avenues at dusk.

Jericho Moon reached low in his saddle and returned with a firearm. It was enormous.

Gorel, very carefully, said, 'What is that?'

The gun was seaweed-green. Seams of azure quartz ran through its length. Jericho said, 'It's a gun.'

'Really.'

More lights formed and began to move. Gorel tensed. He too reached for his guns. There was sorcery at work here.

Gorel hated sorcery.

Jericho said, 'It's a—' The sound he made wasn't human.

Gorel, who had a fair knowledge of several Merlangai dialects, said, 'The hand-cannon of the Drowned God?'

'They say when the Drowned God descended Below into the infinite realms, his warriors followed him, sacrificing themselves in order to serve their master. As the Drowned God had to die in order to be re-born, so did

his followers. When the twenty-seven warriors awoke into new life in the infinite realms, they were transformed—and so were the arms they carried with them.'

'And this is one of those weapons?'

They were approaching the town's gates. These were open. A worn sign hanging from a rotting wooden cross said *Welcome to Prosperity, Pop. 375*.

'This is the Drowned God's cannon, yes.'

They paused before the gates. The sun had almost disappeared. The darkness was smooth around them. They could see the moving lights, but no people. The rusty beaten-metal gate shook though there was no wind. Gorel drew his gun. 'Let me get this right,' he said. 'You're telling me that this monstrosity you're holding, this *hand-cannon*—and I don't even want to imagine what sort of load it fires—you're telling me this is, in effect, a *religious relic*?'

The half-Merlangai aimed the huge gun through the open gate. 'He already knows we're here,' he said. 'He sent us warnings, twice. There is little point in trying to be stealthy.'

'What did you have in mind?'

Jericho Moon grinned and pulled the trigger.

Gorel had the impression of something huge—something that wasn't quite solid enough, and yet was terrifyingly real—emerging from the mouth of that gun. It seemed to expand as it flew out of the barrel, fleetingly taking on the shape of one of the great old ones of the sea, a terrifying being, bigger than a whale, that flew through the gates, through the closing darkness, and scattered the bobbing, elemental lights and with a great tearing and breaking slammed into the walls of the town, into its decrepit houses and tin shacks, and exploded. A huge fireball rose into the sky and in its light the town was revealed in horrid relief. It was a dead town, an empty town, a town joined together by wires and strings and old spit, where nothing lived, where nothing had a right to live.

And yet . . . in the light of the explosion the other lights were—not extinguished—but revealed. They floated this way and that, and their faces were empty, and their eyes shone a sickly blue. They had bodies, of a sort, but they were ethereal, and their feet never seemed to quite touch the ground. The two graal raised their stingless tails in a defensive crouch. Gorel had to hold on as the balance of his beast shifted beneath him. He stared at Jericho. The half-Aquatic stared back at him. Realisation tasted

bitter in Gorel's mouth. The dark-blue eyes of the dead were everywhere, and he knew that soon they would come for him.

He said, 'It's a ghost town.'

Jericho, who as a former sea-dweller was not unused to the spirits of the dead, merely shrugged. 'Then let's kill some dead people,' he said.

Gorel sighed. 'Let's,' he said. He cocked his gun. They rode forward, and crossed the threshold of the town.

The town changed. Where before it was dark now it was full of light. Street lamps burned and cast a friendly, yellow glow over cobbled, narrow streets. There was the smell of roasting meats and baking bread and smoke rose from chimneys. The streets were full of people. There was no sign of the explosion. The houses were sturdy and looked new, and the town itself looked clean and prosperous.

'It's an enchantment,' Gorel said. Beside him Jericho nodded. 'Maybe it's like one of those hundred-year spells,' he said. 'Where you think you've spent one night at a ball but it turns out a hundred years have actually passed.'

'You think so?'

'It could be nice . . . You remember Champol, the wizard?'

'Sure.'

'He got drunk once and told me he was over two hundred years old. That this happened to him twice. Then he said, 'I'll never forget her,' and fell asleep.'

'That does sound like Champol.'

As they rode through the town no one disturbed them. There was a festive air to the crowd. There were small stalls selling drinks and food, and people milled about, chatting, smiling. There were families with children and the small, furry pets they call derel, who have eight legs and which children like to carry on their arms. There were some men mounted on graal of their own, and several Merlangai, and in the distance there was singing, and someone was playing a musical instrument.

'What do we do?' Gorel said. He could feel the enchantment stealing over him, trying to win him over. Already he was beginning to succumb to it, *knowing* the town, *remembering* it, recognising that woman there...the woman that . . .

'Gorel?'

He was married and had a wife and her name was . . . her name was . . .
'Gorel!'

There was a woman on the corner of the road they were following, standing behind a stall selling some sort of roasted nuts, and she was looking directly at him. He thought she was extraordinarily beautiful. Her skin was like smooth obsidian, polished to perfection. She was night, and her eyes were stars, and when she smiled a thrill went through Gorel and he felt a hunger awaken inside him.

'We find the old man,' Jericho said. 'He must be hiding somewhere in the centre of this. We find him, we find the stones, we get out. Gorel, we need to stay together. Gorel!'

But Gorel's graal was already turned. And Jericho was left alone as Gorel, oblivious to his friend's curses, rode a short way, and stopped, and dismounted.

Jericho cursed again. 'You always had too much in common with old Champol,' he said, but there was no one there to listen.

Her name was Eren and she kissed him as soon as he came to her. Her lips were hot against his. She tasted of cinnamon and chilli. 'Gerad,' she said, and he answered to the name. He swept her up in his arms and she laughed, a sound of delighted surprise, and said, 'I was waiting for you.'

'I had to go check something,' he said apologetically. 'There were reports two strangers came into town today. Gunslingers.'

'Did you have any trouble?' she said, worried, and he laughed and kissed her again. 'None,' he said. 'They won't be a problem.'

'Good,' she said, 'because the celebrations are about to start! I was afraid you'd miss them.'

'There is time yet,' Gerad said, murmuring the words into her neck, and she laughed and pushed him away, but not too far. 'The children,' she said, and Gerad said, 'The children are playing with their friends. The last thing they need is us right now.'

Eren smiled and shook her head and said, 'And what did you have in mind . . . sheriff?'

'Let me show you,' he said, and he swept her up again and carried her away and to their house.

They made love hurriedly, their passion demanding complete attention,

the way they did when they were young. They crashed into the table and he spread her down on it and tasted her and she cried as his tongue explored her. She pulled him over her like a blanket and engulfed him, her body drinking in his, and as he entered her, her black almond eyes looked at him and never closed or blinked, looking steadily into his face, and he looked back and each could see the other's pleasure reflected in their face.

'Do you love me?' she said. They lay together in front of the fireplace, where the dying embers glowed faintly. 'I've always loved you,' he said.

They made love again then, slower this time, he like an explorer discovering her body, she tracing her fingers over his skin. She took him in her mouth and he groaned and she laughed and touched him until he could take it no longer and she turned and snuggled into him, her back fitting into his chest, and he took her from behind as they lay on the rugs he had once caught and skinned for her. She moaned as he thrust into her, softly at first, the sound rising with their movements. Then she turned and pushed him back and straddled him, and he held her breasts and marvelled at their beauty as she rocked above him.

They lay again, in each other's arms, and he felt drained and happy and free, the way one does, sometimes, in dreams. Then she said, 'The ceremony! We must hurry up!' and Gerad sighed and knew that his short happiness was over.

They got up and dressed and, holding each other's hands, went out into the street. As they walked towards the town centre two children joined them, and Gerad lifted them up in his arms and held them, his boy and his girl, two fine children who he loved.

They walked amidst the others, the people of this town, the town of which he was sheriff, and as they passed their friends and neighbours they all greeted him, and he greeted them back. It was a small, happy community.

As they reached the clock-tower and the square it sat in the middle of, Gerad saw that the ceremony had almost started. The stage had been erected the day before, and now the dignitaries were already seated—the mayor looking important, and the man from the mining corporation, and of course the Boss, the old man himself, without whom they wouldn't be here. 'I have to go,' he said, turning to his wife, and she kissed him and said, 'We'll be watching you.'

He put the children down, leaving the boy to play with his derel pet, the

small animal clutching hold of its small owner's hand with its legs, rotating its head and making a happy clicking sound at the boy. He went to join the others on the stage. The mayor waved at him. The man from the mining corporation looked bored. The old man . . . He looked at Gerad, briefly, and his eyes . . . though you could never read the old man's eyes, yet still, there was something, perhaps in the expression of the face, that made Gerad unquiet. The old man could see further than anyone. What did he see that disturbed him so?

He walked slowly, greeting familiar faces, but not stopping. He had almost reached the steps to the stage when a face in the crowd caught his eye. A Merlangai face, but not quite . . . a halfling, perhaps? He knew that face, and a name almost came bubbling to the surface of his mind. A gunslinger by the looks of him, a stranger to the town? Their eyes met.

Of course. It was only Melinal, one of the Merlangai miners, recently arrived. He was a good lad. Worked with the others in the river, drank at the Sign of the Drowned Cross. Strange. For a moment he had almost thought . . .

He began to board the steps to the stage. He was the last to arrive, and he smirked to himself as he climbed. He had a good reason to be late, hadn't he? He stopped for a moment and looked back, searching for her face. She saw him looking and smiled. He was a lucky guy. He got to the stage and they all nodded, and he sat between the man from the corporation and the Boss, and the old man turned to him and said, 'Sheriff. It is good to see you.'

'You too, sir,' he said, and meant it. The old man had been too withdrawn recently, was seldom seen anymore amongst the townspeople. It was good that he had come out on this, the day of their celebration, on Town Day. He looked and saw his wife and again thought what a lucky man he was.

As the speeches started, however, and he was sitting there, almost motionless, looking at the people's happy and expectant faces, something began to gnaw at him. Something was souring his mind, ruining his enjoyment of the spectacle. He could not tell what it was. He had never experienced something similar. It was almost like a physical pain, an ache, that robbed the lights of their glamour and the evening of its mood. He felt hot and cold, and a need arose in him, a need for something ill-defined, a thing not of love or hate, not of this world, but outside of it, that existed only for its own ends and had no answer here. He looked into the crowd

again and saw the same face, the half-Merlangai, Melinal, only the name no longer seemed to fit the face which, like all the others, looked up happy and expectant at the stage. It was another name, a rogue's name, that came throbbing through his aching head. The old man turned to him again, looking concerned. 'Sheriff, are you feeling all right?'

'I feel a little strange,' he said. His name was Gerad. That too, somehow, didn't feel right. He shivered. He was cold. He needed . . . there was something he needed. Something he ached for, his body ached for, something light and strange, an unknown substance. 'I have some medication here,' the old man said. 'Here, let me . . . ' and he rooted through the pouch that he always carried with him, slung over his sorcerer's robes. But Gerad said, 'No, I'm sure I'll be fine, just—' and he saw again that face in the crowd and he knew, somehow he *knew*, that the man whose face it was had what he, Gerad—no, *Gorel*—needed, the thing he wanted, desired, *craved* beyond life and death itself. He rose from his seat. The old man looked alarmed. 'Sheriff, please!' he said, but Ger—Gor—he shook away the old man's hand. He looked at him then, and saw something unexpected. There was pain in those eyes, an old, old pain, but deeper still there was amusement, and it startled him. He staggered away as if drunk, and heard the speaker on the stage stop, and the audience turn to look at him, and he didn't care. His hand rested on the butt of his gun and it felt good; it felt familiar and right. He jumped from the stage and made for the half-Merlangai.

The world tilted sideways and changed, and he was in the dark.

No. Where there had been people there were eerie, blue-green lights, bobbing in invisible seats, and beyond each light was a—

He felt bile rise to his throat and he staggered, and only the terrible *need* drove him on. They were dead. Not the skeletal dead, not ethereal the way ghosts should be but—

The eyes of corpses stared at him without emotion. He knew the eyes. The Eyes. They were the stones he'd come to steal. The Eyes were set into bodies moulded into being from rotting flesh and mud and sorcery. The Eyes shone blue and green. The Eyes tracked him.

Amidst the blackness and the bright eyes of the dead, only one other figure was real, and he made for it.

He reached him, unopposed, and grabbed him, and waves of heat and cold passed through him and his throat was parched and sore. 'Give it to me,' he said. But the other didn't see him.

'Jericho!' Gorel said. He was Gorel. The illusion of the town washed away from him like dirt. He slapped the other, but he was not there. He was Melinal, and he was in the other town still, the place of the dead, where he did not belong. Gorel tried to search through his clothing, but he could not find the packet. He felt panic building, and breathing came hard.

He pulled out his long, thin knife. 'Jericho!' Quickly, without pause for thinking, he slashed his friend's cheek with the blade.

Jericho twitched. A shudder ran through him. Gorel slapped him again. 'Jericho!'

And suddenly he knew, and it horrified him. He would kill him if he had to. Kill him to get to the packet of dust, secreted on his friend's person, kill to make the need, the horrid *need*, abate. He put away the blade and drew his gun.

'If you want to stay with them,' he said, speaking softly, 'then I can make it permanent--' and he shoved the gun into the half-Merlangai's mouth and cocked the hammer, heedless of the sound of his friend's breaking teeth.

'Choose,' he said. Still there was no answer. His friend's eyes looked into another world and saw nothing of Gorel. 'Jericho!'

Nothing. And then, behind his back, Gorel heard a soft, low laughter. Gorel didn't turn. He pulled the gun out of his friend's mouth. Jericho's face was a crimson flower of blood. Gorel sighed, and with one deft motion hit Jericho on the back of the head with the butt of his gun.

The half-Aquatic fell and lay still on the ground. It was better for him, Gorel thought. Then he turned, both guns drawn, and saw the old man.

The Boss, alone, was real in this world of shades. Behind him the animated corpses stood, silent, their Buried Eyes shining in the dark. The old man was tall and stooped, with dark leathery skin. His eyes were . . . his eyes . . .

They were not there.

Two pools of darkness looked out on Gorel from that ancient face. And the old man smiled.

'What are you going to do,' he said. 'Shoot me?'

Gorel too smiled. And he squeezed both triggers, and the guns shot simultaneously, and two of the walking corpses fell back with holes in

their foreheads. He wanted—needed—the desire was so strong it overwhelmed fear, overwhelmed sorcery. All he knew at that moment was that the old man was between him and his salvation, the drug given to him by a dying god. And, strangely, it gave him strength. It gave him sureness.

For a fleeting moment, a look of—irritation?—passed over the old man's face. He waved his hand, and the two fallen corpses rose up again. The flesh of their heads melted together and filled the small bullet holes, sealing them. 'They're *dead*,' the old man said.

'But you are not,' Gorel said, and the old man inched his head as if imparting a grave acceptance of the words. 'Why?'

'Why?' The eyeless face stared at him. Did it look surprised? 'Why am I not dead?'

Gorel shrugged. He merely wanted to keep the old man talking. He did not believe in sorcery. Magic was illusion, a confusing of the mind, a way of not seeing. A gun was always better than a spell. You knew where you were, with a gun. 'Why do you keep them?'

'This is my *town*!' the old man said. 'They were my *people*!'

And something came fluttering into Gorel's mind, a memory of that other place, the prosperous town and the children, and his wife, of Eren of the lovely smile and the welcoming body, and he shuddered suddenly. The old man saw it, and smiled. 'Do you miss her?' he said. 'I could give her back to you.' He snapped his fingers. 'Like that.'

One of the corpses came forward. She had been a woman once. Her face was a hideous grey-green colour, and patches of dead skin fell from it. She tried to smile, and Gorel had to look away.

'Look!' the old man demanded. Gorel felt his attention dragged back. And suddenly there was no corpse. The lights were burning and the audience was back, and children laughed and the smells of cooking food made his stomach rumble. And there *she* was, his wife, Eren, looking at him, as beautiful as he had always known her, and her face was worried. She stared at him intently, and there were tears in her eyes, and she said, haltingly, 'Gerad, what is wrong?'

Slowly, he holstered the guns. He wanted her then, with a passion that made his entire body tingle, and he took a step towards her, and another, and she smiled, and tilted her head, her lips ready to be kissed.

'Eren,' he said, moaned, and looked into her eyes, and leaned forward—The eyes! Their colour changed, and he knew then, sickened, and

before he could think, before he could change his mind, his hand slipped down, not to the breasts he longed to touch but to his blade, and with a fast, angry motion he stabbed at her face. The blade slid into her eye socket and she screamed. Gorel, sickened, twisted his wrist, and the blade moved with it and her eye, the Eye, came out and fell to the ground. He stabbed her again, removing the other Eye. Sweat blurred his view and he was glad of it. He watched a corpse fall down to the ground and felt nothing.

Woman. That was what he had thought, what came fluttering like a black butterfly into his mind, a moment before. 'Where is she?' he said. He raised his head and grinned, and the old man took a step back. 'Who are you?' he whispered.

'Gorel of Goliris,' he said, and the old man went very still and said, 'No.'

Gorel stalked forward. She would be close to him. Who was she? The corpses fell back from him, but their gemstone eyes never left him. That's how he sees the world, Gorel thought. Through the eyes of the dead. Where was she?

'You can't be Gorel,' the old man said, speaking slowly. 'Gorel of Goliris is dead.'

Gorel's attention returned to the old man. She would be close to him . . . He began to circle. The old man took another step back. 'The whole family is dead,' the old man whispered. 'And the throne of Goliris is filled with cobwebs and dust . . .'

Gorel's gaze snapped back, his hunt forgotten. 'What?' he said. 'What do you know of Goliris?'

The old man drew himself up. For a moment his appearance changed, and he was majestic and terrifying, an aristocratic being far removed from this squalid place, this empty town on the sands of Meskatel. 'I am—I was—' And then his figure diminished, and he said, tiredly, 'I am of Goliris, and I should know. The royal family is dead, man woman and child, all. I should know,' he repeated, and pride flared again in his eyes, pride and defiance both, 'because I helped destroy them.'

Gorel stared at the old man. He looked at him closely, intently, forgetting the horde of gruesome, animated corpses, forgetting Jericho lying unconscious on the ground, forgetting, even, the need that burned through

his mind and body. They were overtaken with an older need, and a more desperate one.

He remembered the last night of his childhood. The candles burned in his room, and outside the autumn wind blew with deceptive warmth, and the torches shuddered as it passed, and the air was filled with the smell of the sea, and of the gardens, and of the things that grew and died in the forests. It was an ordinary day, and so was the night. Until the screams woke him.

There were guards outside, shouting, and the clash of swords, and someone, far away, crying, and he crouched in his bed, frightened, and something crashed against his door and slid to the ground. That was the last thing he could remember—the sound of a nameless guard dying against his door—and after that there was a haze. Sorcery. And when he awoke his room was gone, and his parents, and the air smelled different, it was suffused with unfamiliar scents, and when they found him their language was strange and it took him months to learn enough to ask, and then he was horrified: they had never heard of Goliris.

He did not feel anger now. Even the call of the drug weakened in him. **H**Where was she? He looked at the corpses again, examining them. For a moment, he let the lure of the old man's sorcery entrap him once more. It hurt when he did it—for when he did, when the world shifted and the people were back, they stared at him in horrified incomprehension, and on the ground lay his wife's lifeless body, and her mutilated, eyeless face stared up at him, accusing without words. He tore his gaze away from her with difficulty, searching for *her*, the woman who should be there, close to the old man but not too close, and he moved, making no sound, and heard the old man's voice, suddenly frightened, saying, 'Where are you going?'

Gorel did not speak, but he followed the brief motion of the Boss's head, and it was that fleeting gaze that betrayed him. The knife was in Gorel's hand, the narrow blade glinting in the light of Buried Eyes. He intended to use it.

There was fear in the old man's voice when he said, 'Stop—' and he turned and took a step towards Gorel, lifting his hand, and again said, 'Stop!'

But Gorel paid him no heed. He could see her now, both in the other

town and in this one. In one she was lovely beyond description, with eyes alive and a mouth made for laughing and for kissing. In the other she was merely another corpse.

‘Please!’

‘My parents are dead,’ Gorel said, surprising himself. He did not often talk, or even think, of what was gone and could never return. ‘Does it hurt, old man, to lose those you love?’

The woman never moved. She stood, in both illusion and life, and gazed on him, her eyes quizzical, and he knew then: she would welcome an end.

‘I lost her once. I cannot lose her again. This is all I have left.’

There were many questions Gorel wanted to ask. How did they die? And did they suffer long? He suspected they did. They were rulers of Goliris, greatest and most ancient empire in all the World. They would not have gone easily.

Who was behind it? And who, for that matter, spared Gorel’s life, and sent him, by means of magic, to the other end of the World?

‘Please,’ the old man said. Gorel laughed.

‘Please! I will tell you!’

‘Tell me what, old man?’

‘You seek Goliris. It is far beyond the measure of a man’s years, but it *can* be reached! Seek the mirror of the pot-bellied god, in the land of the fala—’

The old man’s voice faded away. In its place, illusion thickened around Gorel, and for a moment he was back entirely in that other town, the torches casting light on the faces of the people—his people—as they mutely watched him.

Sorcery. The girl was immensely pretty. She raised her head and looked directly into his eyes.

He took out hers.

It was easy for him. The knife went into the crevice of the eye, twisted, and plucked it out, once, and into the other one, and again. Gorel grinned without humour, a savage, satisfied snarl, and turned, secreting the knife, his hands resting on the butts of his guns. He faced the old man and the illusion faded, and the townspeople’s faces melted back into those of grotesque, expressionless unlife. He heard the old man scream, and smiled again, and turned from the corpse at his feet. Who was he? And

how did he, murderer, sorcerer of Goliris, find himself, like Gorel, an exile in the World?

Gorel faced the old man. Pools of darkness looked on him from a face twisted with hate and despair. Around them the dead stood silent. 'You will never return,' the old man said. 'You will never find your way back. Better for you had you died when you were meant.'

'Better for you had you died a long time ago, old man,' Gorel said.

'You would never understand,' the man said. 'What did the rulers of Goliris ever know of love?'

And Gorel remembered a stern father who once, on his throne, let Gorel sit on his knees; and a mother who had held him in her hands, and kissed him, and he laughed, and the old man's face twisted at the bitter sound.

'Do you know the way, then? You mentioned a god . . . ' Gorel said.

The old man spat on the ground. 'I lied,' he said. 'You will die as you've lived, alone.'

The corpses shuffled closer, closing around Gorel. Their eyes, their Buried Eyes, shone upon him.

But Gorel had eyes only for the old man, and he could see a man defeated, a man not much more than a corpse himself. 'I'll find it,' he said. The power that had animated the old man was gone, and he looked truly old now, and tired, and resigned, and so Gorel shot him.

The guns fired, once, twice, and he re-cocked and fired, and with each echo the old man's body shook and fell back. He died without a fight. When it was over Gorel leaned over him. He looked at the face, but it held no meaning for him, and the death brought no satisfaction. He felt tired. He sat next to the old man's body, hugging his knees. Around him the people of the town began to fall, and as they did the gems fell from their eye-sockets and rolled on the ground, making a clear, tinkling sound, and for a moment it seemed to Gorel that it was raining; a quiet, midnight rain.

On the ride out the landscape changed again and the sand gradually shifted to brown earth, and there were low shrubs and they passed a small forest. Jericho kept touching his mouth and swearing, but softly. Gorel had finished the packet of dust. Their graal moved slowly, leisurely across the land. Against their sides, saddle-bags clinked softly, the sound of a thousand time-pieces chiming in an endless murmur. Gorel was quiet.

‘There is no shame in killing the dead,’ Jericho said. Gorel didn’t answer. Already the memory of the enchantment was growing dim. There was a woman, dark and lovely and naked by a fireplace, but for the life of him he could not remember her name.

THIS TIME OF DAY, THIS TIME OF YEAR

LYNDA E. RUCKER

As a child, Ms. Rucker was told of a drowned city at the bottom of a nearby lake. 'The idea fascinated me,' she says, 'and it formed the primary inspiration for "This Time of Day, This Time of Year". Josie grew from articles and books I read about the experiences of women soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and thoughts about a character damaged beyond the bounds of normal human experience who is thrust back into a world that wants to pretend nothing untoward has happened to them.'

Ms. Rucker's fiction has appeared in such places as F&SF, The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror, The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror, and Black Static. Born and raised in the American South, she travels as much as she can and currently lives in Dublin, Ireland. She occasionally blogs at lyndaerucker.wordpress.com/.

JOSIE CAME BACK. AT FIRST, THAT WAS ALL THAT MATTERED. Not Basra or Baghdad; not Falluja; not Karbala or Samarra or any of the other cities and towns and villages whose names and existences had been unknown to them until they became places where Josie might be lost to them forever. Those didn't matter, nor did—it had to be said—Josie herself, somehow changed, diminished. No, it only mattered that Josie came back, and her parents and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins and the whole community rejoiced. That first Sunday in church the new preacher announced it from the pulpit, beaming like they were welcoming some kind of angel of God into their midst. Josie was home again, safe back in Georgia in the womb of family, protected from harm.

Of course, Ellen was happy that Josie was home. Of course she was. Ellen was the youngest of five kids and apt to get left out of things, only because people still thought of her as a baby, and she wasn't, she was nearly thirteen (well, next year), and that was a long way from babyhood. But she and Josie had always been extra close. Not Ellen with Beth, the sister nearest her own age, and not Josie with Beth, who'd been Josie's sister first, and thus longer. No, it was always Josie and Ellen, never mind the eight years between them. They even looked alike: pale and brown-haired and skinny in a family of blondes. Beth had been barely a year old when Ellen was born, and so a lot of Ellen's care fell to Josie, to ease the burden on their mother. As Josie got older she never seemed to mind her baby sister tagging along, like to the mall with friends. When she went to the fair with her boyfriend, she brought Ellen along. Everybody was so used to seeing the two of them together that no one thought about it much.

So Ellen was overjoyed when she heard they were sending Josie home. Like everyone else, she didn't care about the details—and there seemed to be a lot of details. All she thought of was having Josie back where they could touch her and keep her safe. Ellen had gone around sick to the stomach that whole year waiting for bad news. Whenever she heard of a soldier or a journalist kidnapped in Iraq or Afghanistan or Pakistan, she pictured Josie tied up, her eyes frightened above a filthy cloth stuffed in her mouth. Her brother Byron, who was fifteen, heard you could see *videos* of people getting decapitated on the Internet; he showed her one and never before in her life had she wanted to unthink something the way she did that. Byron felt bad afterwards. He said the videos were probably faked by some sicko. In some ways that was worse: now she not only knew what happened to some people Over There, but that some people Right Here might look on it as entertainment.

But Josie was here now, so Ellen didn't have to imagine her flesh rotting, bones bleaching in a desert somewhere. At first there was just that: gladness, and relief. Then they pretended for a while, when they started noticing things were not right with Josie—and they started noticing pretty fast—but they didn't talk about it. They pretended everything was okay, because that's what families do.

So Ellen never knew if she'd been the first to start noticing or someone else was. Cole was a senior in high school that year and started staying late at football practice every night. Soon Beth had play rehearsals that

stretched longer than they ought and a steady stream of overnights at other girls' houses. Their mother used to not let them stay with friends on a school night, but after Josie came back, a lot of things fell by the wayside, and all their mother ever said about it was that Beth was about old enough that she soon wouldn't want to do that anymore—soon she'd rather be out with boys—so she might as well enjoy herself.

They all found ways of being a little more absent than usual.

Ellen was glad that Josie was back, but all the same, when Josie said she wanted to go to Uncle Hugh's summerhouse for a spell, Ellen's first thought wasn't how badly she wanted to go with her. Josie was not right at all: she was sleepwalking, for one thing, stalking into the kitchen and sitting down across from you like some kind of zombie, and when she wasn't doing that she was crying out from nightmares. She brooded. She snapped at everyone. She was listless. She showed little interest in the things she used to love: running, reality TV, or tinkering with her car, the 1970 Ford Mustang she'd worked so hard saving up for all through high school. She ignored calls and visits from old friends. The only thing that made living with her bearable at all was the overcrowded house—with the seven of them—which had always seemed like a pain until now. Now the numbers were a buffer against Josie's strangeness. At Uncle Hugh's summerhouse it would just be Ellen and Josie—for by then Josie had asked Ellen to go along—and there would be no escaping her.

'Oh, Josie, I don't know,' their mother said. 'Nobody's even been out there in years. I'm sure it's filthy. Maybe it's not even secure—maybe it's broken into or something.'

'I'm not afraid of vandals,' Josie said significantly, letting them know she'd faced down scarier things than a dirty cabin with a broken lock. 'Anyway, it looked okay from the outside.' Josie had already gone out there once or twice, leaving at dawn before anyone got up and returning at dusk.

'You just spent the day out there swimming?' Ellen had asked, and Josie shrugged and said sure, in that diffident way she said so many things these days. Ellen waited for her reprieve, but none came. 'You go with your sister,' their mother said, 'she needs you.' Ellen appealed to their father, who worked long hours at his auto shop and wasn't around much. He never talked a whole lot. He didn't then, either. 'She's your sister, Ellie. You do the right thing,' was all he said. Their mother went to Ellen's principal to talk about her missing school for a few days. Normally Mrs.

Rice was inflexible on such matters, but this called her patriotic duty into question; she arranged for Ellen's teachers to send some work home for Ellen to complete. And that was that.

So to the summer place they went, albeit in autumn. 'The summer place' was a far grander name than it deserved. It was really just a one-room cabin Uncle Hugh had built for fishing trips and the like or—truth was, nobody really knew why he'd done it. He'd bought a patch of land out at Sorrow Lake and built the cabin and went out there to 'get away from it all' as he said. Though as a bachelor, he couldn't really be said to have things in his life that needed getting away from, at least not things that necessitated a whole separate residence. It was true he'd come back from Desert Storm with a whole set of ailments the VA doctors said were all in his head; when he drank, he was prone to accuse the government of using him as a human guinea pig, but Ellen had only heard these stories secondhand, she'd been too young to remember any of it herself.

When Ellen's siblings and cousins started going out to the summerhouse, Uncle Hugh had torn down the outhouse and put in plumbing, and added a couple of bunk beds to the spartan living space. That was the extent of his upgrades. Apparently, overnight invitations to the summerhouse had been quite a treat for the older kids—midnight swims and junk food feasts and all-nighters with minimal supervision—but then Uncle Hugh had tragically drowned in the lake when Ellen was five. His body had not been recovered—the lake was enormous, with miles of shoreline—and Ellen's mother had felt it an affront to sell off the place when there was the slightest chance Uncle Hugh might, as she put it, 'come walking back through there again someday,' and she'd nod at the screen door off the kitchen when she said it, but the years had passed and Uncle Hugh had not done so, and she said it less and less.

Family lore had it that Ellen was heartbroken at Uncle Hugh's passing, but if so, this had long since vanished from her memory. Her older siblings and cousins could sit around indulging for hours in remember-whens, which only served to emphasize the distance between them—not only the youngest in her immediate family, but the youngest of the cousins. She was practically an afterthought.

As it turned out, the lock on the summerhouse was secure. No squatters or vandals had defiled the premises. But it was filthy: cob- and spider-webby, furry with dust and skittering with roaches. The trickle of water from the sink was brown, so they ran it until it was clear. Josie had never

been one for cleaning up, but she directed the operation. They drove back into town and got mops, brooms, dustcloths, fresh sheets (the ones in the summerhouse were yellowed and spattered with mildew), dish detergent, bug spray, soaps and rubber gloves. By evening the cabin was passable; too primitive to ever feel spic-and-span, but at least you didn't feel like your lungs would collapse from breathing in there, or that you'd get a disease eating off the plates.

They had baked beans and frankfurters, heated on Uncle Hugh's little hotplate, which still worked. They ate sitting right next to each other on the concrete stoop at the front door, because even though it was October the nights were still warm. They were sweaty, too, from cleaning; they both wanted showers but the rusty showerhead didn't work. Josie said they'd go back to town and pick up one of those solar showers, but in the meantime they could take a dip in the river.

'Shouldn't we wait an hour after eating?' Ellen asked, but Josie said that was an old wives' tale, so they put on their bathing suits and flip flops and got their towels. They followed a trail carpeted with pine needles through the woods to the lot where people left their cars to walk down to the river. There was an artificial beach with sand leading down to the water. The opposite shore was thick with pine trees. 'Swim At Your Own Risk. No Lifeguard on Duty,' a sign advised, because Sorrow Lake had a bad reputation for swimming and boating accidents. In fact it was called by a different name on the maps, an official name that no one could ever remember. It had been called Sorrow Lake after seven engineers drowned there during its construction, or so the story went. Every year a few people were lost there, just like Uncle Hugh, and the local paper would run stern editorials about the dangers of combining alcohol with boating and swimming, and no one ever seemed to take heed.

This time of day, and this time of year, nobody else was around. The season was dying. The sun, fat and orange, had begun to sink into the water, spraying reds and purples across the horizon. Josie went in first, running into the water and dipping below the surface. Seeing her like that, from behind, Ellen realized how thin her sister was. No meat on her bones at all, just skin over stringy muscles and fragile bone. She thought about it: Josie had eaten okay, she guessed—the beans and frankfurters—but she couldn't remember her finishing a meal since her return, and she often stayed in her room at dinner, saying she'd get something later. Later, Ellen now realized, generally never came.

She followed her sister in gingerly. The water had cooled along with the season. It was good to feel the grime and sweat washing away, and she ducked under to rinse her hair, but the water was so cold it gave her a headache, and she quickly retreated to the shore, huddling under a towel while Josie gambolled in the water. That was the word that came to Ellen—gambolling—she'd learned it the week before in English class, and it perfectly described her sister's movements. She seemed carefree for the first time since before she left for Iraq.

That night in the bottom bunk Ellen couldn't sleep, but Josie, dreamless and peaceful, snored soundly for nine hours. Lying awake, Ellen wondered what they'd do with themselves next. They couldn't just swim all day. She wished she hadn't come with Josie; she almost wished Josie had never come home, the way she was now.

Ellen fell asleep at last just before dawn, and when she woke up the cabin was empty. She dressed and walked down to the river. The surface looked calm until Josie broke from it. With her hair plastered around her head she reminded Ellen of a seal or a sea lion. Ellen waved but Josie didn't seem to notice, and dived back under again. She was down so long that Ellen started to worry; then she bobbed back into view, lifted her head, and finally waved back, shouting something that Ellen couldn't hear.

Josie swam to shore.

'Let's go back into town,' she said. 'I want to get that solar shower and we'll need goggles or masks or something like that. Maybe flippers.' She didn't say why they needed all those things.

They made their second trip to Wal-Mart; in the parking lot they saw one of Josie's best friends from high school and Josie hid behind an SUV and made Ellen hide too. 'I'm just not ready to talk to people yet,' she mumbled. They got everything Josie wanted at the store and drove back to the cabin in silence. Ellen's stomach was growling—they'd eaten nothing since the beans and frankfurters—but Josie wanted to go back into the water immediately. Ellen stayed back at the cabin, dozing on the bottom bunk after her sleepless night. Near evening she woke up and made herself a pimento cheese sandwich—Uncle Hugh's little fridge still worked—and sat out in front of the cabin working on some math problems.

Josie came back after sunset. It didn't seem safe, swimming alone in the dark, but Ellen didn't know what she could do about it. She wished their cell phone worked but she hadn't been able to get a signal, and what if Josie became unruly or aggressive or had some kind of breakdown? But

that was crazy; Josie was calmer and happier, and to Ellen's relief, she ate, too. Pimento cheese, and the last of the baked beans. She said they'd put up the shower in the morning.

Ellen hadn't found a way to raise the subject of leaving, but the solar shower remark didn't bode well for imminent departure. That night Josie was restless. She started shouting, and Ellen called her name over and over to wake her. Suddenly Josie was hanging her top half off the mattress above, hair streaming down in the moonlight. It ought to have been funny but it looked awful, like she'd turned into some sort of monster. The light from the moon showed streaks of tears on her face.

Josie said, 'Ellen, what's Cole doing after high school?' Sometimes Josie asked pointed questions like that, about what somebody was up to, and Ellen would realize how out-of-it she really was. Everyone knew Cole had already joined the Marines and was heading off to basic as soon as the school year ended.

Josie flopped back onto the top bunk after Ellen said it, and Ellen felt bad that she was glad she didn't have to look at Josie's face anymore. 'I can't believe somebody else in this family is doing something that stupid,' Josie said.

Ellen didn't know what to say. There wasn't anything they could do about Cole—she was pretty sure you couldn't back out once you'd signed up. Not unless, like with Josie, they had some reason to send you home. And she didn't know why Josie was so surprised—lots of boys and girls from their town went into the military right after high school.

What Ellen said was, 'I thought the war was supposed to be ending. Josie, do you know we've been at war my whole life?'

Josie didn't answer for a while, and when she did, her voice sounded different. 'Not your whole life, hon, but probably for as long as you can remember.'

The dark made Ellen braver. 'So what did you do over there?'

'A lot of the time it was pretty boring. But one time . . .'

Ellen waited for Josie to finish. She counted to a hundred, waited some more, counted to a hundred again, and said, 'What about the one time?'

'Never mind,' Josie said. 'Go to sleep.'

'I'm not sleepy.'

Josie leaned back down from the top bunk.

'What somebody needs to tell Cole is that they're lying to him. There's no glory waiting for him. After a while, everywhere I looked I saw y'all

faces on dead people—you, or Beth, or Mama, or Byron. And there's other stuff, too, but I'm not gonna tell you about any of it Ellie, just go to sleep.'

But Ellen couldn't, and she knew Josie couldn't either. She heard Josie holding herself still, but restless, breathing the way people do when they're awake and trying to hide it, all through the night and past the dawn.

She didn't dare ask the other question, the real one: *So why did they send you home early?*

First thing next morning Josie said, 'Let's put up the solar shower.' They found a tree with a suitable limb and enough sunshine to hang the bag. Josie said it would heat up in a few hours, but in the meantime she was going for a swim. Ellen stayed behind and ate cornflakes, which tasted dusty, like the cabin, even though they'd just bought them. Afterwards she did some social studies homework (*Read chapter 4 and answer these questions about European explorers in the Americas*) and when Josie still wasn't back, she decided to head down to the river.

Today they weren't alone, and this somehow surprised her; she'd started to imagine they had their own private beach. This other person wasn't swimming, though. A small woman with an easel and a bright red unruly brush of hair was painting, squinting at the canvas, then the river, then at the canvas again. Coming closer, Ellen saw the woman wasn't painting a riverside scene at all. Taking shape on the canvas was a street scene, though not in any present-day town. People rode in horse-drawn buggies, and men wore hats, while women were in long dresses.

The painter turned as Ellen approached. She had a round, friendly face. 'Looks like we've got the place to ourselves,' she said. Ellen resented her presumption of belonging to any group that included herself and Josie.

'Is that your mom out there?' the woman asked, undaunted, and Ellen shook her head. 'My sister.' Her curiosity overcame her irritation then, and she asked, 'Why are you looking at the river but painting that?'

'Oh, that.' The woman looked at the canvas distractedly. 'That's Hekate. They flooded the town when they built the dam and created the lake back in the fifties, but it was dead decades before that.'

Ellen moved closer. 'A town,' she said, pointing at the lake. 'Here?'

'Mmm hmm. They named the lake for it, you know. Lake Hekate . . .'

Ellen said, 'Nobody calls it that.'

The woman nodded towards a canvas bag on its side next to her. 'Look in those books.'

Ellen pulled out a battered hardcover that smelled like mildew. The faded gilt lettering on the side said *Towns of Old Georgia*. The book featured a lot of pictures which were noted to be 'artists' renderings. She flipped through it until she came to the chapter on Hekate.

'The town of Hekate was founded in 1790 by Dionysius Campbell along the Savannah and Broad Rivers, and named for his mother's birthplace in Greece. For more than fifty years Hekate was a thriving town, the largest in the region. It boasted a bank, a hotel, a church, a school, a grog shop, and a number of private homes ...'

Ellen said, 'So what happened to it?'

'It just died out. Flip ahead a few pages.'

Ellen flipped ahead and read:

'Although the town had begun to show signs of depopulation and decline by the 1840s, an epidemic—now thought to have been yellow fever—wiped out many inhabitants in the early 1850s. The Civil War, however, proved its death knell; the menfolk of the town marched off to battle, and those who returned were said to have been 'ravaged' by starvation and suffering. Within a year of the war's end, the town was all but abandoned.'

The woman said, 'When the water level's low, like the last couple of years, you can see some of the foundations. All that rain this spring brought the level back up again. Oh, and that book gets some things wrong. Hekate's not the name of a town in Greece, or anywhere else that I know of. Hekate was a Greek goddess.'

Ellen couldn't stop staring at the surface of the lake, imagining the roads that lay beneath, the school maybe, stores, and homes—places people had loved, they felt safe, places where they had hoped to live out their lives. She said, 'It seems so sad, though.'

The woman stopped painting and looked at Ellen full in the face. 'It does, doesn't it?' she said. 'All that industry, just gone to nothing. It's a microcosm of the end of humanity.'

Ellen didn't understand the last thing she said, and her face felt hot under the woman's scrutiny, though it was a cool morning. She mumbled something and the woman turned to look out at Josie. 'I think your sister's part mermaid.'

They watched as Josie turned to shore. She waded out and walked over towards them, shooting wary glances at the stranger.

‘Hey Josie, did you know there’s a whole *city* under that lake?’

‘Sure. Everybody knows that.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘It’s not really a city,’ said the red-haired woman. ‘It’s a town. And not really a town, not anymore. Just some old foundations. Nothing else left of it.’

Josie fixed her with a look. ‘What do *you* know about it?’

Ellen thought the woman would get flustered, but she gazed calmly back at Josie. ‘I teach history at the university,’ she said. ‘This regional stuff is my specialty.’

Josie said, ‘Ellen, it’s lunchtime. Let’s go.’

This was the first time Josie had expressed any interest in mealtimes, or even awareness of them. Back at the cabin Ellen made herself another pimento cheese sandwich. She wasn’t really hungry but she hoped Josie would follow her example. Josie watched her slathering the bread and demanded, ‘Who was that woman? How do you know her?’

Ellen felt angry with her sister for the first time since she’d come home. ‘Chill,’ she snapped. ‘She was just some stupid woman painting by the lake. What’s wrong with you anyway?’

Josie pushed past her and slammed the door hard on her way out of the cabin. Ellen sat on her bunk, moodily chewing the sandwich she hadn’t wanted in the first place.

She threw the rest of it away and followed Josie outside. She’d thought Josie would be back at the lake, but Josie was pacing the scrubby patch of pine needles near the car. Ellen didn’t know what to say, so she opened her mouth and words just spilled out.

‘Is that why you wanted the mask and stuff?’ she said. ‘Are you exploring at the city under there? Is there anything left? Is it cool?’ She pictured it: fish darting in and out of vacant windows, doors swinging gently with the motion of the water, roads that led to nothing.

Josie stopped pacing. ‘Why don’t you come with me?’

Ellen remembered how cold the water had been. She thought how much colder it would be deeper and farther out, but she couldn’t shake the images in her head.

By the time they got down to the lake, the woman was gone. Ellen sat down and pulled on flippers, which were too large and felt awkward, and

the mask. 'Stay close to me,' Josie said. 'I'll show you where to go. Do exactly as I do.'

'Is it safe?' Ellen said, suddenly worried, and Josie snapped, 'Of course it isn't.'

They waded out till the water reached Ellen's chest, and then they swam. The lake was just as cold as she'd remembered. She was a good swimmer, though, and kept up with her sister, heading towards the middle of the lake. Taking a deep breath, they dived beneath the surface.

Down they went, deeper and deeper, and she could feel the pressure growing in her ears. Where was Josie going? How deep was the lake? Would her eardrums burst? Could they die? But Josie'd done this many times, and she seemed fine. Well, as fine as Josie ever was these days.

Further down, and Ellen began to feel disoriented. She could no longer see the surface. It seemed like long, long minutes had passed, but that couldn't be possible. She was glad for the mask, and kept her gaze on Josie, just ahead. Around her, everything was black.

And then the drowned village swam into view: Hekate, flooded with light.

The historian-woman on the shore had been wrong. Much more than foundations remained; Hekate looked more like Ellen had imagined: whole streets were laid out, lined with houses and shops. Their approach was a dizzying experience. She'd never been on a 'plane before, and she wondered if it felt anything like this. Descending into a town from above made her feel like some sort of god.

Later, Ellen tried to remember Hekate, but the images came as if from a dream, fragmented and impossible. She could read the names on some of the buildings: Cassidy's Hotel, Scarborough's Dry Goods, A & R Savings & Loan. She and Josie swam through windows and out of doorways amid fast-moving schools of reddish fish. Ellen shivered as their scaly bodies flicked against her flesh. Then she was losing track of Josie, and swimming faster, sure that the drowned city was still inhabited, that if only she could move more swiftly she could catch them. Soft vibrations buzzed in her ears like voices, just elusive enough to be her imagination.

At the end of the main street lay a crumbling church, the pews still intact but no roof. Its stained glass windows had survived, congealed with green slime. Surely the glass should have shattered under the pressure? But if that was so, surely she and Josie should be shattered as well? Later, when the town had come to dominate her dreams, Ellen thought she must have

imagined the church, because the imagery she could make out in the stained glass somehow didn't seem suitable for church. In fact, the more Ellen saw, the more she wished she hadn't, and the harder it was to look away. They compelled her to look, even as she felt for the first time a heaviness in her chest, the pressure of the water above her increasing. The figure of a woman caught her eye, no modest Biblical figure but a woman with eyes so dark and terrible Ellen found herself lost in them, and overcome with the need to breathe. Just one breath.

Something took her arm—Josie, pointing straight up, and up they went in a whirling rush. Breaking into the bright air Ellen gasped and sobbed as oxygen returned to her lungs.

They swam back without a word, exhausted, and wrapped themselves in their towels.

At last Ellen asked, 'How was that possible?'

'What?'

'Everything,' Ellen said. 'How we went so deep, and that we didn't need to breathe. And how the town was so . . . intact. Not like that woman said.'

'Well, she didn't know what she was talking about.'

'Well, what about the other stuff?'

Josie's laugh sounded forced. 'You have a big imagination,' she said. 'The water level's not that high. You can see the town without going very deep as long as you have a mask, and we were only under a few minutes. You have good lungs!'

Ellen knew Josie was lying, though her memory of the place was already fraying, bleeding out imperceptibly to the dream periphery of her mind. She could still remember those sibilant voices, though, and the soft whisper of the water rippling through empty windows and abandoned doorways.

They could only have been under a few minutes at most, and had not even swum as far as the middle of the lake, Josie insisted. And of course nothing else was possible. Yet Ellen was sure the sun had changed position in the sky.

Josie slept soundly that night. Ellen did not. She tossed and turned, dreaming fitful underwater dreams of a forgotten world and its watery inhabitants. Morning broke grey and still, with a hint of cool weather ahead. Ellen knew when she opened her eyes that she was alone in the cabin again.

She pushed back the covers, dressed hurriedly and made her way down to the lake.

Josie's towel was there, but she herself was nowhere to be seen.

She'd surface soon. She couldn't stay underwater more than a few minutes. Ellen sat down on her sister's towel. She didn't have a watch, so she counted. She counted what seemed like four minutes, and it was fair to think maybe she'd counted too fast, and so she counted another four minutes, and then there was no guessing to be done, Josie had been under far too long.

Ellen's mind seemed to stop short at that, but her limbs took over; she felt she was watching herself from far away—the girl who scrambled to her feet, who ran up the path to the parking lot. She thought she'd seen a public phone there (please let it not be broken, let it work, let it work). It wasn't a pay phone but a direct emergency phone, for just such an occasion, for there was, as the sign cautioned, No Lifeguard On Duty, and Sorrow Lake was aptly named. And she tore the phone from its cradle and said things she couldn't remember, and then her arms and legs decided they'd done their job, and she sank to the asphalt and waited for someone else to say what happened next.

Even though nothing would ever feel normal again, Ellen was relieved to find herself back in the room she shared with Beth, back in the gentle chaos of the crowded family. And since Josie had been gone the whole of last year anyway, she could almost pretend nothing had happened. Or she could be like her mother: Josie might come walking through that door any day, since they hadn't found her, so just because her towel was on the shore and her car parked by the cabin, it didn't mean she'd drowned, didn't mean she was lost to them forever.

Ellen's mother put the summerhouse up for sale, along with its little plot of land. A man bought it that winter. Then winter gave way to spring and school was out again and Cole went off to basic but not to Iraq like his sister; that war, they said, was ending. They sent Cole to Afghanistan.

Ellen spent a lot of time at the library that summer. She liked reading, and she didn't want to be around the house any more than she had to. Josie's vanishing (for she could only think of it like that) went deeper than any word like pain or loss, or even death, could explain. A great emptiness yawned at her back, an unspeakable extinction, and she might as well have

led Josie straight there, sleeping peacefully away while Josie went to her fate. Her inability to save her sister consumed every waking hour and even her dreams.

Partway through summer she summoned the courage to talk to a reference librarian, and ask for help researching the town of Hekate. The librarian was eager but bemused.

‘It can’t be for school,’ she said, ‘so just research on your own?’ and Ellen nodded. The librarian probably talked about her the way other grown-ups had over the past year when they thought she wasn’t in earshot: that for a young girl she was so silent, and serious, and grown-up. (Among other discomforts that year, she’d experienced a growth spurt: six inches taller, breasts and a period—a sudden possession by an awkward, alien body.)

Most of the books and newspaper clippings and ephemera unearthed by the diligent librarian contained little more than the story she’d heard from the woman by the lake. But she read it all, searching for a clue. In old newspapers, she learned of births and weddings and deaths. As the days went on she began to feel she knew the citizens of Hekate. Rebecca Wall, who’d given birth to triplets. Richard Hudson, who shot his father dead in an argument. Old Thomas Elbert, who fell asleep by the fire and burned his feet off. Likely, the newspaper regretted, ‘he would never recover from his injuries.’ There had been some sort of slave uprising, and there were references to terrible atrocities, but some editions of the paper were missing and so Ellen found it hard to follow the story.

In her third week of investigating, she came across an illustration in a book unreliably titled *Moonshine: Tales of Southern Haints, Hags, and Harrowing Happenings*. The illustration was much like those in the lake woman’s book, a drawing of an unremarkable mid-nineteenth century Southern town, but several paragraphs drew her attention.

‘As the town of Hekate sank into decline, it became known locally as ‘the witch-town,’ and was said to have fallen under the influence of a sorceress. A number of slaves fled the area, unpursued by their owners, as the town increasingly isolated itself. Arriving in the North as free men, the former slaves spoke of arcane rites and rituals and sacrifices, but these reports were dismissed as superstition.

‘In time, however, more stories surfaced, rumors that the town practiced a dangerous and degraded form of an ancient religion imported by its founder. As the town’s reputation diminished, fewer and fewer tradesmen

visited, and after the Civil War, it sheltered a few soldiers who had limped home from the battlefields, starving and diseased. Those they met on their long march back spoke of men in the grip of a delirium—remarkable even amid the suffering and devastation of the defeated armies—of eyes that shone unnaturally bright, and of disturbing, incoherent speech.

‘Locals avoided the town after its demise, citing an unwholesome atmosphere about the entire area.’

Ellen checked the book out of the library and took it home, where she googled Hekate: a goddess of the underworld, she read, of sorcery, of magic, of boundaries between worlds. The red mullet was sacred to Hekate, and Ellen remembered the red fishes swarming around them in the underwater city.

She also found the red-haired woman on the website for the University of Georgia history department. Dr. Elizabeth Price was on sabbatical, the faculty page informed her. Ellen wasn't sure what a sabbatical was, but she clicked on the email link and started writing to her: We met last summer. You told me. My sister. Her words seemed inadequate and confused, and in the end she deleted it all. She went to close the email window but pressed 'send' by accident; moments later, an auto-reply lodged in her inbox, informing her that Dr. Price would not return until the following January.

Of course there wouldn't be anyone she could tell her story to. What would this woman have thought, to receive such a rambling and fantastical tale?

At night the lost town of Hekate infected Ellen's dreams. In the dreams she was forever searching for Josie in the schools of reddish fish, through doorways leading nowhere, and roads that vanished into water and silt.

Summer drew to its end, and still she dreamed. They received their first letter from Cole since basic, a bleak note all the grimmer for its effort to sound cheerful. He enclosed a photo of himself, smiling without a hint of happiness under an unforgiving desert sun, and something gone from his eyes reminded Ellen of Josie. And then autumn closed in.

Ellen had started the school year off badly; for the first time ever, her parents had been called in for a special conference in those early weeks. She'd been such a good student, they were told. She'd done so well last year, in the wake of what happened. Now she was surly, unresponsive, hadn't turned in any work at all. Hadn't turned in any work? Ellen's mother looked at her, slumped miserably in her chair—*What are you doing*

then? What are you writing in your notebooks every night? I thought you were doing schoolwork.

At home, they confiscated her notebooks, and found Ellen's work of the past weeks: endless drawings of a nineteenth-century town, from street scenes and maps to floor plans of buildings, and page after page of unreadable writing. Her mother shook the notebooks at her. *What is this? What's wrong with you?* Ellen couldn't say; she didn't know herself, and she'd long since passed through the fear they were just beginning to feel, and into a kind of acceptance.

The school was confounded. Her parents were confounded. No one knew what to do with her. Ellen felt like the eye of the storm. She watched and waited.

She woke early on the anniversary of Josie's disappearance. Beth still breathed regularly in the other bed—she'd never been sleepless in her life. Ellen dressed quietly and slipped out before anyone woke up.

It was a mile's hike to the highway, and she didn't have to wait long with her thumb out before a truck slowed and came to a stop. The driver was fat and kind-faced, and around her father's age; he had a cross dangling from the rearview mirror and a Bible in the well between the seats. 'Not used to seeing a young lady hitching by herself,' he said. 'You need to be careful.' For once Ellen was grateful for the ungainly height that disguised just how young she was.

He drove her all the way out to Sorrow Lake, and regarded her with concern as she stepped out of his cab. 'Here,' he said, holding out two twenties from his wallet. 'Get yourself back home again.'

Ellen shook her head. 'I'm not going home,' she said, though she had no idea what she'd really do, but he pressed the money on her anyway. She felt his eyes still on her as she crossed the parking lot and the artificial beach, heard him turn the rig around and leave.

She lowered herself to the sand, near where she'd sat the previous year, waiting for Josie to resurface. Maybe she could make it happen now. Maybe if she squeezed her eyes shut and made her thoughts very still, she could go back to that morning, she could go back before that, she could wake up when Josie slipped out of the cabin, and stop her doing whatever it was she had done.

Whatever it was she had done . . .

Ellen opened her eyes again. For a whole year, she'd believed that she'd failed Josie, that Josie had brought her out to the lake as a kind of talisman,

to keep herself grounded. For an entire year, she'd believed that her sister had turned to her for help and she had been found wanting.

Now she understood.

The sibilant voices she'd strained so hard to hear were rising, only this time she could make out bits of what they were saying, and they called out to her; they sang of the path to the city, and she could see the schools of fish assembling, waiting to guide her down the silt roads to the deepest depths.

Josie had brought her baby sister along not for protection, but as a companion. Until Josie went away to Iraq, the two of them had scarcely been apart, and now they needn't be separated any longer.

Ellen got to her feet, and the trucker's money fluttered from her hands. The lake glistened red with fish, hundreds of them, just below the surface. She waded in, the water sloshing her jeans, past her ankles to her knees.

And she knew moments of hesitation then, with the air so pure and cool, the tentative morning sun on her arms, visions of herself growing up, growing older, of all the grief and all the sweetness ahead of her that would never come to pass. A few fish darted forward, sensing her indecision, and she backed away. The fish followed her as far as they could, their sucking mouths rising to the surface to gasp at the air, helpless to reach her.

She knew she should retreat to the safety of the parking lot, and the road beyond, but instead she walked along the curve of the lake towards Uncle Hugh's cabin. She wasn't ready to face the questions, the anger and confusion of her family. She knew, though, that she didn't want to follow Josie, and all the others who had gone before. She wanted to grow up, and go away, and do all the foolish and unexpected and wonderful things that people do in the course of their lives.

They were calling again, their voices soft and unyielding, calling her down and away. *Just one look.* She picked her way to the edge of the lake. The surface was smooth, blameless and bland. The fish had deserted her.

Her jeans were wet to the thighs; she felt encased in the flesh of something already dead.

And then a breeze stirred the surface of the lake, and the ruins of Hekate appeared, rippling along a black ribbon of road, shining dark beneath the waters, the vision that had consumed her that whole long year.

The wind shifted, erasing the vision. Something told her this was her last chance. She might return to Sorrow Lake, but nothing would ever be the same.

One final look. She might find Josie down there. She might bring her back.

The soles of her shoes smacked the water, and with a sharp shock of cold the lake closed over her head. Fish surged round her, scales against flesh, tangling in her hair, drawing her into the wet rushing dark. Her shoes and jeans were heavy. The weight of the water crushed her memory of breath and light. Her descent swallowed time; seconds or eons might have passed.

Blackness suffused her eyes and her ears and her nose. And then something glowed, not light, but a blacker blackness, a darkness so profound and alien it illuminated the sunken town, no longer a ruin, but restored. Blackness shone out from the highest spire, the church steeple, intricately twisted upon itself, knotted into nameless shapes that ought not to exist, beautiful and monstrous. Voices swelled from within the church itself, tones unheard in any register, rising to enmesh her. She kicked at the water and at the swarms of escorting fish, propelling her arms in an effort to thrust herself back towards the surface. She had seen enough. But Josie's name left her lips and was lost, and the singing engulfed her, and she plunged into the dark heart of Hekate.

DREAMING KANDRESPHAR

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

A regular to these pages, Mr. Schweitzer readily admits that he can see a trace of Borges in the following tale. ‘Particularly “The Immortals”,’ he adds. But for all he is a firm believer in the old adage ‘steal from the best and at least it shows that you have taste’, he hopes there is more to this story. ‘Ultimately,’ he concludes, ‘such stories about fabulous lost cities (think of Dunsany’s Carcassonne) are about visionary experiences, glimpses of impossible ideals and what happens to people caught up in obsessive quests for same.’ And this one is no exception. Hurrah!

The author’s recent sales have mostly been to the revived Weird Tales or to S.T. Joshi anthologies (most of which will be appearing emblazoned with the PS logo!). ‘My very most recent one,’ he says, ‘was to Nate Pederson’s Starry Wisdom Catalogue project, which (as I recall) you are also publishing.’ Quite correct. Mr. Schweitzer’s latest books are Speaking of the Fantastic III, a book of interviews, and Echoes of the Goddess, the companion volume of stories to The Shattered Goddess.

I MET HIM ON A BLEAK SHORE, IN THE DARK, BENEATH THE brilliant stars. Because I was still young then, he seemed very old to me; certainly very weary. I saw it in his face, which gleamed in the light of his small fire. He had that look that I suppose prophets must have, of having seen something the rest of us have not and having been marked by it forever.

‘You have journeyed far,’ he said, without looking up.

‘I have,’ I replied.

‘And you will journey further.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘I have already dreamed it,’ he said, in a tone of absolute, startling certainty. ‘Therefore it *is* so.’

I felt a touch of dread then, but he bade me sit and offered me a cup of some warm, almost flavorless tea. We sat still, sipping, while the faintly luminescent, whispering waves broke almost at our feet.

I told him of the places I had already been to, New York, Paris, London, Rome, and certain others further to the east.

‘I haven’t dreamed of those places,’ he said, and fell silent for a long time, while the tea cup slowly cooled in my hands. ‘But perhaps I shall,’ he added after a while, with a shrug and very little conviction.

Then I mentioned Kandresphar, which I sought, and his face lit up with more than the reflection of his fire. He spoke with animation and longing of the Golden Dragon City of Kandresphar, whose many-roofed palaces fill the sky, whose brilliant domes outshine the sun. When the sun, knowing he has been bested, finally sets, the lantern-lit pinnacles of Kandresphar gleam among the stars, until you can’t tell one from the other, and the dragons flutter beneath the eaves like bats, high above the broad avenues and sparkling fountains.

‘No doubt,’ he said when he had concluded, ‘you think this just an idle fancy.’

I swore to him that I did not, for I desired marvels above all things, and had otherwise turned my back on the world, determined to find Kandresphar, about which I had read what I could in secret books. It is described in a full paragraph in the *History of Zaccarath*, and hinted at obliquely (but quite explicitly if you read the words *just so*) in a footnote in the fourth volume of the *Encyclopedia of Tl n*. I could have gone on in that vein inexhaustibly, expounding my researches, had he not leaned forward and said softly, ‘I’ve been there.’

I regarded him with suspicion and wonder.

‘To Kandresphar?’

‘Long ago,’ he said, ‘I sat by the shore of the dark ocean, and the waves merely babbled without meaning, and the stars overhead directed me not; but the ancient one who sat with me pointed in the direction I must go. Filled with passion for holy Kandresphar, I rose and left him, wandering for many days, weeks, months. I don’t know how long. When my supplies and money were exhausted, and I was ragged and delirious and lost, far from the water’s edge and nearly dead, nomads found me and brought me

to their camp, treating me with great kindness. While we sat among their camels in the night and they shared with me their meager meat and drink, I told them of Kandresphar, which I sought. I think they were kind to me, not merely because I wasn't worth robbing, but because they considered me to be mad, as one must be to seek fabled Kandresphar, and to be mad is to be touched by God and therefore sacred. Yes, they knew of Kandresphar, though they dared not speak the name without making a certain sign first, to ward off evil luck, and they rarely spoke it at all, for Kandresphar is far older than their God. But furtively, in the dark, they performed a shuffling dance and a moaning chant which recalled ancient, lost Kandresphar, among whose spires, they believed, certain angels flew as companions to the dragons, before ever those angels were summoned to praise God. Those angels, they said, were the discontented ones, who had known Kandresphar ere they had ever known Heaven.

'And then the chieftain of the nomads made the sign to ward off evil luck, and explained to me that Kandresphar, like all things dreamed by man, had passed away, until its very stones crumbled into dust, and became the sands which drifted all around us on the night wind. He waved his hand in a sweeping motion and said, 'Truly you have already come to Kandresphar, for it is here.'

'I wept then, refusing to believe him. I told him that I would discover Kandresphar on my own, and he said, 'You are indeed mad, and for that I honor you. Yet I know that your suffering will never end, even should you come into Kandresphar and learn all its secrets. Therefore, I pity you.' And the nomads are a notably pitiless race.'

The old man, telling me this, leaning over his fading fire by the shore of the sea, sobbed gently. His tears sizzled among the flames. I got up, thanked him for his hospitality and the tea, and made to go on my way.

He grabbed me by the wrist and said, 'You do not believe me, young sir?'

I made no reply. Already I had come to regard him as more of a beguiling lunatic than a prophet. 'No?' he said. '*Then you must hear more!*'

And I sat beside him once more, and he told me how he had indeed discovered Kandresphar, defying the nomads, wandering in the desert until he became something of a legend, a phantom figure glimpsed from afar as

he walked by starlight along the ridge of a dune. Those who saw him made a sign against him to ward off bad luck, and they counted, one by one, the stars he eclipsed as he passed by. But it was only when all the stars had fled before him, as the foam flees in an outrushing tide, and after the sun blinded him and his suffering was so great that it transcended all bodily pain entirely, that he came, by what means he never knew, into the great city of Kandresphar, which stretched from horizon to horizon before him—or at least he thought it did. When his eyesight had returned to him a little, he was able to see that some of the dunes and drifts and outcrops of rock were subtly *shaped* by something other than the wind, and he knew that he beheld Kandresphar stretched out before him, like the scattered bones of an immense corpse.

I made to go again, but he did not release my wrist.

‘Did I tell you about the *inhabitants* of great Kandresphar, whom I met?’

‘No. You did not.’

‘I do not speak of the lizards, nor of the winding serpents, though they both inhabited that place, for I perceived that they were strangers, who had come to dwell there much later when it was already a ruin. No, I mean the *men*, or those who had once *been* men, troglodytes, naked, sun-blackened, blind creatures who groped in the caves and still babbled words and snatches of songs about the mighty and splendid Kandresphar. In as much as I could converse with them at all, it became clear that they did not know what these words and songs meant, for they had forgotten everything except the shapes of the words on the tongue; and this was a terrible sadness to me, and once more I wept, I who had dreamed of Kandresphar in all her glory and sought her, even as you do now.

‘But wait, there is more: Among the troglodytes was one so ancient and so ragged that I could not tell if it was—perhaps I should say if it had been—a man or a woman; but this one croaked to me between rotted teeth, ‘Sir, we have waited long for your return.’

‘I did not question this further. My return? Had I been here before? If so, only in dreams, and what are dreams but a kind of madness, and what is madness? For if I was mad, so was this other, this other and I, both mad, and the mad are sacred for they have been touched by God or by *something older than God*. Therefore I allowed myself to be led into a cave, or maybe an ancient, vaulted cellar, and the very oldest of troglodytes gathered around me, and we shared another supper far more meager than what I remembered as the fabulous feast I had had among the nomads; and

some of them sang clearly—not in grunts and squawks but actual *song*—an ancient song of Kandresphar, calling up the memory of the Golden Dragon City where once dwelt even the angels. We all wept with the glory of it, and when I finally fell asleep, I dreamed of Kandresphar in all its ancient magnificence, and in that dream I knew—I feared, even as I was dreaming—that to awaken and to lose Kandresphar now would be the most terrible of all the agonies I had suffered.

‘But wait, wait, be patient. Don’t get up. I *didn’t* lose it—by what miracle I know not—but I tell you I came at last into Kandresphar the Golden somehow, for in the morning I awoke to find myself inside an actual *house*—I cannot say that I had been indoors in years—and though it was a poor and tumbledown affair, with dirt for the floor and a goat nibbling at the woven straw that hung between a rude frame to make up my bed, there was a roof overhead, and an old woman sat by a fire stirring a pot and singing softly of Kandresphar. Then there were children, dirty and ragged to be sure, but children nonetheless, swarming around, pulling me out of bed, saying, ‘Tell us a story!’ But I could only tell them of places which were not Kandresphar, which left them unsatisfied, so they dragged me outside, into the city of Kandresphar itself. As my eyes cleared and adjusted to the light I beheld half a ruin and half a city, with crumbled walls and toppled columns, with great stone idols fallen on their faces and left where they were and new footpaths trodden around them. Yet there were inhabitants, even merchants in the occasional shop and beggars in the squares by the dried-up fountains.

‘And we climbed up a loose and treacherous stairway to a high place, and looked down into a broad avenue, along which the very last of the golden dragons of Kandresphar was being paraded for the glory of the city. It was a sickly beast, barely alive, its wings broken and its golden scales tarnished almost black; and I could not but laugh at the sight of the creaking, massive wagon on solid wooden wheels which had been stuck under its lame hindquarters, so the thing could drag itself along like a cripple in a cart. The soldiers marching alongside blew upon their trumpets, and though the notes cracked often, this was the march of the armies of Kandresphar, even if the soldiers themselves wore mere scraps of leather for armor and some of them even had cooking pots on their heads. Their captain had a fine helmet decorated liberally with the waving, golden feathers of the *hizzarth*—that marvelous bird of which only one specimen has ever existed. They say it lays rubies the size of grapefruits for

eggs . . . but I digress. Suffice it to say that the captain wore his helmet proudly, according to the ancient custom of Kandresphar. Looking down upon all of this, and gazing out over the rooftops and fallen columns toward the broken domes in the distance, I beheld a shimmering mirage like some outline or reflection of Kandresphar at the zenith of its glory when it had ruled over all the earth and angels and dragons fluttered beneath the eaves of its towers.

‘And once again I wept, and I tell you that there are enough tears in this story to fill an ocean.

‘No, no, do not get up and don’t try to leave before I am finished. You really are an impatient and impolite young man. Besides, if you run off now you won’t hear how I returned to the house in Kandresphar where I dwelt, and how the old woman who had been stirring the pot in the middle of the floor was not old at all, but young and beautiful, and how she called me husband; for I, in one dreamless moment of perfect happiness amid the splendor of Kandresphar, had indeed loved and courted and married such a one. We lay together in the darkness on that straw bed, alone, having shooed away the goat, and we created between us a whole tribe of children who would carry some memory of Kandresphar down to the end of time.

‘In the gentle light of dawn, it was I who had grown old, not she. My beard was long and white, and my limbs were weary when I rose from my bed. My wife, whose name was Illarna, seemed barely a child. Yet I did not marvel at any of these things, because once you have lingered in Kandresphar for any length of time, the mind is sated with wonders, and one more miracle is as any other.

‘On this morning my very young Illarna bade me get up and dress myself in my finest robe, for today I was to be presented before the throne of the city. The robe lay heavily on my shoulders, embroidered as it was with gold and encrusted with precious jewels which in their patterns replicated the hidden mysteries of the stars. Upon my cap I, even I, possessed one shining feather of the *hizzarth*, presented to my father’s father’s father for service to Kandresphar and handed down to me. And Illarna dressed in her own finery, being as she was a princess by some circuitous tracery of ancestry that I shall not bother to go into—for the King of All Kings in Kandresphar has a thousand wives, as did his father, and his father’s father, which makes for rather a lot of princesses. As a princess, then, she clad herself, her face hidden modestly behind a fan, and she rode beside me in

our litter as we passed through the wide, broad, and gleaming streets of the city, while soldiers in golden-plumed helmets marched before and after and beside us, and great crowds of citizens looked down from high rooftops and balconies, and cheered, and showered us with the petals of such roses as no longer grow upon the Earth; and the wings of the dragons thundered overhead.

‘So we came to that palace, the domes of which overmaster the sun, and the gates swung wide. The great crowd of courtiers and subject kings, all in their robes and crowns parted before us, then closed behind us and swept us along like the gleaming foam of the sea, rushing around the massive pillars. Overhead, angels fluttered among the groinings of the ceiling like started pigeons. Once, high up in a dome which seemed to float on light, a coiled dragon hissed and shifted, its scales gleaming.

‘This great wave, if I may call it that, *broke* at the foot of the throne, and fell back, as foaming water does from a shore, and I found myself alone—where was Illarna? had she been carried away by that gleaming mass?—alone, I say, at the foot of a high marble stairway that seemed to rise into the sky—so high that I had to bend my tired back and neck painfully to see to the top, and my eyes strained as I peered into the gleaming glory of it all, but I saw the truth at the end: that the throne was *empty*.

‘Then a great sigh rose from out of Kandresphar, and it was the voice of all its people, and I knew that I alone must ascend that long stair and take my place on that throne; and this I did, slowly, painfully, leaning on my staff, ever longing to just stop and sit down on a step and rest, but knowing I could not, for this was the culmination of all my seeking, all my suffering, all my dreams; and the angels fluttered about my ears like moths, whispering that I must go on; and I continued on, not because I was commanded, but out of my own desire which was sharper than any pain I had suffered. And at last I sat myself down on the high throne of highest Kandresphar, and those rogue angels who were not subject to God placed the crown of Kandresphar on my head, and I, I, sat there, gazing out over all the city and all the world, while the kings of the world, their crowns gleaming, massed together like specks of foam in a vast ocean that sighed at my feet. I knew that I had but to raise my hand to command the dragons, and that I alone could write in golden ink upon indestructible parchment and address God as my equal and brother, telling him that I wasn’t ready to give over to him any of his stray and errant angels.’

Now the old man by the fire, by the sea, who held my wrist with remarkable force, was *laughing*, and his laughter in my ears was a wheezing, obscene thing, which reduced all the beauty of all the dreams ever dreamed to one big *joke*.

I was enraged. This was an insult to all of my own yearnings. With greater strength than I ever knew I had, I broke loose, shoved him aside and got to my feet, tears streaming down my face enough to fill an ocean, and I cursed him and denied everything he said, calling it lies and madness, denying that madness could ever be sacred or worthy of respect. For his, his lies were the ravings of an idiot, like the mindless cackle of carrion-devouring hyenas in the night—and I went on like that for some time, until he held up his hand for silence, and said merely, ‘But if you leave now, you won’t hear the end of the story. For, indeed, the ultimate secret of Kandresphar was soon revealed to me.’

I could only sit down yet again, opposite him, with the last dying embers between us. Overhead, the stars were beginning to fade with the coming dawn.

‘Ignorant, ill-bred boy,’ he muttered, and then continued, telling how as he sat there amid all that glory, on the high throne of Kandresphar, where he could command dragons, correspond with God as an equal and receive the homage of the entire world, someone came up behind him, tapped him on the shoulder, and with a hooked finger bade him follow.

And he rose and went, behind a curtain, then up a narrow, spiral staircase in the dark. Sometimes in the turning of it he caught a glimpse of the face of the one who led him, which glowed like the Moon; and he knew that this one was a messenger of one of the gods who are older than God, or perhaps one of those very gods now in reduced circumstances, like an exiled king who has to work for a living. He allowed himself to be led at last to one of those uttermost pinnacles of Kandresphar, which shine indistinguishably among the stars. Wordlessly he was bidden to go through a little door, into a place where he could gaze out through great, vaulted windows over all the stars and planets and gleaming dust-clouds of the universe, among which the rooftops and dragons and broad avenues of holy Kandresphar gleamed, albeit rather difficult to make out at this height.

A figure clad all in ragged black sat on a wooden chair, back to him, gazing out over that view, and on a table beside the chair rested a scythe and an hourglass.

Without a word, this figure rose, the chair creaking a little. He was very tall, hooded and hunched over, but it was possible to see that his face was all of bone, and that he held in his cupped hand a quantity of dust, upon which he blew, the breath whistling through his broken teeth.

Then there was only darkness, and a sense of tumbling, down, down a very long way, and that was the end of the story; and the vile old madman by the dead fire, on the beach, who appeared filthy and hideous in the clear light of dawn, *laughed* even more offensively. Yet he wheezed and rocked and heaved as he did so; and I broke away and got to my feet, screaming at him, denying all he had said.

He looked up for me, only the sadness now visible on his face, and I thought to pity him, but I did not.

He picked up sand and let it fall through his fingers, watching it drift on the wind.

He waved his arms wide, to indicate the shore, the sea, and the desert behind us.

‘Here is Kandresphar,’ he said. ‘All around us. Every grain of it.’

And weeping, he laughed, and laughing, he wept.

‘No,’ I said, desperately, in tears myself. ‘No. There is more than that. I have *proof*.’ I rummaged through my pockets desperately, my heart sinking into despair, even terror as I *couldn’t find* my proof, now at the very moment I needed it.

‘Are you looking for this?’ he said, holding something up, and I snatched it out of his grasp angrily, wondering how the old scoundrel had managed to pick my pocket, but certain that he had. Yes, this was the *proof*. I alone had discerned the significance of it, though many would have called me mad for doing so, when I found it in a junk box in a little shop in the shadow of one of the world’s great museums—a piece of ancient stone about two inches by four and an inch thick, with a little carving in it, like the swirl of a *bizzarth* feather—an actual piece of ancient Kandresphar, only the third known to science, and the largest. And it was *mine*.

‘I came to understand,’ said the old man gently, his laughter and tears both having faded into a sigh, like the whispering of the sea. ‘I understood that the breath which was blown blew *against time*, like the wind when it sometimes raises little ripples against the current on a stream. That was

why I grew *older* as Kandresphar grew young, why I was most aged at the zenith of its glory, and why I fell so very, very far. Kandresphar had passed over me like one of those little ripples, in the opposite direction from mine.'

'I don't believe a word of this,' I said.

'Good. Go on not believing it.' He pointed east, toward the rising sun. 'Seek Kandresphar still. Do not give up. It will burn inside of you. Just remember that when you come to a shore and sit by a fire, and a muddled young man comes to you and doesn't believe a word of what you tell him, *give him that stone*, and bid him to go on, and to place that stone beside another, and to invite others to place stones beside it; for he is the dreamer and builder of Kandresphar, its lord, and its god. Now go! Go! Go! *You have very far to travel yet!*'

THE PROVIDENTIAL PRESERVATION OF THE UNIVERSAL BIBLIOGRAPHIC REPOSITORY

ANDREW DRUMMOND

One learns something every day--well, every good day, anyways. Take this juicy little morsel provided by Mr. Drummond. 'The Belgian Paul Otlet set up a proto-Internet long before computers were invented. All the world's knowledge was to be catalogued, cross-referenced and made available to anyone at the end of a telephone-line. This was the Universal Bibliographic Repository.' Wow! But what attracted the author to Otlet's scheme? 'The sheer scale of this undertaking,' he says without so much as a second's hesitation. 'I'm a hoarder of useless information myself,' he admits, 'so anyone who sets out to hoard the entire scientific and factual knowledge of the planet is good with me!' On top of that, of course, the startling similarities between the concept and today's Internet were just too good to ignore. 'If Otlet's plan had succeeded,' Mr. Drummond concludes, 'then perhaps we'd all be "UBRing" today rather than Googling? Now that's a thought.'

Mr. Drummond has been writing for more years than he cares to remember. His four novels published since 2004 have championed utterly lost causes of the past, and he has a pointless ambition to keep unearthing the stories of hopeless phantasiers for many more years to come. At present, he is working on a scheme which should see 17th century English Republicans reach the surface of the moon, by the serious application of Mechanical Powers, and with a sure and certain knowledge of Mechanical Motions. Research into this project has incidentally led him down several overgrown byways of early Universal Language schemes. 'A person can lose himself in there for a long time,' he cautions. 'But it should all be worth it when we finally get to talk to the Lunarians.'

‘LOADS OF COWS!’ EXCLAIMED HENRI.

Matilde was mortified. She felt obliged to withdraw her eyes from the passing rural scene. Large ruminants there were in considerable numbers, certainly. But there was no reason to call attention to them. Not now. Not in the presence of these fellow-travellers.

There was the priest who sat opposite her and who had already, although they were quite unacquainted, spoken to her. And if she did not care to look at the priest, then neither did she care to look at the man seated next to him, a smooth-looking individual in a pale raincoat—some sort of commercial traveller, she did not doubt, of the sort that her mama had been obliged to take in as lodgers when papa had passed away. Those sort were Pests. Next to him, by the far window, sat a man noisily flapping a newspaper. The headlines were large and gloomy, proclaiming war. War? Matilde thought not. She shook her head firmly, and then realised what she was doing. She flushed and stared out of her window again as if deeply annoyed by something she had seen outside. No, there could be no war. It was quite inconceivable, after all the effort that brilliant men had put into preventing it. There was too much to be lost in a war.

To her right sprawled young Henri, of a stocky disposition, uncomfortably close, filling out more than his fair share of the bench. A quick side-glance confirmed her worst fears. The foolish youth was gaping, with both mouth and eyes, not to mention legs. He goggled over her bosom at the passing countryside, now that they had left Brussels behind. Swiftly, she jerked her right hand out and closed his mouth with a reverse pincer-movement of her new gloves. Henri ceased gaping, began gasping. The commercial traveller laughed.

She frowned at The Pest and then deliberately cleared her face. This was no way for a lady to behave. She reminded herself sternly that she was on Important Business, and that the safety of the Condensed Corpus of Universal Knowledge was, for several hours at least, in her care, and her care alone. She must act responsibly.

She was aware that the eyes of the three men in the carriage were now upon her. She had no intention of showing herself up as a flustered female, unable to cope with the novelties of railway travel. It was best to look steadily out of the window. The countryside! She loved the countryside. Once or twice a year, she and mama would take a trip out to the countryside, usually with Uncle Albert who visited from Liège, and they

would have such a lovely time! Uncle Albert was not really an uncle—he was a dear old friend of papa's: but he was most kind to mama. Matilde smiled at the memory of some delightful country-walks they had taken together. Then she became aware of her smile and desisted straight away.

Alas! The priest now encouraged, bent towards Matilde. 'Your son, madame, is surely on his first trip out of the big city?' he asked.

Her son? Goodness gracious, how was she to respond? That this myopian should think her married! And with a son like that! Which was worse? She pursed her lips and gripped her document bag more tightly.

It was Henri who completed her mortification by announcing in a very loud voice—the boy could never speak quietly—such a bad example to colleagues at the Universal Bibliographic Repository: 'That's not my mam,' he bellowed, as if everyone wished to know his family circumstances. 'My mam's at home with my sisters. They're called Thérèse, Marie, Dominique and Jeanne. Dominique's the babby. That is Mademoiselle Poels, Father.'

'Oh,' said the priest, raising a soft hand to his mouth, in apology no doubt. 'I am so sorry, mademoiselle. Do forgive me.'

Matilde merely nodded, once, stiffly. If this religious simpleton was going to pester her all the way to Paris, she would not be able to control herself. She would say, or do, something she would later regret. Mama had warned her, but she would cause a scandal, she knew she would.

The individual who considered himself God's gift to women was enjoying all this. 'Of course this is not her son, Father,' he said, addressing the priest with a laugh, 'how could you suppose that such a pretty young woman was mother to this strapping youth? You priests,' he added, rolling his eyes towards Matilde in a most provocative and offensive manner, 'you have absolutely no idea about the weaker sex, do you?' To cap his insolence, he bowed forwards in his seat, straight at her. The Pest was clearly prowling. She knew how to deal with that.

She reached in her case and pulled out a scholarly volume. Her mama had advised her that ladies do not read books in public, and certainly not in a railway-carriage. But mama had probably never had to deal with an idiot boy, an unobservant priest and a drooling lecher, all together in one railway-compartment. She opened her book and poked her head down into the pages. Only a fool would dare interrupt her now.

And, naturally, a fool obliged.

'Ah,' said the priest who had, as soon as the book appeared, hauled out of his own bag a pair of spectacles and placed them on his nose,

preparatory to spying on her reading, 'Paul Otlet's *Collected Bibliographical Essays*, I see. Well, well! Most fascinating, and, if I may say so, most curious reading for a young woman. Do you,' he proceeded to insult her, 'grasp what the man is trying to say?'

Matilde looked up from her book. The seducer to the priest's left sported a fixed grin. She would wipe that smile off his face soon enough.

'Father,' she said firmly to the priest, 'I work at Monsieur Otlet's 'Mundaneum'. The ideas which the Director propounds in this volume are put into practice by none other than myself, on a daily basis. Such ideas are no harder for me to understand than the contents of your Breviary are for you. Or,' she added pointedly, but without adjusting her gaze, 'than the bill of fare in a house of ill-repute is for a commercial traveller.'

Before the priest could answer, his neighbour positively guffawed with laughter, opening his depraved mouth ever so wide. 'That's a good one, eh, Father?' he exclaimed. 'A real cracker, I'd say. Mademoiselle,' he added sagely, but with sparkling eyes that Matilde feared to catch, 'a house of ill-repute has no bill of fare. You see the meal in front of you, and you just choose the dish that tempts you most. And then you gobble it all up!' Incredibly, he began to make bestial gobbling noises. Henri, to his discredit, sniggered and reddened. The commercial traveller winked broadly at the young man, then produced, of all things, a cheap pewter flask containing—almost without the trace of a doubt—aqua vitae. He passed it over to Henri who, after merely a moment of hesitation, slurped at it, then handed it back, wiping his lips.

The priest had at least the decency to offer his apologies.

'You are of course quite right to correct my misunderstanding, mademoiselle. I merely conjectured that the subject-matter of the essays might prove too difficult or dry a subject for a young woman such as yourself. I care for several young ladies back in my parish, and, alas, there is not one among them who does not prefer a few verses of poetry or a novel to works of a—shall we say?—more elevating nature.'

Matilde was in no mood to be categorised with some flighty girls whose range of interest extended from fatuous fiction to faithless young men and straight back again.

'Father,' she said, tapping the cover of the book to emphasise her points, 'there is nothing more elevating than, 1, the condensing of all information into one scheme of classification. Accordingly, 1.1, we have created the Universal Decimal Classification for this purpose and, 1.2, we have greatly

extended the schema to allow for new discoveries and to permit easy cross-referencing. 2, we have invited all academics, all bibliographers, all readers, to record each and every printed work under this new classification. 3, we will make all of this condensed documentation available to any man or woman, who wishes to extend his or her understanding of the material world.'

'And what of the Other World, of God?' asked the priest mildly.

'Be assured that it has been categorised,' she replied shortly, then continued. '4.1, in the 'Mundaneum', we have already gathered more than eleven million—eleven,' she repeated, for emphasis, looking hard at the lascivious individual, 'million index-cards containing the exact details and categories of every single publication held in Belgium, and we are making, 4.2, rapid advances in the classification of every book held in the eleven major libraries of Germany, building on the foundation-stones of the Prussian *Gesamtkatalog*.'

'Germany, madame!' exclaimed the man brandishing the newspaper, appalled. 'Do you not realise that Germany has this very day—' He got no further. Matilde Poels was in her element.

'5, it is our plan to record every single page of every single document in microphotographic form, which, as you will doubtless be aware, monsieur,' she addressed the patriotic newspaper-reader, 'uses a method developed by our genial colleague M. Goldschmidt to photograph and reduce to microscopic size the pages of a book, and store these images on chemically-treated film. 6, it will be possible, in a very short time, to offer to all the clients of the 'Mundaneum' a service which permits them to, 6.1, search for material related to a topic of interest and, 6.2, view all books, periodicals, journals and papers—pictures and text—which are related to the topic. That prospect is, monsieur, the most elevating prospect of all.

'7,' continued Matilde, seeing her enemies retreating in disarray before her, 'I have in the luggage-van of this very train, thirty-five crates indexing almost all of the known facts of the universe. It is my responsibility to accompany these precious crates to, 7.1, Paris, where they will be stored safely in the vaults of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. We have already sent copies to, 7.2, Washington in America, and to, 7.3, Rio de Janeiro in the far distant land of Brazil. In the present times of danger, M. Otlet believes that they will be safer abroad.'

'Thirty-five crates, mademoiselle?' queried the man behind the newspaper. 'And you are all alone against the invading enemy. How will you manage?'

Matilde bridled. 'I am a woman who takes her responsibilities very seriously, sir,' she said angrily. 'I have besides, 7.11, a porter to assist me.' She did not deign to look at Henri who, on hearing his honourable profession mentioned in a discussion of which he had lost the thread long ago, sat up suddenly and blushed. The commercial traveller winked over at him again, and very coarsely bent his arm and clenched his fist in imitation of the strong-man at a fair.

'You would do well, sir,' Matilde continued addressing her new interrogator, quite unable to stop herself now that she had started, 'to read another book by M. Otlet, rather than that foolish newspaper!'

'And what would you recommend, young lady?' asked the reader of news, raising his eyebrows in mock surprise. 'This Otlet is, I must suppose, a Pacifist?' He spoke the word with some distaste, much as he might have said 'German'.

'M. Otlet is no mere Pacifist,' she retorted. 'He is an Internationalist. All of his life has been devoted to the establishment of international cooperative bodies. And obviously I would recommend to you his most recent work *La Fin de la Guerre*. If I had thought I would be in debate with a warmonger, I would have brought a copy along. It would make you think twice about senseless death and destruction.'

'But as you have not brought a copy,' replied the unpleasant gentleman, 'I shall make do with *Le Commencement de la Guerre*.' He smiled smugly round the compartment and then turned to the financial pages with considerable noise and show.

Conversation petered out. Outside, the late afternoon shadows were growing longer and the countryside of Flanders rocked past. Small farms, pastures with larger ruminants, smaller ruminants, anseriformes, now and then flowing water. The hot month of July had just ended, today was the second day of August. According to the railway timetable which Matilde had studied—as she studied all things, for she never let a single fact pass her by, conscious that facts alone drive the wheel of the world—the border into France would be reached at six o'clock precisely. It was close to five now.

At the border there would be passport-control, possibly searches for contraband: aliens and smugglers, she thought with a secret shiver. The train would halt, there might be time to consume some of the sustenance which mama had kindly prepared and packed in a little basket. Would the customs officials demand to open the crates and inspect the contents?

Would they get everything out of order, all the beautifully copied index-cards? Monsieur Otlet had advised her that this would not happen, for she had in her case all the necessary documents. 'With documentation,' he had once famously lectured, 'the world cannot resort to violence.' How true that was! So: she need not feel nervous about the border, although she determined that she would be quite on her guard.

Matilde tried to read her book, but the text simply danced around before her eyes. Her mind turned again and again to those thirty-five carefully-packed crates that were rocking along in the luggage-van at the head of the train. Were they safely stacked and tied down? What if one of them fell and cracked open? There would be cards everywhere, facts all up in the air and quite out of order.

Thank goodness for the Universal Decimal Classification scheme! She calmed herself momentarily. If the worst should happen, and the cards did spill all over the floor of the luggage-van, one would merely need to take note of the classification-number written so neatly on each card, and they could readily be put back in order. Those cards, simple, yet so powerful: together they comprised the Universal Book, endlessly re-writing itself. How many times had she told herself that, and how well did she know it! Oh!—but what if the door to the wagon suddenly banged open, while the cards lay about inside? In a trice, they would be blown all over the countryside, down leafy lanes, into ponds and rivers and the four stomach compartments of the larger ruminants. That would be a catastrophe!

Matilde struggled to maintain her peace of mind. She peered ever more desperately into M. Otlet's *Collected Essays*, clenching her fists and curling her toes. As soon as the train stopped at the border, she would go to the luggage-van and see for herself that all was well. Yes, that would do it. And then, if the customs-officials wished to inspect her documentation, what better place to do it? Certainly, she would not wish to be questioned in front of these charlatans here.

At last, the train slowed, whistled and came to a grinding halt. Matilde put away her book, rose to her feet with dignity and peered out of the window. The train stood in a desolate place, clearly not a station. Some men in uniform were marching with intent towards the train. She turned to her young colleague.

'This is the border, Henri. You have your passport?'

Henri felt in all his pockets, panicked, and finally located the document. He had been sitting on it. He waved it triumphantly. The Pest applauded enthusiastically.

‘Excellent,’ said Matilde drily. ‘Now, I am going to inspect the luggage-van. You will stay here. I will be back shortly. Do not disgrace me.’

Before Henri could protest, she had opened the door, stepped carefully down the side of the carriage and found herself standing amidst clouds of steam on a cinder path. Looking neither right nor left, nor indeed upwards to where each window had an idle head poking out, she strode forward clasping her document-case. She remembered that the Prussian State Railways had introduced a system of classification for their railway wagons in 1902: she wished to establish whether the Belgian or French railways had followed suit and peered at the numbers painted on each wagon that she passed, analysing them as she went. There were two luggage-vans: it was a very important train, the express from Brussels to Paris. Her crates—her very own crates—were in the van closest to the vast locomotive. Two customs-officials were idling next to it, engaged in wasting time: clearly, they were French, not Belgian. As she approached, they saluted smartly and stroked their moustaches with white gloves.

‘How can we help mademoiselle?’ asked the taller of the two, a man with sleepy brown eyes. He showed many strong teeth. Matilde ignored the teeth and the eyes and explained that she was the authorised and certified owner of thirty-five crates in the van and that she wished to have her documents controlled. Wished also—no, demanded—to see that the crates had not been tampered with.

The taller man bowed facetiously and then with great athleticism which a flightier woman might have admired, leapt up to the door of the van, flung it open and held out his hand to Matilde. She closed her eyes and raised her arm. With quite astonishing strength, the man pulled her up. So swift was her passage through the air that she almost did not notice the outrage perpetrated upon her person by the man left on the ground, who assisted her vertical trajectory with a push on a convenient part of her anatomy.

Business was soon completed. Her passport was stamped. The customs-official satisfied himself, with much displeasing chaff, that Mlle. Poels was indeed the documented owner of the crates, and that there were thirty-five crates loaded. ‘And what is this ‘Index?’’ he insisted on knowing.

Matilde gave him as short an answer as she deemed fit: 'An encyclopaedic table of contents of the subject-matter of Knowledge, collected on cards and cross-referenced by a faceted scheme of bibliographical classification, known as the Universal Decimal Classification.' The male appeared more than satisfied with that reply, stamped the papers and saluted languidly. He held out his arms to help her down; his impudent colleague stood below in an attitude that promised unforgivable outrage.

It was at that moment that Matilde decided that she would stay with her crates all the way to Paris. The idea was brilliant. She would not have to listen to any more nonsense from a priest, a rake and a chauvinist; neither would she have to put up with the uncouth habits of Henri, who was, quite frankly, unfit for polite society; finally, she would not be obliged to swing in the arms of two Frenchmen, a matter on which mama had given her much cautionary instruction on the previous evening. She announced her decision in the clearest possible terms.

The customs-official tried at first to dissuade her, then shrugged rudely, muttered '*Eh bien, bon!*' and launched himself to ground. The door was rolled shut. The sound of masculine laughter ensued and some doubtless ribald discussion. After a brief pause, the door was tapped four times by a hammer—doubtless some certificate being attached for the clarification of officials down the line. Documentation: that, at least, was acceptable.

Matilde was now left in almost total darkness, for there were, it seemed, no windows in a luggage-van. She much regretted having left mama's basket of provisions in the compartment. But at least she had her index-cards under direct supervision. She stood holding her document-case close to her chest.

A few minutes passed and then the locomotive whistled shrilly, very close at hand. Matilde positively jumped, her heart fluttering. 'Goodness!' she murmured, and sat down on one of the packing-cases. She knew, from the recent inspection, that it was the one which contained classifications from 510 through to 519.6—covering all of 'Mathematics', inclusive of number theory, combinational analysis, statistical theory etc (not forgetting of course that the 'Statistics' cards should cross-reference another crate, containing the 'Social Sciences' index). Dear friends indeed! The train began to pull forwards, slowly at first and with a great deal of shrieking, then faster until it settled into a comfortable rhythm. They were now

in France, and Paris was barely a couple of hours away. The hotel was booked, and the crates would be put into secure storage overnight. And tomorrow she would have the great pleasure, and unimaginable honour, of presenting the Index into the safekeeping of France's own national library. Not a patch, of course on the Universal Repository in Brussels—as far as bibliographical classification went, France was still in the Dark Ages.

The train rattled on. To lighten the darkness, Matilde reminded herself of the many things she had discussed with M. Otlet in the past few months—his vision of the future, the new services that the repository would be able to offer to its clients.

It was no longer enough that the many clients of the 'Mundaneum' should send in a letter asking for information on—let us say—the religious architecture in the Russian town of Novgorod the Great in the 16th century. Naturally, under the new bibliographical discipline established by M. Otlet, the relevant card or cards would be located without difficulty (she traced the poetical formula (47) 2.523:72.7 «16» on the rough wood), and the details copied out neatly on to a blank set of cards which would be returned by post to the enquirer. Most efficiently done, and clients were quite satisfied with that.

But how would it be, M. Otlet had proposed recently, if we could offer a service by which the client received, for a small consideration, a microphotographic film containing the actual pages of all the works referenced? Not merely the Index, but also the Information itself? No heavy books to consult: one simply needed a blank wall onto which the magic lantern could project the miniaturised pages.

And how would it be further, if somehow telegraphic wires could be used to send in the request and return the results? Some form, perhaps, of typewriter that was actuated by the telegraph? A client need not move from his study or his office, and make the exhausting journey to Brussels—a real service if the journey was in unpleasant company.

And what if, considered M. Otlet's genius, what if human ingenuity could build a machine, much like the invention of the American statistician Mr. Hollerith, which mechanically sought out the relevant cards and then copied them, and what if this machine could be instructed to receive and send *via* the telegraph or telephone? All that the regular client might require would be a smaller version of a photographic printing machine, or a portable magic lantern.

Yes: the concepts of *telereading* and *telewriting* had been outlined and they would surely be more than just the matter of dreams!

After some time had passed contemplating this very pleasant vision of the future, Matilde felt the train slowing and finally pulling into a station. The lights shining outside illuminated for her a very dim and dirty window that she had not noticed before. It was let into the wall of the carriage, to one side of the door, barely two hands' breadth across. When the train had lurched to a halt, she stood up and went to the window. With her handkerchief, she wiped a small corner clean. Peering out, she saw that the platform outside was busy with station-staff and with soldiers. Anxious not to be seen, she pulled away from the window and sat down again. The first place after the border where the train was scheduled to stop was St Quentin. Famed for its linen cloth and a remarkable collegiate church, some 48,000 inhabitants: somewhere, in the crate containing cards for 911.3:316 (44), the geography of France, there would be a factual distillation of the place. The train was due to halt for five minutes only, before starting on the last leg to Paris and the *Gare du Nord*.

The five minutes lasted a long time. There was at first a great hubbub of raised voices, a wave of noise which gradually receded. There followed a long period of absolute silence, finally shattered by great clanking noises and monstrous jerks, as if the train was being pulled apart. Matilde estimated that perhaps twenty minutes had elapsed before she heard the sound of whistles—a guard's, followed by a locomotive's. Strangely, the train did not move, although there was the sound of an engine pulling away.

A great silence fell upon the station. She looked out of the grimy window again. The platform was now deserted. Matilde turned her attention to the heavy door, but could not move it. At length, she resorted to what mama had indicated that a lady should do under no circumstances. She screamed loudly for help.

There was no response.

She kicked at the door and screamed again and again. At length, she heard the sound of footsteps on the platform. She cleared her throat and called in a less hysterical manner, demanding assistance. A handle clattered and then the door slowly rumbled open. A gentleman stood outside, looking in with curiosity. A gentleman, surely, for he was well-dressed in an overcoat with a fur-collar, a respectable hat and clean footwear; he carried a good quality leather briefcase.

‘Madame,’ said the gentleman raising his hat. And then, disturbingly, he climbed aboard.

Matilde had not been prepared for this. She remembered mama’s advice concerning Frenchmen. Her first precaution to evade a fate worse than death was to retreat to the neat pile of crates and step behind the one that contained classification 2.34—Religion: Persons: Martyrs.

‘Do not be alarmed, madame,’ said the gentleman easily. ‘I will keep my distance. But,’ he added, pulling out a watch and consulting it, ‘we really must be on our way.’ With which words, he rolled the door shut and settled himself comfortably on a small folding stool which he had brought along with him.

This was extraordinary. Matilde no longer knew what to do. The more so when the train gave a great shudder and, without the slightest whistle or other auditory signal, began to move.

Backwards.

‘Monsieur,’ asked Matilde after a minute, in as strong a voice as she could muster, ‘is this train still on its way to Paris?’

‘Ah, *mais non*,’ said the Frenchman, apparently puzzled by her question, spreading his hands out apologetically. ‘We are, as you must know, on our way to Belgium.’

‘To Belgium? But I have just come from there. The train is scheduled to reach Paris at ten minutes to eight.’

‘It seems that schedules are subject to change,’ was his answer.

‘Then—?’ Matilde sat down suddenly, her knees weak. She felt quite flustered. Mama had not warned her of the propensity of trains to suddenly reverse direction. This behaviour did not fit the facts at all.

‘I should introduce myself,’ said the gentleman at length, seeing his travelling-companion’s discomfort. He raised his hat once more. ‘My name is Louis-Philippe Vergnot. I am the owner of several manufactories in St Quentin, that town which we have just left. My intention is to travel to the port of Ostend, and there take ship for England. As you are probably aware, war has broken out, and my fear is that France will be overrun shortly. I have therefore hired this portion of the train to take myself and my few belongings to Ostend as swiftly as possible. I regret, madame, my unexpected invasion of your carriage. But I can assure you,’ he went on, ‘that the disturbance to the plans of your fellow-passengers in the rest of the train is even greater.’

Matilde could think of nothing to say. She found herself, like foolish Henri, gaping. ‘Even greater?’ she managed to repeat.

‘Yes, indeed. The rest of the train has been commandeered by the French Army for the war-effort. The train is now on its way, I believe, to the Lorraine region.’

‘But Henri is on that train!’ she exclaimed.

‘Henri?’ queried M. Vergnot, with a look of concern. ‘Your husband perhaps? Or pet dog?’

‘Certainly not, monsieur! Henri is a just a young, and very naive, colleague. My name, sir, is Mademoiselle Poels, of Brussels.’

‘*Eh bien*, Mademoiselle Poels, of Brussels,’ said the other in a placatory manner, ‘all the passengers were placed aboard the slow train for Amiens, from where they might change for Rouen and then Paris; Henri will doubtless be there in a day or two.’

Matilde thought immediately of how M. Otlet would receive the news that his young porter had been whisked off amidst preparations for war. It scarcely fitted well with the ethos of Internationalism which drove every action at the *Palais Mondiale*. How was she to break the news? And what of mama’s little basket of food—was it now provisioning the Front?

The train rattled on over points in a leisurely manner. Matilde considered matters for some time. M. Vergnot, after asking permission, lit up a cigar and calmly puffed away at it, as gentlemen do. At last she spoke up.

‘Monsieur, have you considered how I am to extricate myself from this awkward situation? I have no desire to travel to Ostend. And if I am not permitted to reach Paris, I must be permitted to return to Brussels and consult with the Director of my Institute.’

Vergnot savoured his cigar before replying.

‘Mademoiselle, it was my honest understanding that this luggage-van was in any case on its way back to Belgium. Even if I have been misled, I have paid good money to hire this part of the train, which was not immediately required for the War Effort. A great deal of money indeed. You can scarcely ask me to risk my investment with any sort of detour? We are heading by indirect route to Ostend, *via* Douai and Lens, avoiding Lille where there will be far too much activity. Should you not wish to travel to Ostend, you may step down at any station after we have crossed the border. To stop before the border would merely jeopardise my plan. Once in Belgium, my dear lady, you may return to Brussels by the most direct route.’

‘That, monsieur,’ replied Matilde, now annoyed, ‘is the most ridiculous thing I have heard today. How can you, a self-professed gentleman,

propose to abandon me in the countryside, with all my precious crates, without any means of transport or safety? Have you no shame at all? Have you any idea at all how valuable this collection is to Europe in the Twentieth Century?’

Vergnot was unmoved by this appeal to Internationalism and the Future. ‘Precious crates, mademoiselle?’ he said politely. ‘But the official documentation describes the contents as spoiled dry goods, to be returned to the country of origin? Why do you describe them as precious?’

‘What documentation?’ demanded Matilde, disconcerted.

Vergnot pointed at the closed door. ‘Why, the customs certificate attached to the door,’ he replied.

Matilde paused. Dry goods? Spoiled? What was this—some vulgar joke?

While she tried to unravel this mystery, her companion dropped his cigar butt elegantly on the floor, and ground it under his left foot.

Matilde glared at him. This was really too much. ‘Do you wish to cause a conflagration, monsieur?’ she demanded. ‘Do you mean to set us both alight without hope of escape? And have you no idea at all what treasure is contained within these crates?’ Dramatically—perhaps too dramatically, she thought, but no matter—she indicated with a sweep of her arm the entire collection of index cards destined for the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. ‘This is the unique French abstract of the Universal Bibliographic Repository! A gift between neighbours.’

Vergnot appeared disappointed. ‘Such neighbours, I fear, as now require more than a mere Bibliography. We live in times of war.’

‘All the more reason, one would argue, for preserving the gift,’ Matilde retorted triumphantly. ‘With ready access to the facts, men will be less hasty to grasp after the sword!’ She knew it; it had to happen; she had climbed on her High Horse, as dear papa used to say. She felt herself hot and bothered, rage swirled around in her nostrils; but she did not care. ‘You will not, monsieur, play fast and loose with this collection, nor with my own person. You will set me down, in Belgium if it must be so, but you will take steps to ensure the safe return of every single one of these crates, and myself, to Brussels. If you have an ounce of decency in your breast, you will do this. And if,’ she added to kill stone dead any excuses the industrialist might dream up, ‘if you have so much money to spend on your journey, you will spend just a little more on this reparation!’

Vergnot eyed her for some time. At length, he lit himself another cigar.

‘Mademoiselle Poels,’ he said slowly, ‘I see that you are a woman of strict principles. I can permit myself to admire a woman like that. Very deeply. So I will make you two propositions. You may choose the one that suits you best. I will not be offended by your choice, and you may count on it, my dear mademoiselle, that I will carry out your wishes to the letter. Do you agree?’

‘I agree to nothing, Monsieur Vergnot, until I have heard what you have to say.’

‘Let it be so, then. My first proposition is this: that I set you down at the first convenient stop after we have crossed the border. At that place I will arrange for your crates to be shipped to Brussels, or, if that is not immediately possible, to be stored safely until shipment can be arranged. I will also pay for your ticket back to Brussels.’

Matilde nodded politely at this generous suggestion.

‘My second proposition is that you accompany me to Ostend, and travel across the sea with me to England, you and your Universal Index. When we reach London, you shall donate your collection to the Reading Room of the famous British Museum, and then we shall live as man and wife. For, Mademoiselle Poels, I am much attracted to your spirit and your appearance.’

Matilde could not believe her ears. Had this man just made the most improper suggestion that she had ever heard? Or was she deceived by exhaustion? It had been a long day. She studied his face very closely indeed, looking for signs of mockery, or debauchery, or embarrassment. But he looked very serious. She must have misheard. The silence extended itself. The train clattered slowly through the evening. The bibliographer had lost all her bearings. She thought of asking the Frenchman to repeat his second proposition; and then she thought it best that he did not. Although mama had warned her of many an outrage that a lady might expect at the hands of males, she had most certainly not prepared her for this kind. The silence extended itself some more. Vergnot sat calmly, waiting for her answer.

After careful consideration and cross-referential analysis, Matilde made up her mind. ‘I thank you, monsieur, for your offer of extending the collections held in the British Museum. But I must return to Brussels at the earliest opportunity. My responsibility is to the Universal Bibliographic Repository.’

‘Admirable—just like a Vestal Virgin,’ murmured the industrialist, possibly imagining that her ears were not sharp. Mama always said her

daughter had the sharpest ears in Brussels. More loudly, he said: 'So be it, mademoiselle. When we cross the border, I shall consult with the engineer on a suitable town at which you may disembark. I have in any case some other arrangements to make at the border. These may detain me away from this comfortable carriage for several hours. You need not be alarmed. I am a man of my word.' M. Vergnot inclined forwards in a polite bow.

Matilde acknowledged his avowal with a gracious nod of the head, and retired to sit on her packing-cases, her head awl with the most strange fancies. A Vestal Virgin? What did this man know about her that she perhaps did not? To begin with, there had been four, or in some accounts six, Vestal Virgins: at the *Palais Mondiale* she was, barring perhaps Mme. de Bauche, the only one who was dedicated to the cause of the accumulation of all information. Heavens! she did so in her sleep. Every fact was eagerly embraced, lovingly caressed, and added to the great canon. Already, she had learned much about the Brussels to Paris express that had never before been recorded and cross-referenced. She would rectify this omission, just as soon as she returned to the safety of the 'Mundaneum'. Facts, facts, facts: a mountain, a fortress of facts, a Chinese Wall of facts which would pose the greatest obstacle to war-mongering, to impertinent seducers, to obscurantist priests and the insolence of French customs-officers. Although she had not quite reached Paris with her precious cargo, neither had she, in this world of fantasists and deniers, mislaid it. True, she had misplaced Henri: but she could explain that with the bare facts. Henri was not important—he would, she had no doubt, be put on a train home from Amiens, with a fine brioche or two to sustain him.

Fortified by such thoughts, Matilde relaxed. A safe distance away from her, M. Vergnot puffed at his cigars, and considered his watch from time to time. Once, he lifted his expensive briefcase on to his knees, opened it and checked some papers and what appeared to be large piles of bank-notes. At that sight, Matilde respectfully averted her eyes. A gentleman's money, as mama always said, is his own affair and need not concern a lady.

When the train at last halted, M. Vergnot stood up. He looked at his watch. 'A quarter past ten, mademoiselle,' he announced. As if the time of night could be of any interest to a lady in this situation. 'I will

return before dawn. I leave you my coat as a blanket, for it will grow cold.’ With which enigmatic words, he slid open the door and jumped elegantly into darkness, his briefcase swinging in his right hand. Matilde Poels gladly took up the warm overcoat. She had been shivering for some time, but had been sure to give no sign of it. The coat was heavy, warm, and smelled comfortingly of cigar smoke. Curiously, it did not smell of its owner. Matilde considered this: Uncle Albert’s coat always smelled of the man himself. But he did not smoke filthy cigars—perhaps that was it? Somewhere, in the crate containing the range of cards from 573 to 579, there was a section of the Repository which dealt with the Human Senses. In there, almost certainly, the matter would be explained. She regretted having no illumination. A long night stretched ahead of her, and she could read neither M. Otlet’s collected papers for the *Institut International de Bibliographie* nor could she browse among the two hundred and ten thousand index-cards which formed this initial batch—this ‘seed harvest’, as M. Otlet described it—bound for France. What a missed opportunity!

Matilde lay down. Under her head was a crate containing all the known facts concerning The General Organization of Statistics; under her feet, a crate with every possible reference to The Earth and Geology; under her hips, a crate that contained the absolute factual essence of Animal Husbandry and Breeding in General. With this firm mattress below, and M. Vergnot’s coat above, she settled with a sigh and fell instantly asleep.

She was awoken by the opening of the door. She looked up startled, saw the industrialist from St Quentin, and clutched his coat tightly about her person. Certainly, a lady should not be found tumbled in her sleep by a man who was not of the family. She sat up very quickly.

‘You have returned?’ she said needlessly. It was growing light outside.

‘I have, Mlle. Poels,’ he replied. ‘I have had a long night of it, and some difficulty with the officials in this place. But my papers are now in order and we may proceed.’

‘I will not,’ replied Matilde swiftly, to forestall any unpleasant revelation, ‘ask why it took you so long, nor what means you have used to ease our way across the border.’

‘You are very wise not to,’ replied M. Vergnot gravely. ‘You would be, I think, disappointed in me. Now, mademoiselle, I must request that we share my coat, for I am chilled by the cold morning.’

Hastily, Matilde surrendered the coat. 'You may have it all, monsieur, for I am in truth over-heated.' This was not a fact, but a fiction. Matilde had suddenly discovered that a Fiction weighed more in the balance of Chastity than did Fact. It was quite astonishing. She blushed, and shivered as she blushed.

'Very well,' said Vergnot, offering no argument. He took back his coat, draped it over his shoulders and resumed his seat. 'I have arranged with the engineer to stop at a small town not far into Belgium, where, he assures me, your crates will be stored securely and from where you may return at once to Brussels. The man is familiar with this part of the world.

'And, mademoiselle, here is the notice which was attached to the door. It has no further currency.' Vergnot passed her a rather tattered piece of stiff paper, whose four corners had been torn off. Matilde examined it. It bore the crest of the French Customs Service. In the centre, written boldly, clearly and neatly, were the words: 'Dry goods. Spoiled. Useless. Return to Country of Origin.' There was an indecipherable signature underneath, and yesterday's date, the 2nd August. At the foot was a huge and very official stamp.

Matilde retired to the crate containing Index entries for 2.34, mortified.

At around seven in the morning, the train slowed to a halt once more, and when M. Vergnot pulled open the door, a most delightful late summer morning met their eyes. A neat and capacious railway-station, well-tended, pots of bright red geraniums, white-washed station-buildings. Towering into the sky above a line of houses, Matilde could see a lovely old cathedral. Great old bells rang out and out. Vergnot and Matilde stood at the open door and enjoyed the scene.

'My only regret,' said the man, 'is that I will leave all this behind in two or three hours, perhaps forever. England has nothing to compare to this.'

Matilde thought to argue with him, for she had made a close study of the national characteristics, etiquette and customs of England—390 (42); but decided against a confrontation. In any case, the station-master came marching up, brimming with importance and wishing to know how he could be of assistance to this unexpected arrival. M. Vergnot jumped down, there was a brief conversation; an envelope slipped from one hand to another. In moments, two porters had arrived at the station-master's

dictatorial summons, and under Matilde's watchful eye, unloaded the crates on to the empty platform. With extraordinary speed, they were then whisked off to a brick-built outhouse within the station grounds from which, the official proclaimed proudly, only the Count of Monte Cristo might escape.

As Matilde pondered the demonstrability of this boast, Vergnot announced that he had to take his leave. Elegantly he brushed his lips over Matilde's outstretched hand, gazed one last time into her eyes, then leaped aboard his train. Matilde noticed now that it comprised only the one luggage-van and a small engine. The locomotive whistled then chugged off towards the north.

'And now, mademoiselle,' said the station-master, 'please install yourself in our comfortable ladies' waiting-room. I am advised that it is the best waiting-room in all of Western Flanders. The train for Ghent, from where you will connect for Brussels, will depart in precisely—' he consulted his watch, '—one hour and forty-seven minutes. A boy will bring you a tray with hot coffee and some warm rolls. And here, of course, is your ticket, paid for by your—*ahem*—your good friend.' These last words were uttered with the very slightest hint of doubt. Matilde chose to ignore the salacious tone. She thanked the railway official in a manner of which her mama would have been proud, retreated into the ladies' waiting-room, and sank down on to a padded bench. At last, she could breathe again. The index was once more safe on Belgian soil. Her own person was out of the clutches of desperate males. And she had a ticket for Brussels.

At a quarter past five, Matilde entered the 'Mundaneum' and headed smartly for the Director's office. When she reached the door, she took a deep breath, then knocked.

'Enter,' called a familiar voice.

She did so.

Monsieur Otlet looked up and sat back in astonishment.

'Mademoiselle Poels!' he exclaimed. 'What has happened? You are supposed to be in Paris. Dear God, don't tell me that something has happened to the Repository?' He ran round the desk in agitation and seized her hands.

Matilde shook her head and, feeling of a sudden faint after all her exertions, seated herself. M. Otlet poured her a cup of tea. He always had

a pot of tea at his elbow. At length, she was able to explain the whole story.

‘Well,’ said the Director, when he had heard every detail that Matilde cared to reveal. ‘This is all very peculiar. They detached only your wagon, you say? With no explanation? I suppose there is merit in that, for otherwise the Repository might have ended up in the thick of war!’ He shook his head.

‘And,’ Matilde reminded him, ‘I have mislaid Henri.’

‘These are wicked times,’ said Otlet, sitting down behind his desk. He had been pacing the floor restlessly as Matilde told her tale. ‘I am told that Germany has now invaded our country, that their armies have surrounded Liège and are heading for Brussels. Perhaps Henri is much safer away from all the fighting.’ He shook his head hopelessly. ‘But my own sons...’ He stopped and blew his nose, a sure sign that he was deeply worried. ‘And now this. Whatever will become of our enterprise?’

‘I think,’ said Matilde cautiously, ‘the crates will be safe enough where they are. The town is very quiet. The Germans will have no interest in such a small place.’

Paul Otlet brightened up. ‘Yes, yes, you are probably correct. We must leave them there for now, until all this blows over. It surely cannot last long—a few months at the most. It is for the best. I will write to the station-master myself. The building is secure, you say?’

‘He assured me that it is both fast against robbers and impervious to rain, *Monsieur le Directeur*,’ replied Matilde.

‘Excellent. Then we shall leave them there in—in—what was the name of the town?’

‘Ypres.’

CLEAVAGE

PETER HARDY

Peter Hardy's previous appearance in Postscripts was with 'Drive-in' in #22/23, The Company He Keeps. This new story, 'Cleavage', draws brilliantly on Peter's background in theatre—specifically, blood-soaked Renaissance theatre . . .

CHANCES ARE YOU WOULDN'T KNOW MY NAME, EVEN IF I were to mention it. Not unless you're one of those theatre-goers who regularly peruse your programs, curious to see just who that was playing the uncle, the doctor, the old family friend.

Stars come and go—moving on to what they think will be greener pastures—but we're the ensemble, the glue that holds the company together. We may not get talked about much in the press, but our colleagues know who we are. Perhaps the most extravagant notice I've ever received began with the phrase 'Also in the cast were . . .'

I certainly wasn't mentioned in this famously over-the-top review by Lucian O'Connor, who used to write for the city's largest and most influential newspaper: 'The Rosehill Repertory Company drags itself kicking and screaming into the 21st Century, with its brilliant re-imagining of that old chestnut, *Nothing But A Whore*, Alas—stirring together a delicious stew out of the grisly meat of Jacobean tragedy, the bloody sauce of *Grand Guignol*, with just a pinch of post-modern irony to give it spice.'

Lucian used to be a food critic.

That review, and the sensational opening night which it accompanied, were all part of a series of events that did, indeed, turn things around for Rosehill Repertory, restoring us to our rightful place as the leading theatre

company in this part of the country. I played my own modest role in that tale of tragedy and triumph, but for me you could say that it began long before that fabled opening night—nearly two years, in fact—when I found myself, quite uncharacteristically, nestled within the soft, white bosom of Mary Elizabeth Angelina, our company's newest ingénue.

Now, ingénues, as everyone knows, are a dime a dozen—there's never any shortage of pretty young women wanting to get on the stage. But, almost from the beginning, it seemed to me that Mary Elizabeth had something special. Aside from her obvious beauty (the kind, I thought, that would only grow and deepen with the years) there was also the promise of talent, with a quickness of intelligence and a lightness of touch that made her stand out from the rest. 'Mark my words,' I told the other fellows in my dressing room. 'She's a keeper.'

As for the nestling—well, as much as I might like to claim otherwise, it was not of a personal nature. Rather, we were on stage, together, taking part in a bit of cheap comic business for the company's latest wintertime sex farce, a masterpiece of taste entitled *No Panties, Please*.

At the time of this production, the fortunes of Rosehill Rep had been in decline for some time, with dwindling ticket sales and a subscriber base whose members kept dying off, and no fresh blood to replace them. This being the case, we did our best to keep what audiences we still had happy—and, in the depths of January, moving on into the first weeks of frozen February, what they seemed to want was mindless comedy and girls in their underwear. . . preferably with a British accent, to lend things a touch of class.

The show was being directed by the legendary George Oakwood, who had founded our company nearly thirty years before. He was an aging lion, by this time, and approached comedy with a heavy directorial hand. Thus, it was his idea to have Mary Elizabeth (as the innocent Sunday School teacher) take the hand of the crusty old Vicar to whom she had come for aid (played by myself) and press it tightly to her heart . . . deep inside the décolletage of the low-cut French maid's uniform which the Sunday School teacher was wearing, at that point (for plot reasons too silly to go into right now).

Furthermore, it was George's notion to have us *stay* there—frozen in tableau, my hand to her chest—for the rest of the scene. Only two or three minutes, to be sure, but at eight shows a week, for a six-week run. . . that's quite a lot of nestling. And, I'll admit, there's been many a night since then

that I've drifted off to sleep with the memory of her hand on mine—the warmth of her flesh, the tender beating of her heart.

We take our happy dreams where we can find them.

At the time, though, I did my best not to make her uncomfortable, maintaining a friendly professional distance—for she was quite a young woman, while I am somewhat older. She took it all like a good sport, and I thought she handled herself well throughout the show . . . but it seemed to me there was something she had missed. A moment where she could have been getting a laugh, where the show could have used one.

It came late in the first act, when most of us were on stage, looking to the door from which the Bullfighter was about to make his big comic entrance. But he had a costume change to get through, and there were always just a few seconds of dead space. It seemed manifestly apparent to me that if Mary Elizabeth was to turn, just for a moment, and see the Mother Superior looming behind her, it would get a laugh—not a big one, just enough to fill that hole. I waited in vain for the director to see this—or Mary Elizabeth, or *somebody*—but no one ever did. And, of course, I couldn't just come out and *say* something.

There is a delicate dance of negotiation one must go through, rules of etiquette that have to be observed. Actors aren't supposed to give each other notes, and directors don't want anyone but them telling the actors what to do . . . etc. This has always seemed rather foolish to me; theatre is a collaborative art form, after all, and it shouldn't matter where an idea comes from, so long as it's a good one. But one must be subtle, and show some discretion.

What I did, in the end, was to contrive to hold a conversation, within Mary Elizabeth's hearing, in which I told several other cast members about a moment where I'd been considering doing a similar turn-and-comic-take. But that I'd decided against it because, of course, 'My character would never do that.'

Quite right—but Mary Elizabeth's character would.

And so she did, the very next night, getting a small but generous laugh, which helped to pave the way for an even bigger laugh when the Bullfighter made his appearance . . . *exactly as I had known it would*. George was in the audience that night, and later on, backstage, I heard him commending Mary Elizabeth for her 'new idea'.

She looked my way for a moment, smiling shyly, as if seeking my blessing, but I felt no need to say anything. The play is something we all

do, together, and if one of us gets a laugh, we all get a laugh. It seemed to me that Mary Elizabeth understood this, without having to be told, and from that time on I felt sure that she was one of us.

I kept a fatherly eye on her, after that, watching with approval as she rose through the ranks of the company, becoming a favorite with the audiences and a darling of the critics. And so, I was particularly pleased when George Oakwood took me aside, one day, and told me that he was considering her for the role of Francesca, the evil countess in Thomas Centerton's *Nothing But a Whore, Alas*. (As anyone will tell you, the villains always have the best parts.)

On the other hand, it rather surprised me to hear that he was considering doing the play at all. I'd read it, of course, years before, but couldn't remember the last time I'd heard of it actually being produced, anywhere, ever. It had come to be regarded as something of a joke—one of the more outlandish of those Jacobean revenge tragedies, where everyone winds up dead in the end, piles of corpses scattered about the stage.

George had a new take on it, however: he saw it as a series of tragic love stories, one opening up into another, like a pattern of Chinese boxes, all of them culminating in the tale of Francesca and the Monk, her nefarious henchman—two characters who find in each other, too late, the warmth and human connection which they have been denied all their lives.

'She was abused,' George told me, 'you can tell. It's there in the lines, but no one ever *sees* it.' And he quoted to me:

And so I fell beneath the shadow of my father
Whilst my mother did turn away.

I took the play home that night and read it again, amazed to find that everything George had been talking about was completely supported by the text. I told him as much, the next day, and agreed that Mary Elizabeth would be marvelous in the role. . . with her icy blue eyes and pale white skin, the hair rising like silvery mist from her shoulders.

'And what about the Monk?' he asked, regarding me with that shrewd director's eye we'd all come to know so well. 'What do you think of him?'

'Well,' I replied, 'after what you've told me now—it's a revelation!' I found him fascinating: a character who *thinks* himself pious and pure, while burning inside with a lust and loneliness he will not even allow himself to recognize. Men who do not truly know themselves—but think they do—are always the most interesting ones to play.

'It'll be the last show I ever direct,' George declared, 'and I'll show them all—there's life in the old boy yet!' I hadn't seen him looking so charged-up in years. He planned to present the play in our upcoming 30th Anniversary Season, after which he would retire, turning over the reins of the company to his long-time assistant, Maynard Oppenheimer.

As for the Monk, while George never came out and offered me the role, I was encouraged by the way he kept talking to me about the character, asking questions and then observing my reactions, meticulously, as though he were taking notes in his head.

All right then, I told myself, if I wanted the part, I would have to earn it—by studying, and preparing, and giving the audition of my life. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

As our 29th Season drew to a close, I read the play over and over again, each night, trying on the coarse, rough robes of the Monk and letting his words breathe in my mind, until they'd settled down into every part of me. And sometimes I'd see Mary Elizabeth, as well, sitting in the Green Room and poring over the script with a hunger and intensity that I recognized all too clearly. This could be her breakthrough role, after all—a pathway from the purgatory of the Eternal Ingénue into the loftier realms of the Leading Lady.

I thought about approaching her, once or twice, and asking if she'd like to get together and read through some of the scenes—but no, I thought, better to keep it fresh, save it for the stage. There'd always been a spark between us, an undeniable chemistry that now, at last, could be put to good use.

In real life, of course, it would have been inappropriate—ludicrous, even—but onstage! Yes . . . onstage . . .

And that is how it could have been, should have been—*would* have been—if not for the intervention of two tragic events:

(1) George Oakwood—our company's Founding Artistic Director—dropped dead, one night, onstage, in the middle of his one-man show about Orson Welles, and

(2) Darius Grant was brought in to save the company.

It didn't happen that quickly, of course—not all at once. There were memorial services and tributes in the paper—people may have begun to take George for granted, but he was still a cultural legend. It was then announced that a search would be undertaken to find his successor, but we all knew it would be Maynard Oppenheimer. That is what George had

planned for, after all, and besides, Maynard knew the company inside and out—knew the actors, the audience, the city itself. It should have been obvious to anyone that he was the best man for the job, and only a band of fools, led by a drunken madwoman, would have seen things any differently.

Unfortunately, that proved to be an accurate description of our Board of Directors.

Kathy Carpenter was the President of the Board, by sole virtue of the fact that her husband's textile company was our biggest sponsor. The rest of the Board followed her every whim, and Crazy Kathy (as we called her, familiarly if not affectionately) was nothing if not whimsical. There are those who claim to have seen her sober, on occasion, but none of them has ever been able to prove it.

One of her whims had been to become enamored of the work of Darius Grant, a young director who'd been making something of a name for himself with a mangy little group called the Passion Players. They performed in an old warehouse, with poor heating and no air-conditioning, and a single toilet to serve both the actors and the audience. All they did were the classics (for which no royalty payments had to be made), and their specialty was performing Shakespeare set to rap music, with hip-hop dance numbers being injected into the proceedings whenever possible.

I had attended several of their productions, early on, and it seemed to me that Darius's directorial flourishes were usually more about drawing attention to himself and his own cleverness than they were about serving the play. I stopped going after seeing his *Romeo and Juliet*, which had ended with the dead lovers being hoisted out of the tomb by a chain-and-pulley system, while the Prince struggled through his final speech, trying to be heard over all that clanking and rattling.

But this sort of thing had begun to attract a cult following, and some were even calling Darius Grant a genius. Kathy announced that he would be brought in as Guest Director for the opening show in our 30th Anniversary Season, a recent Broadway hit called *Insignificant Others*. This was a pleasant trifle, sure to please our audiences, and the general consensus in the company was that, however this new wonder boy turned out, he shouldn't be able to do too much damage.

Darius had grander ambitions, however, and made them clear to us at the first rehearsal. 'This company is dead!' he announced. 'Everyone knows it—everyone can *smell* it. I'm going to bring Rosehill Rep back to

life if it's the last thing I ever do. Even if I have to cut off an arm and a leg to make it happen!

This last remark would be remembered, later, and often quoted.

You might not have thought it possible that the rehearsing of a light comedy should be such a miserable experience for everyone—but then, Darius gave us hardly any time to *rehearse*. Instead, we played theatre games, a harrowing mixture of psychobabble and ritualistic cruelty, that had us crawling about on the floor, cradling each other and pretending we were holding our children . . . then imagining that we had killed our children, and were begging them to come back to life . . . etc., etc., *ad nauseam*.

I saw all this for what it was, of course: brainwashing technique, pure and simple, designed to crush our spirits and turn us into the kind of adoring acolytes that Darius had become accustomed to working with at the Passion Players. There, he'd been mostly dealing with amateurs, kids barely out of college and old-timers that were pitifully grateful for the chance to finally get on stage. The professionals of Rosehill Rep, I felt sure, would show him they were made of sterner stuff.

Perhaps sensing my general resistance, Darius singled me out for his particular attention. I was playing 'the Judge'—not an especially large or important role—but Darius took my one monologue and had me deliver it, over and over again, standing on a chair while he shouted out commands to me, each time demanding that I give him a different 'color.'

'Do it like a hedgehog!'

'Now, do it like a porcupine!'

'Do it like a poinsettia!'

All of us longed for the day when rehearsals would be over, and this charlatan would be gone. Then, we could look forward to auditions for *Nothing But A Whore, Alas*, to be directed by Maynard Oppenheimer, working from the notes left behind by George Oakwood. We'd be bringing to life the final vision of our late, lost leader, and Rosehill Rep would be itself again.

Already, I knew my lines by heart.

'There's more to acting than just learning your lines, you know!' Darius marched around me like the little tyrant he was. 'Do it like you're drowning! Now, do it like you *wish* you were drowning . . .'

And, through it all, whenever my courage began to fail—when it seemed as though he might actually be succeeding in his efforts to drive me mad—I would see *her*, waiting in the wings, watching me from the sidelines. Mary Elizabeth, to be sure, but ever more often it was Francesca that I saw, now . . . chatting in the dressing rooms, leaving the theatre at night, walking down the street with the other girls.

Francesca, who thinks the Monk is her helpless pawn, who fails to see that he is her match, and more than her match. That only he can love and understand her as she needs, as she's been waiting for all her life—since her heart was frozen, long ago, into the shape of a dagger, by the cruelty of her father and the betrayal of all those who should have protected her.

And, when we came to the end of Act Three, Scene Four—the only possible place to put the single intermission demanded by today's audiences—and she understands, at last, that he is her destiny, that their lives are bound together by a knot of fate—and she submits to him, the music rising and the curtain falling, the lights surrendering to the dark . . . then . . . then!

She would be mine.

But one should always beware of getting too closely involved with another member of the company.

All too often, fantasies of the heart can become indistinguishable from the realities of the stage.

The opening night of *Insignificant Others* was a disaster, which came as no surprise to anybody who had actually been working on it. We had some walk-outs at intermission and, towards the end of the final act, I heard a patron in the front row whisper reassuringly to his wife, 'I think it'll be over soon.'

Reviews were dismal and ticket sales plummeted, with subscribers calling in to cancel for the rest of the season. The genius of Darius Grant had managed to take the opening show of our 30th Anniversary Season—a sure-fire, can't-fail crowd-pleaser—and turn it into a flop. The Board of Directors responded to this with quick and decisive action: Maynard Oppenheimer was fired and it was announced that Darius Grant would be directing all productions from now on.

Crazy Kathy had liked the show.

Poor Maynard was devastated, of course—he'd been with the company since he was a boy, signing on as an intern at age fifteen. We took him out for an unofficial going away party, commandeering a cabaret bar and singing songs through the night, the lyrics of which had been altered to pay tribute to Maynard, and to George, and the memory of an era gone by. God only knew what the future held in store for us.

I caught a glimpse of it, however, early the next morning, when I went by the theatre to pick up my paycheck. (End of an era or no, the rent still had to be paid.) There, on the call board, through the shimmering haze of a hangover, I saw what could only have been a mirage—the cast list for *Nothing But A Whore, Alas*, already completed, with auditions never having been held. Darius had simply gone ahead and cast the thing, right off the top of his greasy little head. I had to search the page three times before I even saw my name, playing one of a panel of Judge Advocates.

Again the Judge. Forever the Judge.

But it was what he'd done to Francesca that truly hurt my heart. He'd cast one of his friends from the Passion Players, a preening diva who'd always seemed as though she'd be more at home in a drag show than doing classical tragedy. Mary Elizabeth, meanwhile, would be languishing in the role of Leonora—yet another ingénue.

Still blinded by my hangover, I went out for a hair of the dog . . . which turned out to be a hairy dog indeed. Throughout the day I careened from one bar to another, finally ending up back at the theatre an hour and a half before curtain; for the first and only time in my professional life, I had reported for work in a state of intoxication. There would be time for me to sober up, I told myself, but first I had to see *her*, talk to *her*. Tell her—I'm not sure what—that I understood. That I knew the disappointment she must be feeling, even to the point of despair.

She was already in her dressing room, as I'd known she would be—curling her hair into the halo of ringlets required by this latest sweet young thing she was playing. She looked up in surprise as I stumbled in, and I stood there for a moment, dazzled by her beauty. Then it all poured out of me, spilling onto her dressing room floor—how I couldn't forgive him for what he'd done, to all of us, but most of all to her—taking away the role she had been promised, Francesca—how could she bear it? And condemning her to Leonora, a simpering twit that any bimbo off the street could have played.

Through it all, she just kept watching me, a smile of perplexity on her

face. And when it became clear, at last, that I had finally finished—the torrent of my words trickling off to a drunken mumble—she shrugged her pretty shoulders and said, ‘But . . . Leonora’s a bigger part.’

I stared at her, thinking that, surely, I must have heard her wrong.

‘No, really,’ she went on, her smile widening. ‘I counted the lines. It’s a *much* bigger part. Plus—she’s got a death scene.’

‘Of *course* she’s got a death scene!’ I exploded. ‘They *all* have death scenes! Everybody in the play dies!’

‘Yes,’ she said, now bright with enthusiasm. ‘But Leonora has her *own* death scene. Practically everybody else dies at once, all at the end—it’s ridiculous—the stage is littered with bodies. But, with Leonora, there won’t be a lot of other bodies cluttering up the place. It’ll just be *me*.’

I couldn’t take this anymore, and pleaded with her to understand. ‘But . . . it should have been *you and I* playing those roles!’ She blinked, and pulled back from me a bit. ‘Francesca and the Monk! It would have been perfect for us! We could have been together, at last, and then . . . and then . . .’

I trailed off into silence, realizing that she was staring at me, now, looking not only baffled, but—I must confess it—somewhat appalled.

Disoriented, I peered about the room, feeling frightened, not sure what scene I was in. There’s no telling what might have happened next, but I was rescued—or, at least, granted a reprieve—by the entrance of two new characters. I recognized them as Crazy Kathy and one of her friends . . . a fellow member of the American Barfly Association. They brushed past me and flocked around Mary Elizabeth, fawning over her and talking about how wonderful she’d been in the show; they were coming to see it again, that night, after which they wanted to take her and Darius out to dinner. And wasn’t it an exciting new direction he was taking the theatre in? She must be so proud.

I stood there, ignored, sobering up by the second, as if buckets of ice water were being poured continuously over my head. Eventually, Kathy seemed to realize that I was in the room—that I was not just some dressmaker’s dummy—and turned toward me blearily, breathing scotch all over my face.

‘I’m sorry,’ she slurred, ‘and you are . . .?’

‘Oh, *you* know,’ Mary Elizabeth chirped in, brightly—and there was just the slightest, deadliest moment of hesitation, before she went on. ‘He’s the actor who plays the Judge.’

Kathy looked woozily confused, as if she'd never heard the word 'actor' before. But then her friend stepped in: 'Oh, yes, of course! You were wonderful, too,' she said, hastening to remind Kathy that they had an urgent appointment at the tavern across the street. And they were gone, leaving only their fumes behind them.

Having composed herself, now, and no doubt feeling fortified by the praise that had been showered upon her, Mary Elizabeth turned to me with an ingratiating smile.

'Sorry about that,' she said. 'You know—have to keep the Board happy!' Then she fixed her face into an expression that I think was meant to convey sympathy. 'Anyway . . . I understand you're being disappointed . . . but, really, we just have to make the best of it, don't we? Trust in Darius, and do everything we can to help fulfill his vision of the play.' Her smile warmed and widened. 'After all—he *is* a genius.'

A lifetime of theatrical training prepares us for such moments. I did not bat an eye—merely thanked her for her time, and apologized for having interrupted what I'm sure must have been her extensive pre-show character process. (All that hair-curling, you know . . . very taxing.) I went to the Equity men's dressing room and showered, coldly, beginning my own nightly preparations.

Two things had become very clear to me—things which only a besotted fool could have failed to see before now:

(1) Mary Elizabeth was sleeping with Darius Grant—probably had been, for some time, and

(2) She had no idea what my name was. Had forgotten it completely . . . if, indeed, she'd ever known it in the first place.

Furthermore, she had thrown in her lot with the man who was going to destroy the Rosehill Repertory Company, the ensemble to which I had devoted my life, and that I had come to call my home. After all I'd taught her, everything that I'd hoped for the two of us—none of that mattered to her, and why should it? She didn't even know my name. *She didn't even know who I was.*

Well.

If all she wanted was a death scene . . . perhaps that could be arranged.

I had months to plan, consider my options, and await my opportunity. It came, at last, late one night in late October, a little over a week before

the opening night of what had become Darius Grant's production of *Nothing But A Whore, Alas*. It was going to be dreadful, of course, with none of the depth or tragic resonance that George had seen in the play. Darius had cut the text to ribbons, racing from one murder to the next, always demanding that each one be as realistic as possible. It was going to be like a slasher film, with tights.

The tech people had been happy at first, amusing themselves with stirring up buckets of stage blood and fashioning the severed heads and dismembered limbs, creating elaborate mechanical devices of torture and murder. But Darius kept changing his mind about things, continually coming up with new demands—the latest of which was a whole new concept for the killing of Leonora, the ingénue.

This would be the emotional climax of the play, since Leonora was just about the only character onstage you might actually care about. She was to be dispatched by the Monk, on Francesca's orders, but the means of her execution were not specified in the text. Tonight, Darius had announced that he wanted to have her 'quartered,' as they used to say—torn limb from limb by four horses running in opposite directions. The blood and guts involved in this posed no problem for the Technical Director; what he had wanted to know was: 'How are we supposed to get four horses on stage?'

'Puppets!' Darius had declared, triumphantly. 'She can be pulled to pieces by giant horse puppets!' When somebody had pointed out that this might not be consistent with the over-arching realism he'd been striving for throughout the production, Darius had gone ballistic. 'Have none of you people ever heard of *Brecht*?!'

This is what he usually said whenever it was suggested that something he wanted to do didn't make any sense.

At last, the technical people had put their collective foot down, and told Darius there was simply no time to prepare such an elaborate effect before opening night—and, besides, he had already gone considerably over-budget. Darius had stormed off in a huff, which was not helped by the fact that people were beginning to openly laugh at him, now. As I learned long ago, the surest way to make another person lose power, in a scene, is to laugh at them.

I found him alone, in a bar. When Darius was in this sort of mood, nobody else wanted to be around him. But I had managed to convince him, over these past weeks, that I was a true believer, now—one of his chosen few.

‘They’re all cowards!’ he ranted. ‘I sold out to them, and now they’ve turned me into a coward, too. They give you all this money—let it seduce you—and then they use it like a dog, to whip you with.’ His metaphors were mixing up a bit, but I could follow his general thread, nodding in agreement as I bought another round. ‘You think that money’s going to liberate you,’ he went on, ‘but all it does is to take you away from the passion, and purpose, that made you want to create something beautiful in the first place . . .’

I thought of the ending of the play, as he was staging it—with the bloody entrails of the disemboweled Monk and Francesca mixing and embracing on the floor between them. That was Darius’ idea of a love scene.

‘You know, Darius,’ I mused, ‘something that I’ll never forget . . .’ He looked up in irritation—I was only supposed to be there to listen, after all, not contribute to the conversation. But his face lit up when I finished my sentence: ‘. . . that production you directed of *Tylon the Conqueror*.’

‘Yes!’ he enthused. ‘It was brilliant!’ False modesty had never been one of his failings. ‘Now, *that* was theatre!’

It had been the first of the shows I’d seen at the Passion Players, and the only one to make me think this young fellow might actually have some promise. Particularly because of one scene, in which Tylon the Conqueror had strode through a field of battle, delivering a speech of defiance against the gods. Darius had filled the stage with mannequins, styrofoam dummies, which the actor playing Tylon had cut to pieces with his blade.

In many ways, it had been a typical Darius Grant effect—flashy and arresting, and leaving behind a mess for the technical people to clean up afterwards. But there had been real power to the scene, as well, with a true feeling of danger and violence. And you could tell that the sword was real.

‘That’s what I need,’ Darius was saying. ‘Something like that, something to put my *mark* on this production. Show them all who Darius Grant *is!*’

There’s no great trick to manipulating an ego-maniac. All you have to do is praise them constantly, agree with everything they say, and allow them to think that all of the ideas you’ve so carefully led them to were really their own. I even allowed him to ‘persuade’ me that we should operate in secrecy, telling no one else of our plans.

‘Not even Mary Elizabeth?’ I asked.

‘Especially not her!’ he snarled. ‘I want to see real fear on her face, for a change, instead of all that screaming and posturing she puts on. I’ll give

her something to scream about . . .’ Apparently, the bloom had gone off the rose of their romance.

And it was true—you could tell that Mary Elizabeth was getting bored with ingénues. She’d been playing the role with a wink and a smirk, as if to let everyone know what a fool she found Leonora to be. Perhaps all that innocence was simply too far outside the range of her experience now. I’d come to realize, these past months, just how many people she had been sleeping with—practically every straight man in the company, it seemed, plus a few of those who pretended to be, or weren’t sure yet.

Nothing but a whore, indeed.

Darius and I stayed late at the theatre each night, after that, long after everyone else had gone home. People marveled at the change in him—he seemed to be in a much better mood, and had even modified the death scene of Leonora as a gesture of conciliation to the tech people. The way it was being rehearsed now, the Monk would simply stab her, plainly and cleanly, as she was stretched out on a slab in his lair. All our efforts were aimed towards opening night, when the surprise we’d been working on would have the most impact. But then, Lucian O’Connor rang up and said that he would not be able to attend the show, on that particular evening, and he wanted to know—could he come to the dress rehearsal instead?

This is an odious practice, one which I would never allow at any theatre where I was in charge . . . but, in this case, I encouraged Darius to agree, and adjust our plans accordingly. ‘What’s the point of creating a sensation,’ I pointed out to him, ‘if it’s not going to be covered in the press?’ He couldn’t deny the logic of this, and so it was arranged: Lucian would attend the dress rehearsal on Thursday night, with his review appearing Friday morning in the Weekend Arts Section, in time to give publicity to our official opening that night.

Now, since having an audience is a vital part of the theatrical experience, we ‘papered the house’ for the dress rehearsal, inviting friends and family of the cast and crew to see the show for free. Crazy Kathy was also there, with a large party of her drunken friends, and throughout the first half they cheered on the villains, applauding each new display of torture and dismemberment. Their laughter was not altogether inappropriate, because it wasn’t really a serious piece of theatre they were watching—more like a

Halloween fright show, occasionally interrupted by passages of classical poetry.

As was his custom, Lucian began to write his review at intermission, in order to save himself time later. Kathy and her friends loaded up on wine at the lobby bar, and things got even more raucous in the second half.

As the death scene of Leonora approached, I was in my assigned position, waiting in the wings. Mary Elizabeth was being strapped down, onto her sacrificial slab, when Darius rushed backstage to make sure everything was ready. I assured him, in low tones, that the spring mechanisms were working properly, and the blades were sharp.

Going to Mary Elizabeth, he fussed about with her bonds, making sure they were tight. He had insisted that she truly be tied down—so that it would look as though she was genuinely struggling to free herself, he had explained.

‘Get out of here,’ she hissed at him, ‘and let me do my work!’ He replied by grabbing hold of the top front of her gleaming ivory gown and ripping it open—destroying an exquisite piece of needlework which the costume shop had labored over for weeks. She flushed, the pale white flesh of her cleavage showing an angry red against the alabaster fabric—but you could tell that she liked it.

She had no idea what was coming.

Darius returned to the audience and the setting for the Monk’s lair moved out onto the stage, on the giant turntable of which Rosehill Rep is so proud. The entire playing area, both under and above the stage, is a rat’s warren of secret passageways, moveable scenery and trapdoors.

Lights came up on Leonora, pleading for her life in a speech that seemed to grow longer and more unbearably phony each night. The Monk was being portrayed by a pretty young man who’d put some gray in his hair. Darius said that he had cast it this way to increase the sexual tension between him and Francesca—but the two actors couldn’t stand each other, and played their roles like cartoon villains in a late night comedy sketch. So much for the tragic love story George Oakwood had envisioned.

Leonora was on her slab, tilted out towards the audience, so they could see her better as she strained prettily against her bonds. The Monk, who has vowed to kill her, moves downstage as he indulges in a long, conscience-stricken monologue:

And now would I do it

Were it to be that I do it
But should it be that I do it . . .

(He goes on like this for some time—Thomas Centerton was no Shakespeare.)

I pulled the levers and watched the blades descending into place, spaced out around the death-table of Leonora, their purpose all too terribly clear. Mary Elizabeth saw them and, after a moment, began to scream—for real, piercing shrieks of terror that must have awakened any audience members that were dozing from their drafts of intermission wine, and drowning out the words of the pretty-boy Monk, who turned towards her in irritation, outraged by this shameless effort to upstage him. From her booth, the stage manager must have seen it all, as well, and doubtless began to curse the reckless genius of Darius Grant.

A lot of things happened next, and they happened very quickly.

Of all the people who later claimed to have been there that night, no two of them seem to remember it quite the same—like a dream shared by many, but reinterpreted by all, viewed by each through the lens of their own private nightmares.

One moment, the girl in the long pale gown was writhing about on the platform, desperate to escape—and the next, she had been transformed into the still, stark white body of a naked female form, bald and denuded, seen in a stuttering strobe light that turned the image on stage into that of a flickering silent film. And then, the blades came flashing down, one after the other, slicing off first her arms, then her legs, and finally her head, which rolled and bounced across the stage, as the lights went to black.

And through it all, they say, you could hear her screaming—even as she was cut to pieces, after she had been beheaded—screams, distant and echoing, as if she was crying out from the depths of Hell.

In fact, what they heard was Mary Elizabeth, now beneath the stage, still strapped into her place, and bellowing with all the rage and terror of someone who had—so I'm told—just soiled herself.

The revolving platform had worked perfectly, but what truly made the effect such a masterstroke was that we had made no attempt to disguise the mannequin, dressing it up with wig or costume. This gave the moment its startling hallucinatory power, an image that would linger on in the

memories—both conscious and unconscious—of all those who saw it that night. Everyone was talking about it, afterwards; no one wanted to go home.

‘The last thing I thought, right before the lights went out, was . . . what’s *wrong* with that woman? What did they *do* to her? I mean, apart from cutting her up and all.’

‘At first, I didn’t know what it was I had just seen—I *still* don’t know! What *was* it?’

A woman, a child, a goddess frozen into ice—an angel, shining bright with heavenly light—everyone had seen something different, like a dozen different dreams for every dozen spectators.

‘And there wasn’t even any *blood* when they cut her up . . .’

More dark visions were provoked, in that one moment, than by all the blood and carnage spattered throughout the rest of the play, each murder realistically rendered in carefully crafted detail.

‘You know, to be honest, I hadn’t even been *liking* the show, all that much, up to that point . . . but it’s like that scene pulled it all together for me, put it into *context*.’

Lucian O’Connor was there, gushing all over himself, and promising Darius a review for the ages. ‘It’ll be in the morning paper, I guarantee it,’ he trumpeted. ‘I’ll even give you the headline: DARIUS GRANT HACKS AND SLASHES HIS WAY INTO THEATRE HISTORY!’

He didn’t know, of course, that it would be the last review he would ever write.

I moved through the crowd, basking in the praise, knowing full well that Darius would take all the credit for himself. Eventually, Mary Elizabeth appeared, trying to stake out her own small claim: ‘Oh, yes,’ I heard her saying, ‘I encouraged Darius to go through with it. He wasn’t sure . . . thought it might be too shocking for some people.’

‘And your screams sounded so *real*,’ one of Kathy’s friends blathered, as if there could be no higher praise.

‘Well,’ the actress answered, ‘I was a bit worried . . . that the platform wouldn’t flip over in time!’ And everyone laughed.

Crazy Kathy was beside herself, promising everyone a full house for the next night. The party seemed to go on for hours, and it was agreed by all that it had been a glorious run-through, which couldn’t possibly have gone any better.

Of course, that had only been the dress rehearsal.

On opening night—as often happens—things didn’t go quite so well.

In fact, from Mary Elizabeth’s point of view, you’d have to say it was rather a catastrophe.

The horrified scandal which swept through the city did wonders to blow away the cobwebs from our musty reputation. Tickets sales skyrocketed, and since then our subscription base has nearly tripled. There truly is no such thing as bad publicity.

Under the restored leadership of Maynard Oppenheimer, we have returned to the top of our profession. There’s even a rumor going about that we’ll soon be winning a Tony Award for Best Regional Theatre.

Oddly enough, from his prison cell, Darius Grant continues to claim sole responsibility for everything that happened . . . it just never seems to occur to him that anyone else might ever have had an original thought. In his tedious would-be bestseller, *Mea Culpa*, my name is not even mentioned, once.

But I don’t care about that. As I’ve said before, it doesn’t matter where an idea comes from . . . so long as it’s a good one.

And I’m content just to be a member of the ensemble.

MEMORYVILLE BLUES

JOHN GRANT

'Considering that I have, for some time, been engaged in researching and writing a pretty massive encyclopaedia of film noir,' Mr. Grant explains, 'it's understandable—even inevitable—that this interest has been leaking into my fiction.' *'Memoryville Blues'* thus belongs to a sort of informal fantasy/noir group that includes also *'Lives'* (in Ellen Datlow's *Inferno*, 2007), *'Will the Real Veronica LeBarr Please Stand Down?'* (in *Postscripts* #16, 2008), *The City in These Pages* (a novella which we published back in 2008), *'Breaking Laws'* (in Vera Nazarian's *Sky Whales and Other Wonders*, 2009), *'The Life Business'* (in Gerard Brennan's and Mike Stone's *Requiems for the Departed*) and *The Lonely Hunter* (published by PS), with a couple of others as yet unpublished. *'Several of these tales,'* the author reflects, *'might have been called urban fantasy until a few years ago, when that term seemed to come to mean merely ersatz Philip Marlowe with added vampires or zombies. "Memoryville Blues" was born out of an irritation with that situation; it's an attempt to create an urban fantasy in which the urbs itself is the supernatural entity.'*

AN ETERNITY OF BIG SNOWFLAKES FLOATING SILENTLY through dark gray air to the ground as if that's only one of the directions they could choose to fall. For the first time in my life I feel as if I'm stuck inside one of those souvenir balls you buy to prove to the folks at home you've been somewhere—somewhere it snows, even if it never does. Beneath me, the truck wheels have already jolted three or four times and made that odd, heavy grinding noise they make to warn you that sooner or later they're going to lose traction altogether. I lean forward and wipe

the windshield with the back of my sleeve, as if the snow were on the inside. I haven't seen anything else but a couple of plows on the freeway in the past half-hour. The speedometer in front of me hasn't broken into double figures for about the same length of time.

And the radio's conked out.

I am not going to make it to my gig in Philly tonight.

Scrabbling on the empty passenger seat to my right, I find my cell. A signal at last. I thumb Redial.

Someone's playing maracas on the line, but I get through anyway.

'Who'd you say you are?'

'Benny. Benny McAlligan.'

'Ah. Ya. Right, Benny. Lookin' forward to ya gig tonight, man.'

'Well, you see, thing is . . .'

I explain about the blizzard. He's unhappy, and a bit suspicious; apparently the sun's shining at the tail end of a perfect September afternoon in Philly. But maybe in the end my earnestness, and maybe the squeak-grunt squeak-grunt squeak-grunt of the wipers behind my voice, persuades him I really am stuck in weather somewhere. And why the hell should he care, anyway? His bar can have an open-mic night instead of me and likely sell three times as much beer. It's not as if anyone's going to slit their wrists because they missed a Benny McAlligan gig.

Me included.

Two albums on Columbia, the first of them, *New City Troubadour*, neatly timed to welcome the end of the fashion for singer-songwriters, the second, *Lemon Street Okie*, coming after The Flaming Ghoulies had transformed the rock scene and put a stake through the already barely beating heart of that singer-songwriter fashion, and released only because some junior executive somewhere within the organization had forgotten to cancel the contract. Both LPs disappeared without trace fairly quickly, even though the 'Village Blues' single off *New City Troubadour* spent about a millisecond in the Top 100 and Russ Kunkel played on *Lemon Street Okie*. A third album, *Cerne*, came out on the Scrubbadubba label—no, you've never heard of Scrubbadubba Records, screw your eyes up in faux-scouring of memory cells as you might—and was probably the main cause of that label's rapid demise, although I'm told *Cerne* now does quite well in the nostalgic illegal download market. I like to think of it as my autobiographical album. The songs are made up of tales of my life and loves, sung from the heart—as only Benny McAlligan could sing them',

the press release said. The cover is a photograph of that big chalk giant guy on a hillside somewhere in England, only the folks at Scrubbadubba chickened out of showing him the way he really is and put a cheery Hawaiian loincloth on him. Do they have loincloths in Hawaii? Hey, that's the music biz.

But the one-time existence of those albums allows the kind of dives that book me today to put 'Columbia Recording Artist' on their ads and bills, so the LPs bring me work I might otherwise not be getting. I bootleg cassette copies to sell to the audience after gigs, and sometimes I even sell a few. Maybe I'll get me a CD burner soon and move myself into the digital age like all the other aging minstrel boys on the road—whoo-ee!

Not that I need the money.

Thank you, Grandpa McAlligan, somewhere they can't find you.

But I do need the touring, so I here I am with my guitars and my clothes and the tools of my trade in the back of the truck, and no plans to be home until spring.

I didn't plan to be in the middle of a blizzard fifty miles out of Philly, either.

A plow honks in companionable greeting as it ponderously pulls past me, throwing a wave of slush onto the central meridian, and its headlights, more powerful than mine, reveal something new in the porridgy sky ahead of me. It's a direction sign, and for a miracle it's clear of snow.

Exits 38A-38D. 1 mile. Memoryville.

I never heard of Memoryville, but it must be some size of a place if it's got four exits to itself. And the first of those exits is only a mile away, a distance my truck might just about be able to cover if the tires decide they want to keep gripping the road.

Usually I sleep in the back of the truck on my airbed in my sleeping bag. In this weather, though, I think I'll treat myself to a warm night in a motel bed.

A woman, if I can find one.

Coming into Memoryville, I wonder for a few minutes if there's been some mistake and I've found my way to Philly after all. This isn't just some anonymous wayside township but a decent-scale city, with sprawling supermarkets and drunks in doorways and blocks of offices. The illusion soon passes and it becomes pretty obvious this city isn't

Philly—the architecture’s all wrong, the tenor of the traffic and pedestrians.

The blizzard hasn’t got here yet. I must have driven out of the front of it at about the same time I came off the freeway. There’s no snow in the streets, just slick black asphalt, shiny under the streetlights as if from recently fallen rain, with the shop windows’ glow spilling in puddles across it. There isn’t much traffic about, but enough that I have to keep my eyes on the road ahead and only glance at Memoryville’s splendors as I pass them.

City Hall with Lafayette on horseback, guano-spotted sword held high aloft. A branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank, its foyer lit up and the ATMs there lurking like predators. Burger King. Virgin Megastore. Sneaky Peters’ XXXX Video, with its intriguingly placed apostrophe: slyness or illiteracy? Mobil. Taco Bell. Coldwell Banker.

Darkness.

Dumpster Alley.

Hooker City.

More darkness.

I’ve weaved my way all through the center of Memoryville and out the other side before realizing I’ve done so. No, this definitely ain’t Philadelphia.

I’m getting to the outskirts when I see the combination I want: right next to Wan Chow’s Chinese and Traditional Diner with the reassuring Coors sign in the window (it’s not that I want the Coors, you understand, but at least now I know I can get myself a drink) is the Beds-R-Us Hotel, which—I can see through my steaming-up windows—has a restaurant of its own.

Yes, okay, let me rephrase that, striving for a higher degree of scientific accuracy.

A ‘restaurant’ of its own.

But, what the hell, I now have a choice of cuisines.

I swing the truck into the Beds-R-Us’s courtyard.

‘Chalet number thirteen is empty, sir. What card do you want to use?’

‘Cash.’

‘Cash?’

He’s nineteen going on fifty. Masturbation has a lot to answer for.

‘Cash,’ I say. ‘You know, that funny folding green stuff.’

‘I don’t know I can—’

‘Sure you can. It’s what this great Union of ours was built on, from sea to shining sea.’

‘But—’

I riffle a thick slab of bills at him, and finally he nods, acne a-jiggle. ‘I guess I’ve got your license plates, mister.’

We both look through the glass doors of the Beds-R-Us Hotel at the front of my truck, not more than a few feet beyond them, and I read off the numbers and letters for him to copy down while at the same time I’m counting out a little heap of money. Another clerk in another suburb might have wondered why it was I had to read my truck’s numbers rather than just reel them off from memory, but not this one. There’s a television getting to the end of a commercial break in the little office behind the counter, and while he’s checking my driver’s license to make sure I’m really me—which, technically speaking, I’m not—with the other half of his attention he’s trying to see round the elbow of corridor between him and the set.

‘That’s fine, Mr., ah, Cronin,’ he says, glancing at where I’ve signed. He gives the dough a quick count, passes me a pair of keys.

‘Chalet thirteen, out there, turn right, across the way.’ His voice becomes mechanical as he recites the rest of the drill. ‘Checkout’s eleven. The other key’s in case you need to get into the main building after the office is closed. Ice and soda in the machines at every corner of the courtyard. The managers and staff of the Beds-R-Us Hotel Group hope you have a happy and comfortable stay with us.’

I offer him a grin, duck away towards the door.

‘Say,’ I ask him over my shoulder, enjoying the look of consternation on his face as this goddam guest delays him yet longer from his TV show.

‘Yes, mister?’

‘How come I never heard of Memoryville before? It’s a big enough place and I travel a lot.’

He shrugs, as if it’s a stupid damn’ question. In fact, of course, it *is*, now I hear it for myself. How’s some poor little teenaged motel clerk supposed to have an explanation for a casual stranger’s ignorance?

‘How’d it get the name?’ I amend. ‘Memoryville.’

This time he grins. Telling me is going to be worth missing a few extra seconds of *C.S.I.* for.

‘You see them two hills on the outside of town?’

‘No. I didn’t see anything. There was a blizzard.’

He looks politely incredulous, but says nothing. Maybe the snow’ll give Memoryville a miss, and he’ll spend the rest of his life wondering why a passing traveler should lie to him about something so mundane.

‘No, I didn’t,’ I repeat, prompting him.

‘Well, you seen them two hills, you’d a guessed why the folks who founded this place in the seventeenth century called it Mammaryville. And then—’

‘And then along came the Victorians,’ I finish for him.

‘You got it in one, mister. That be all?’

I take a quick look at the motel’s own restaurant, decide to try my luck at Wan Chow’s Chinese and Traditional Diner fifty yards and a gastronomic universe away.

I push the door open, walk face-first into a multicolored bead curtain, fight my way through it, find myself looking into the face of a tall, smiling Asian man. With his unlined face and his ungrayed hair, he could be Wan Chow’s son, or Wan Chow himself, or Wan Chow’s father or grandpa. Smiling at my klutziness or in welcome, who knows? Goddam inscrutable Asians.

He bows just enough so you can notice he’s done it, then leads me to a corner table. I’m the only customer.

The waiter goes briefly to behind the bar at the far side of the restaurant and reappears with a glass of water, a paper place mat covered in ads for local businesses, and a cloth with which he wipes the formica surface.

I have a couple of beers with my Mushroom Foo Yung #59 and Egg Roll #17, and pay for everything in cash like before, leaving a standard-sized tip.

Back out on the sidewalk, I look one way and then the other. The thin rain that wet the streets before I arrived in Memoryville is back again. Droplets clinging to my eyebrows become a strange, improperly seen presence, a spectator hiding in an auditorium that, like the clerk’s TV set, is hidden by an elbow of corridor from the lighted stage.

A couple hundred yards along to the left, on the far side of the street, are the lights of a bar.

A bar’s good.

Inside, shaking wetness off the cuffs of my jeans, I sit up at the counter with my elbows set together on the polished dark wood. The beers they have on tap are Budweiser, Budweiser and Budweiser, so I ask for a Budweiser. Like Wan Chow's Chinese and Traditional Diner, where I could have had a Coors but didn't, the place is virtually empty—just me, the barman, the bar, the silent jukebox, the pool table where someone's leaning over to concentrate on a shot that's crucial to her chances of winning the solo game she's playing against herself.

Oh good.

'He didn't turn up?' I say.

She looks across at me, realizing for the first time I've joined her beside the pool table. There's a little sheen of sweat on her upper lip. She sank the shot and so the table's empty. Game over.

'Who?'

I grin, gesturing with my beer as if towards someone who isn't there. 'Whoever you were beating in that game.'

She shrugs, rolls her eyes, grins back at me.

'Oh, him. Lousy pool player, anyway.'

'Need competition?'

'Just friendly?'

'You got it.'

'Okay.'

I feed quarters into the table, then choose myself a cue while she's racking the balls. She has untidy hair that looks a sort of dirty blonde color in the bar's dim lighting. She blinks a lot, and there's a line across the bridge of her nose; it doesn't take a Poirot to work out she normally wears glasses but swaps them for contact lenses when she goes out pool-playing on her own. Black jeans, a cute little rear. Not much of a chest, but that's good too. She has a face that's not pretty until it lights up with her smile. Her teeth are slightly askew, which is why her smile's so fine to watch. She looks like she's been around a bit, knows the ropes, but has managed to cling onto that *something* which old-fashioned people call integrity.

'Aileen,' she says when she has the triangle straightened to her satisfaction, sticking out a hand to me.

'Daniel.'

'Dan?'

'Sometimes. But usually I prefer Daniel.'

She nods, a little sideways tilt of the head, an eyebrow raised. 'Fair enough.'

Aileen breaks, and I watch her rather than what the colored balls are doing. If she and I were characters in a book, she'd be the kind of person I was instinctively attracted to—not just as a possible mate for the night but as a friend. I read enough novels to know this, back in the long ago, enough to know the kind of metaphors I should put into the love songs I sing. But I've never actually felt it, and sometimes I wish I could. How can affection be woven out of nothing more than human breath and human touch? What would it be like really to get to know this woman, this Aileen with her quaint name and her belief that glasses disfigure a face rather than make it complete? Would I discover she snores gently as she sleeps, has a secret addiction to butter pecan ice cream, is allergic to cat fur, phones her mother every weekend to tell her things are just fine, really, when they're not? I have my own journeys of discovery with the women I meet, but they have different destinations than these.

She's solids, I'm stripes. We play. She wins.

She fixes me with a stare through narrowed eyes. 'There wasn't any . . . any *artifice* in that little triumph of mine, was there, mister?'

'No. I wish there had been. You're a better player than I am.'

It's true—the bit about her being the better player. As for the rest, I could care less who won.

I point at the empty table. 'Another? Let me get my revenge?'

Aileen laughs. 'Yeah, sure, and somewhere along the line there'll be the idea, like it's fluttered in out of nowhere, that maybe we should stick a buck or two on each game just to make it a bit more interesting.'

'Nothing like that. You'd clean me out anyway.'

'You sure 'bout that?'

'Yes.'

Suddenly there's a half guilty, half girlish smile. 'It's not my wallet you want to get into, huh?'

'That's the kind of thing.'

We're chuckling together like conspirators.

'I'm not that kind of girl, though.'

Oh yeah? 'Me neither.'

We're giggling again. She allows as I can buy her a beer, so I do, and I get another for myself, too.

Still there's no one else comes into the place, and if I'd stop to think about it I'd find this strange. There are jokes about bars so bad no one ever goes there unless they absolutely have to, but I've never actually found

one like that. Whatever, I don't stop and think about it. I have other things in mind.

She wins the second game, too. After that we go sit at the counter together for a while, moving from beer on to rye (me) and vodka sours (her). When she complains the stools are beginning to seem too vertiginously tall for her, we migrate from the bar to a table. The barman seems not to care if we stay or go. There's a ball game on the TV above the dead jukebox and he watches it with the sound turned off, his hand frozen halfway through the action of wiping off the bar with a towel, his mouth open as if someone stole his bubblegum and he's only just beginning to realize it.

Aileen and I talk about each other. The booze is beginning to hit her, but not so much as you'd notice it unless you were right close up, like I am. I tell her about Daniel K. Cronin, who travels about the country surveying wetlands for the E.P.A., and not about Benny McAlligan, who had two albums out once from Columbia but has succeeded since then only in turning himself into a singer-songwriter who doesn't write songs any more.

Dan Cronin's more believable, anyhow.

I can tell that Aileen's toying in her mind with our banter at the pool table. Well, she's thinking, am I that kind of a girl or not?

Working for the E.P.A. is, as I thought it would be, the kind of thing she likes to hear.

'Where you staying?' she says at last, wrinkling her nose in anticipation of what the answer's going to be.

I point through the wall. 'Where else?'

Giggling: 'They charging you by the hour, or you book a whole night?'

'It seems clean enough.'

Aileen puts a hand on the back of my wrist. It's the first time we've touched except an accidental brush in passing. She laughs another cloud of alcoholic laughter into my face.

'I was only kidding.'

'About . . . ?'

'About the rooms being rented by the hour.'

I segue the conversation into some other subject. The way to catch prey is through subtle advances, not sudden moves that might frighten the target into flight.

I've already learned that Aileen is a librarian—an assistant librarian, in point of fact, a position that appears to allow her additional freedoms in

the area of loathing senior librarians. She'd like to have been a teacher, but there was a youthful marriage she refuses to say anything about which apparently doomed higher career ambitions. Still, she'd like to work with kids in that area of the library, but more often her duties involve ferreting stuff out of the stacks.

'Must be a big library,' I say. 'I didn't realize Memoryville had a library that size.'

'We have the state library here,' she says, giving me an arch everyone-but-a-moron-knows-that look, then starting to chuckle again.

I didn't know. It's not something I've ever sat down and thought about, where the various states' libraries might be, but the fact there should be one here makes it even odder I never heard of Memoryville before the sign came looming up out of the snowfall.

She tells me about some books she's read recently. They're all new novels, so I haven't read them. I gave up on reading novels when I gave up on songwriting.

Off Aileen goes, not for the first time this evening—all that liquor in her and everything—to the ladies' room.

When she reappears, she looks like she's made a decision.

Before she can say anything, I tell her, 'I got some halfway passable eight-year bourbon back at the motel.'

It's a lie.

I don't.

But she says she'll come back to my room anyway and help me drink some of it in case it just evaporates of its own accord.

Outside, the rain has stopped, to be replaced by a faint white mist. Aileen clings to my arm, still giggling, occasionally putting a lot more weight on me than I'm expecting; oh, yes, the booze has hit her where it should.

I pause at the corner before we cross the empty street, waiting for the little green man to pop into existence, and look up at the night sky. No stars, no moon, just a faint opalescence running from one horizon to the other, the way there always is in Memoryville.

Where did that thought come from?

Under the humming eyes of the traffic lights we cross over. While I've been away, the diner has closed for the night: the purple fluorescents

spelling out Wan Chow's Chinese and Traditional Diner have been switched off; the windows are darkened except for nightlights glowing inside warping paper lanterns and, of course, the Coors signs. The office of the Beds-R-Us Hotel has shut down, too—Aileen and I must have flirted in the bar longer than I thought we did. That's good news. There was a stupid fool of a clerk in a motel in Dayton, Ohio, who stayed up later than he was supposed to stay.

Look, honey, I managed not to drop the key while getting the door of Chalet #13 open.

A double bed with a comforter done in that very dark red paisley pattern that convinces you before you even go near it that the cover's going to be a lot heavier than you expect and feel moist without actually feeling damp.

Twin lights, both yellow, one on each side of the bed, both giving off a nervous-seeming light.

I drew the thin curtains before going out, and I put the guitars vertically in their cases in an array along the wall opposite the one that has the door to the bathroom. Clothes remained in their suitcases, for fear of leaving fibers in the cheap, splintery drawers of the cheap, splintery cabinet. The only thing in the nightstand drawer is the little silvery packet of condoms.

As we stand in the doorway, taking in this scene of welcoming bliss, one of the lights flickers and goes out. There's a beautiful symbolism in this that I appreciate but, of course, Aileen does not.

She kicks the door shut behind us with her heel, and is in my arms immediately. Some of the women I harvest come to me willingly, some of them less so, but it's rarely I encounter the urgency Aileen is displaying. Her groin is pressed hard against mine, so I can feel her unshaven mons quite clearly through the two intervening layers of denim. She slams my back against the door, her hands pushing up the flesh under my teeshirt. Her teeth are rammed against mine, her tongue stabbing into me.

After a few seconds of this, I push her away.

'Hey,' I gasp, smiling. 'Take it slower. We got all night, haven't we?'

Neither of us has mentioned the halfway passable eight-year bourbon.

'It's just that I—' she says.

'Me too,' I murmur.

She lowers her head and shakes it, so her hair beats my chest with soft whiplashes. 'I shouldn't be here.'

I reach behind me as if to open the door. Instead, of course, I lock it. 'If you want to—?'

Aileen straightens up, looks me directly in the eyes. ‘No. No, I’m a big girl. I know what I’m doing.’

Then the big girl nods to where the bathroom door stands just a fraction open, with shadow behind it. ‘Let me go, you know, freshen up a bit.’

I grin again. ‘Sure. Be my guest.’

She vanishes behind the closing door.

There’s a shitty little clock radio under the still-functioning bedside light, so I switch it on. Earlier I tuned it to a classics station, but just my luck they’re in the middle of a commercial break. I leave it on anyway, to give Aileen the comforting illusion that I can’t hear her unzipping and pissing.

I wonder how often Aileen’s been to this motel with guys like me. Maybe not this exact room—sorry, chalet—but, since all the chalets are probably identical except for incidental details like the number of cigarette burns on the furniture, that’s a merely academic distinction. It’s certainly not as if she seems ignorant of where everything is. No looking around for the bathroom.

In my pocket I have a guitar B-string, a new one I got out of its packet just after I’d tuned the clock radio, before I set out for Wan Chow’s Chinese and Traditional Diner. I readied it for its task by looping its ends and plaiting the thin wire to make sure the loops will hold. I’ve done this often enough to know where to put the loops almost without thinking; there was a time, years ago, I had to measure. A pair of handkerchiefs go each into one of the loops to protect the skin of my hands. I use women’s handkerchiefs because they’re smaller; that way the assembly doesn’t make such a big lump in my pocket.

Yeah, I’ve thought of the joke a thousand times already. ‘Is that a garrote in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?’

Tomorrow morning I’ll have the painstaking task of *un*plaiting the wire so I can put the string on my guitar. My next gig, every time I put my finger down on the B-string I’ll be able to think of Aileen, and what I did to her, and what she smelled and tasted like as I was doing it to her, and it’ll be a good thing I’ve got the guitar across the front of me.

Talking of which . . .

I quickly slip out of my clothes, put a condom on.

Just as I’m finishing, she runs the water for one last quick spurt, gives it a quick gargle, and clicks the light off.

As she comes out of the bathroom, naked, her clothing in a bundle in her arms, she’s looking towards the bed, clearly expecting me to be waiting

there for her. I'm not the only one who can listen through doors. She must have heard my clothes falling to the floor, or something.

Aileen opens her mouth to say something, but before there's time for even the start of a word my looped B-string has come up and over her head to settle itself on the top of her chest. I pull both ends of the steel string and it tightens around her neck.

I'm behind her, my hardness hard up against her. I'm impatient for the fucking to be over so the true pleasures of the night can begin.

'Don't say a word, little girl.'

She drops her clothes, lifts her hands up instinctively towards where the wire is cutting into the skin of her neck. It's the same move they always make, and of course it's futile.

Her body's shaking.

'Hush, bitchfuck,' I insist, in case she takes it into her head to scream. But it's not with terror she's shaking.

She's laughing.

'Asshole,' she says, very quietly, then carries on with her laughter.

Just then the door to the outside, the door that I took the careful precaution of locking, is thrown open.

Aileen reaches up and with impossible ease pulls the plaited loops of the garrote out of my hands. She walks over to the bed, still sniggering like a pranking schoolgirl, sits down on it, and pulls my bag of tools out from underneath. She undoes the zipper to show all the delicious shininess of tumbled sharp edges within, then tosses the B-string in on top of the rest.

I can't speak. I've forgotten how to.

I'm standing there naked except for a condom on a rapidly shrinking dick as more people cram into the room than can conceivably fit between its four walls.

'Good evening, Mr. McAlligan,' says the guy from Wan Chow's Chinese and Traditional Diner.

As the people come flooding in, so do the memories, the memories that've been firmly locked away in a windowless cell until now.

He has a million names and a million guises, has the man I met tonight as the waiter in the diner. Maybe he's really called Wan Chow, maybe he isn't. I'll never know. He was just collateral damage—just someone who saw something he shouldn't have seen in an alley in, now where was it, in an alley in Providence, and who had to be put out of the way. That was the night I took down the fat redhead—what was her name? Oh, right:

Rosie. Adiposie Rosie, I called her as I fucked her on a gray-sheeted bed while a buzzing, flashing orange light directly outside our window told the world the pair of us were at the Family Fare Motel All Rooms With Cable and Magic Fingers. Adiposie Rosie had a B-string around her neck at the time, naturally, so maybe wasn't enjoying the fuck as much as she should have been, but I was, and as I came I tightened the B-string so the blood began spurting up around her throat like an obscenely animated black necklace in the flickering orange light.

As the wire met bone I watched the fear and the life fade from her eyes while I was still pulsing.

That wasn't the last time I came that night, of course. It took me long hours, as it always did, to process her and package her in black plastic bags that could be taken out to the truck. Adiposie Rosie required one more plastic bag than anyone else had ever done—a datum that made me grin as I drove away from Providence in that pearly time just before the sun begins to rise. Perhaps it was because of the extra bag that Wan Chow, or whatever his name is, saw me; he was an extraneous detail, and it's always hard to remember extraneous details. I couldn't think why I'd chosen her, because normally I don't like my women fat. Every now and then when I'm performing in a gig the whim'll strike me and I'll sing a line different or even a whole new verse, or I'll play with the chords so they're not quite the same as they usually are, and maybe Adiposie Rosie was just one of those improvisations.

I'm two artists, after all. Not just the one the world sees. An artist of the flesh as well as an artist of song.

Was two artists. Was.

'Hiya, Benny,' says Adiposie Rosie now as she passes me. With a crimson-nailed finger she gives the dangling end of my condom a dainty flick. 'Good to see you again.'

The tall, wonderfully beautiful black girl is Becka. I remember her, too. She didn't want to come back to my motel room somewhere out west—Pasadena, perhaps, or San Jose. The only way I was able to lure her there was by pretending I was a dealer in antiquarian books and had some George Gissing first editions in my bag. Once she was in the door of the room she was, of course, history; but her lack of consent meant she didn't give me the satisfaction some of the others had. That was why it was the very next night I took Lyra. Lyra's here too.

They all are.

There are 42 of them, all told—I know because I was always careful to keep accurate count—plus the three male collateral damages: Wan Chow, a spotty young motel clerk I exchanged a few words with in Dayton, Ohio, a facelessly anonymous barman who sold me some beers in Toronto.

No motel room in the world is big enough to hold 46 people without them being jammed together hip-to-hip.

This one is.

This is Chalet #13 at the Beds-R-U's Hotel, in Memoryville.

The first time I found Memoryville—or Memoryville found me—I was in Wyoming, driving to a gig in historic Laramie. I was well out of my usual terrain, and nervous about it. In this part of the world folk who were going out for the evening were generally in search of some Country & Western twang, not slick urban folk about dodging the draft or losing your heart to someone inevitably called Suzanne. I've had some hard times in places like Laramie—once even got beat up after the gig was over because I was so obviously a fag, not having had a dog that died an' all.

Luckily that wasn't a night I'd gone seeking company.

I was maybe an hour short of Laramie and a relaxing crap I'd been putting off for the best part of two hundred miles (check out a Wyoming gas station and you'll know why) when the truck's engine started sounding like it had rocks in it. No one else on the road either direction, of course: just asphalt and red rocks that looked like they'd been formed in jelly molds.

The engine chugalug-chugged to a halt.

I tried a couple times to get it restarted—not even a chugalug, now—then climbed out and opened up the hood to take a look, in an attempt to persuade myself I knew what I was doing. What I saw was a car engine with annoyed-looking steam rising off of it.

The wind moved some blood-red dust around.

I waited, wondering what to do.

The wind moved some *more* blood-red dust around.

There wasn't anyone else for a thousand miles, so far as I could tell, except me and the wind.

The day had been hot up until now, but suddenly there was a coldness came sweeping across the empty landscape. I slammed the hood back down again and wrapped my arms around myself. It was like a thick cloud

had passed across the sun, except there wasn't a cloud in the sky and everywhere was as bright as ever.

I looked at my watch. I was due in Laramie in three hours, three and a half. If a miracle happened I could make it.

And then the miracle *did* happen—well, *a* miracle, anyway.

I began to hear, way in the distance, the whine of an auto engine fighting with the gradient, and soon enough there crept into view over the crest of the hill—the hill I'd driven up myself just five minutes back along the road—an old blue Chevy pickup. As it came closer I saw it was even older than I guessed.

The driver saw me. A hand emerged from the side window and waved at me.

I waved back.

Drawing level, the pickup came to a halt, its engine continuing to idle noisily as if in parody of my own truck's engine's silence.

'You in trouble, stranger?' A big old black guy with thick-rimmed spectacles and a white beard that limned his face like snow clinging to a tree branch.

I shrugged, pointed at my dead truck. 'I need to be in Laramie tonight.'

'Then you have found yourself good fortune, young man, because Laramie is exactly where I'm heading.'

Minutes later we had my truck hooked up behind his and I was riding alongside him on the high, hard seat of the Chevy.

As he drove, he didn't talk a lot, but from time to time he looked over at me and smiled.

I thought he was just being friendly.

We came over yet another crest in the road and were looking down into a valley. At first I didn't register what I was seeing, and didn't think anything of it.

Then I did a double-take. I must have looked like a Marx Brother.

'Where the hell's this?'

This was a medium-sized city, with tall office blocks and early-evening traffic jams beginning to form and a haze in the air to let you know too many people lived here. It certainly wasn't Laramie, which the last time I'd been there had boasted about three buildings of permanent construction while all the rest of the town was dilapidated trailer park.

'That's a good question,' said the big old black guy beside me, except when I glanced at him now I saw he wasn't old any longer, and he wasn't

a guy. Now I put my mind back over the past few minutes, I realized this wasn't a sudden change: it had been happening slowly, increment by even smaller increment. My companion had *flowed* from one state into another.

'Remember me?' said Becca.
The worst thing was, I did.

This first time, the sign at the city boundary is big and white, with lettering in black that welcomes me to Memoryville. Also in black is the drawing at the sign's top left of a cowboy clinging on for dear life to the neck of a bucking bronco. Memoryville is clearly very proud of being a part of Wyoming.

I remember how surprisingly easy it was to overpower Becca, two years ago in San Jose, or maybe it was Pasadena. My brain's telling me it would be just as easy to do the same again, now. But there's another part of me that's put a lock on my actions. Even if I could find the initiative to attack her, my limbs and muscles wouldn't obey my commands.

Somehow we manage to avoid all the nascent traffic jams as Becca drives us in through the center of the city and most of the way back out again, until we come close to a little group of buildings that contains Wan Chow's Chinese and Traditional Diner, and the Beds-R-Us Hotel. A block and a half farther along there's a bar whose name I don't catch.

I've hardly spoken all this time, not since I first set eyes on Memoryville slouching in the valley below, and my driver hasn't at all.

She speaks now, though.

'You want a drink first, Benny, or you'd like to get yourself checked in?'

'This isn't Laramie,' I manage to stutter.

'No,' she says after a moment's consideration. 'No, it isn't. I'm afraid you're not going to get to Laramie for your gig, Benny—not now, not ever. In fact, if you want to know the truth, you've played your last gig. That's it. End of a glowing career and all that shit. Maybe you'll someday be a footnote somewhere in the specialist music press—one of those Where Are They Now? features they use to fill up the bottom of a page. Maybe you won't.'

I look at my hands, curled into fists on my knees. I look out of the pickup at the front of the diner next to the motel. Wan Chow's Chinese and Traditional Diner says the sign above the window. In the window itself

there's another sign, a neon glow telling me I can get a Coors there. Underneath that, a row of tired-seeming paper lanterns. I look at Becka—at least, I look at my companion: I'm still not convinced she's Becka, because I can remember Becka struggling under me as I fucked her and then tightened the guitar string around her throat until she didn't struggle any more. There doesn't seem a lot I can say.

Somehow Becka's not there when I'm fed Mushroom Foo Yung #59 and Egg Roll #17 in Wan Chow's Chinese and Traditional Diner by a guy who seems vaguely familiar, even though I can't recall who he might be or even why I should have had cause to remember him in the first place; but she's there playing pool when I walk into a bar that's deserted except for a barman whose face doesn't register at all and this tall black girl leaning across the pool table.

She beats me at pool.

I tell her my name is Ethan Standers and I'm a dealer in antiquarian books and I'm on a buying trip right now. It's just chance that's brought me here to Memoryville—in fact, now I try hard to think about it, I can't recall exactly how it is I got to Memoryville at all, but I don't tell her that.

'We met somewhere before?' I say to her as I bring another two beers across to the table where we've ended up.

It's the oldest line in the world, of course, but in this instance the question is perfectly genuine. It's as if the two of us were really close sometime, must have been long ago, must have been in a different lifetime because the only people I ever get close to aren't alive afterwards.

'I keep getting this, you know, feeling about you,' I continue as I put the beers down. There's a spreading pool of liquid on the polished wood that looks almost as if someone's peed there.

Very romantic, huh?

Becka giggles. The liquor's beginning to get to her.

'Try another one, buster. You'd met me before, you'd sure as hell remember it.'

She's right. I would.

Later, she comes with me willingly enough to Chalet #13 at the Beds-R-Us Hotel, and at the back of my mind, even as my delight grows at the prospect of what the rest of the night holds, there's this faint worry that this should be so. I file the worry away alongside that vague feeling I had for a while, back in the bar, that I'd met Becka before.

Once the door of Chalet #13's shut behind us, Becka goes into the

bathroom to 'freshen up' and I play with the shitty little clock radio and fish out my B-string and my condom, and get naked.

When Becka comes out of the bathroom, she's naked too.

That's when my nightmares begin, because the room door flies open and a whole herd of people comes trampling in.

And I remember where I met Becka before, and how it was I got here to Memoryville.

Memoryville. It's a place that's wherever they decide it'll be, each evening as I'm fifty miles away from the next in an eternal string of gigs I never reach. I don't think there's a state of the Union it hasn't been in countless times, including Hawaii, and every province of Canada's been accounted for on a thousand nights too, with the possible exception of Newfoundland. Sometimes they take me as far afield as Australia or Britain or France or Japan. Sometimes I can't even identify the country I'm in when I'm driving to the gig I won't play. Most often, though, the city settles itself down on the silent wings of a night predator in some valley in the States, and it's there I arrive unsuspecting soon after.

It's there I book myself into Chalet #13 of the Beds-R-Us Hotel.

Eat at Wan Chow's Chinese and Traditional Diner.

Pick up a pool-playing woman in the bar just down the street.

Get her back to the motel.

Wait naked for her, garrote in my hands, until she emerges from the bathroom.

Put the wire round her neck.

Be like the man on the English hillside with his club and his erection, laughing at a universe that might seek to inhibit him in the exercise of his raw, brute power.

And then be impotent to affect anything as events veer wildly away from the script I've written for the rest of the night, as all of the people I culled during my years of being an artist come into the room.

Their derisive laughter is almost the worst thing I have to endure.

Or so I think at first, until they start to educate me, through pain and torment, mutilation and humiliation, into an understanding of how long eternity can be made to last.

WHAT WE DO

ROBERT REED

Mr. Reed is the author of a recent volume of novellas, lovingly published by PS and including the title piece, Eater-of-Bone. An e-book collection of stories is in the works for later this year, wearing the title The Great Ship. The author is also presently working away at his first official trilogy. The Diamond Trilogy books are set in the universe of Marrow and the Great Ship, and the first volume, The Slayer's Son, is scheduled to be published by Prime Books in 2013.

I CAN'T SAY WHY I WAS HIRED. THREE PEOPLE HAVE TOLD ME three different stories. One colleague claimed an old classmate of mine works in our industry and recommended me. Another promised that the government had some profound Web-dredging software that reads every word being written on-line, and my ruminations caught the machine's attention. But my lover has the highest clearance, and she likes to tell me that someone far above both of us was one of my fans, knew what I accomplished in my former career, and that something about my skills looked rare and useful.

I used to be a games designer, making a good living building dragons and World War III submarines. But the last game did badly, which led to a shouting match with one thin-skinned executive. A few shoves were followed by a long conversation with the police, and after that I had to survive on contract jobs and Food Stamps, right up until being hired by my current employer.

'Who do I thank?' I asked.

My lover smiled, happy to have my interest. 'I won't say.'

‘You don’t know.’

‘I’m not talking.’

‘Is it you?’

That idea made her laugh. ‘Don’t you believe me?’

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘I don’t believe anything I’m told anymore.’

‘Except that I love you.’

‘Well,’ I said. ‘That, of course.’

Whatever the story, I was nearly broke when they contacted me by e-mail and phone, feeling out my interest to do what was termed ‘a very different job’. Some man that I never saw again came to my apartment, asking questions while recording my body language and probably stealing hairs off my brush when he used my toilet. Then I was flown a thousand miles and put through a series of professional and very convincing interviews.

‘But a lot of what we do is for show,’ my boss mentioned when we met. ‘You were hired before you knew you were a candidate, most likely.’

‘Hired by whom?’

He answered by pointing at the chair behind the desk. ‘Sit there, please.’

‘Where do you sit?’ I asked.

‘Here. In the guest’s chair.’ He was enjoying my confusion. ‘No, Mr. Rossan. This is your office. Mine is at the end of the hall.’

I made some thankful sounds. There was no window, but I had space and nice furnishings.

‘Sit,’ he insisted.

So I sat.

And he sat and grinned, then said, ‘Ask.’

‘Ask what?’

He preferred not to say.

‘Nobody’s ever quite told me . . .’ I began.

An eyebrow lifted, proving that I was on the right course.

‘. . . what it is that we do here?’

‘We look for threats, of course.’

‘Threats.’

A nod seemed enough of an answer. Then he waited.

‘You seem to be a private company,’ I said.

‘Are we?’

‘So you do what?’ I asked. ‘Contract work for the CIA or NSA or somebody?’

He shrugged.

I said, 'Threats,' and then, 'You mean terrorists.'

'No.'

I blinked.

'Other companies and government entities chase terrorists.' My boss was and is a fleshy man with an easy charm and a talent for saying nothing in the most profound ways. 'We don't care about traditional terrorists. What we want to focus on are the other enemies lurking out there.'

'Out there?'

A nod.

'Like, what? Aliens?'

He laughed and swept at the air with one hand. 'No, no. Never aliens.'

Good, I thought.

'That's an entirely different division of our company.'

'It is?'

'With experts working on the problem today. Or so I hear.'

'Working on alien threats.'

'Contingencies,' he said.

I tried silence.

'We make contingency studies,' he said. 'An entire industry has emerged, dedicated to searching through what is possible, however unlikely.'

'But we don't do aliens.'

'Never.'

'So what is that we do?'

'Other things.'

I sat and thought. For being a man of power and responsibility, my boss rarely had anywhere to go. We might have sat for hours, judging by his body language.

'Okay,' I said. 'The internet.'

'What about it?'

'It becomes intelligent and tries to take over the world.'

I couldn't tell if the man was pleased or mortified. Either way, he closed his eyes and pressed his lips into an odd smile, and after one good breath said, 'No. There's another company in charge of internet issues. We are different.'

'Different.'

'We're paid and paid well to chase other hazards.'

'Such as?'

‘I won’t say.’

‘Because it’s classified?’

‘No. It’s because if we define our categories—if we give meaning and direction to our program—we’ll find ourselves narrowed. Constrained.’

‘Good to know.’

‘We aren’t interested in aliens or self-aware computers. And unless you have an unusual perspective, don’t bother with global warming or bioweapons.’

‘Why not?’

He shrugged and shook his head, settling into pure disappointment. ‘You don’t understand. Think large. Think different. Think on your own, and when you have enough material and a rationale, write a paper on the subject. Then send it up the hall to me.’

‘But not one of the obvious problems,’ I said.

‘Never.’

‘Because other people are doing that work.’

Once more, I had failed him. Shaking his head, he said, ‘No, no. You really have missed the point.’

‘Which is?’

‘If a threat feels real, if it possesses mass and substance, somebody might actually read our work.’

I opened my mouth, and then I shut it again.

‘We don’t want to be read,’ my boss assured me. ‘What we want is to build is a library worthy of our mission.’

‘And what is our mission?’

‘Having desks,’ he said, suddenly rising from the guest chair. ‘And a paycheck. And all the rest that comes from this windfall.’

This windfall included a single-story office building that began life as a discount department store. But the store was too far from the arterial, hidden among little offices and ordinary homes, and it failed. New owners added windows and interior walls, creating a maze of offices and meeting rooms rented to a succession of businesses with nothing in common but their inevitable collapse. At least that was the legend that passed for history. My employers bought every square foot of asphalt and cheap sheetrock. With a little less noise than a moon launch, workers reinforced the walls and replaced window glass with armored panes, and the corpo-

rate fortification was filled with optical cable and servers and state-of-art security systems. Our cover story was that we were an information service provider, unless we were one branch of an insurance conglomerate. Or we helped banks master the flow of money across the world. I was offered several lies; focus has never been our strong suit. Two card keys allowed me to enter the steel door in back. Beefy fellows belonging to no genuine law enforcement agency met me with suspicion and magic wands. It was mysterious and fun, at least for a few days. Government protocols demanded a gauntlet at the beginning and end of the workday, but come break time and lunch most of us left through the lobby, signing names in a ledger that often wore the wrong date at the top of the page. A thriving coffee and sandwich place stood within a stone's throw. One week into my new job, a pretty young barista handed me a tall Guatemalan, and with a little wink asked, 'How are things in the old think tank?'

The old think tank was peculiarly peculiar, but as promised the pay was very good. The only problem was the work itself. I've never been confused for being ambitious, but I imagined myself surrounded by geniuses and finely honed intellects. Winning their admiration seemed important, and my first effort needed to be worthy of congratulations and maybe some hearty slaps on the back, and that's why it took me three weeks to carve one very bad opening paragraph.

My future lover ruled the office next door. I hadn't mentioned my writer's block to anybody, but she showed up on a Friday, dropping into the guest chair. She looked like a teenager, small and too young-faced to belong with the rest of us, yet she was fifteen days older than me. She had tiny breasts and narrow hips, and it took me a very long time to see her as a potential partner.

'Mr. Rossan,' she said.

I replied with her surname, preceded with a raspy 'Ms'.

'How long since you joined us?'

'About a month,' I said.

'It's been exactly twenty workdays, as of five o'clock.' She consulted her smart phone; it was ten minutes till three. 'We have a rule, Mr. Rossan. And believe it or not, this rule matters. One paper has to be logged every month or you face instant dismissal.'

'I was told . . .' What was I told? 'I thought that was the average output.'

'Average is mandatory,' she said.

I had three paragraphs by then, tightly reasoned, ultimately silly.

‘You need to pound something out,’ she coached.

‘Something?’

‘Don’t do random words. That’s been tried, and the software always picks up on it.’

I didn’t talk.

‘And don’t plagiarize. I don’t care how obscure the source, there’s other programs that’ll find you out.’

‘I wouldn’t cheat,’ I said.

‘And you need this today.’ Then she stood, giving me some last bits of advice. ‘Think about hurting a lot of people, or killing the world entirely. Now write about that, whatever just popped into your head. Two thousand words and let the computer straighten out your grammar.’

‘All right.’

Her smile seemed genuine. ‘I want you as my neighbor, Mr. Rossan.’

‘Well, good,’ I said.

‘There was a man before you,’ she said. ‘He’d sit on the wrong side of this desk, turn his monitor around, and leave his door open, showing everybody what he was researching. Which was porn, mostly.’

‘And that got him dismissed,’ I said.

My assumption won a snort and laugh. ‘In a reasonable world, sure.’

Then she left, and I wrote ten words more than two thousand. The concept was borrowed from countless video games, with a few elaborations and pseudoscience explanations added by me. I shot it to my boss before 4:30, and I wasn’t fired, and before the next month was done, I bought a house and joined two on-line dating services that kept me happily entertained while I wasn’t sitting in my office, discreetly watching pornography.

Five years of employment made me one of the Old Hands in an enterprise that saw little new blood. Few of us were hired because nobody willingly quit. If not for heart attacks and one quiet suicide, our faces wouldn’t have changed at all. There were always rumors of cutbacks and outright cancellations of our contract. Congress and that diffuse, ignorant beast called the Public were suffering buyer’s remorse for the black billions spent in the pursuit of malcontents and ugly nations. Oh, well. I had savings and a nice house and no children to herd through college, and with

upkeep, my electric Lexus would last until I could start milking my Roth. I had a plan and stability, including a durable relationship with that still-girlish co-worker who seemed to genuinely like me.

On a Monday morning, I walked through the steel door.

Neither guard mentioned changes. I don't think they knew anything yet. They called me, 'Mr. Rossan,' and I referred to them by their first names, and after the usual swipes and insulting examinations, I was allowed to finish the walk to my changeless office.

My boss was waiting.

I felt the same as always, but five years hadn't done him any favors. His weight had grown and grown sloppy, the red face promising strokes in some near future. Standing looked like labor, but that's what he was doing when I arrived. He was standing in the middle of my office, staring at my desk. The furniture was waiting for me, but he wasn't. He acted as if he had been plopped down in this place without warning, and hearing me, he wheeled around, surprised to find my face watching him.

We traded silences.

Finally, I said his name and 'Hello'.

He blinked and took one long breath. 'Are you late?' he asked.

'Maybe by a minute.'

'You seem late.' He glanced at his Rolex. 'No, I lost track of time.'

'Mystery solved,' I said.

My face needed a good long study. 'You aren't leaving early today, are you? No doctor visits, that sort of business?'

'None planned. Why?'

'Well, there might be a review coming.'

'A review.'

'Yes.'

'So they're closing us down?' I joked.

Instincts kicked in. 'God, I hope not.' Then he forced out a thick laugh. 'No, it's an impromptu review. People coming out here to take a look at things.'

'Things.'

'Just stay close today. All right?'

I made my most solemn promise, winning my freedom. Then I stepped into my lover's office, discovering that she was definitely late.

I worked until ten-thirty. Which means that I sat at my monitors, trolling for distractions and diversions that could be confused for research. News

has never been my first interest, but there was an odd bulletin about one or several commercial airliners being directed to isolated runways, and the president was canceling some big appearance, and a headline about civil unrest in Minnesota struck me as laughably peculiar. But I didn't read anything past the leads, and when Google News stopped updating, I assumed glitches and closed the window, focusing my full attentions on the newest incarnation of Grand Theft Auto. That was when my still-girlish woman-friend made her belated appearance.

That's when my guts started twisting and aching.

'Mr. Rossan,' she called to me. Her voice was loud and strained, and when our eyes met, she conspicuously looked in a new direction.

'Did you just get in?' I asked.

She said, 'No.'

Our habit was for her to collect me before the morning break, usually carrying an extra coffee.

'Where's my coffee?' I asked.

She looked at her empty hands.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' she said. Normally an expert liar, she laughed nervously and shoved those empty hands behind her back. 'You want coffee?'

'I'd love some.'

'Well, let's go across the street.'

'Best idea of the day,' I said, hoping that my favorite barista was guiding the caffeine ship.

We left together, except she steered me toward the back door instead of the lobby—another sign of profound trouble. The guards sat at their desks, staring only at me and not blinking. I stopped short, asking her, 'What's wrong?'

She didn't try to lie. It was better to look at me pitifully and say nothing.

Nobody else was visible. Office doors were closed, the usual mid-morning wanderers were missing, a strange studious quiet gripped the entire building.

'This is a little weird,' I said, minimizing my impression.

'Honey,' she said. 'There are some people.'

I felt as if I were falling.

A pitiful, aching voice said, 'They need to talk to you.'

'Okay.'

'Out back.'

I didn't respond.

She kept walking, stopping beside the guards. Then she looked back at me, sorry that I hadn't decided to follow.

'What people?' I called out.

She muttered something to the guards.

The two men rose and stepped towards me, each trying to look muscular and impressive. Neither was, but their combined weight and youth drained any hint of fight out of my meat.

'Come with us, Mr. Rossan.'

I don't know which one spoke, but each claimed an arm. We walked to the end of the hallway and my lover opened the door for us, and I thought I was scared. I thought I was genuinely frazzled and anxious, right up until I saw five or six or seven men wearing gas masks, several brandishing pistols while the fellow in front rattled a set of handcuffs.

They didn't have to restrain me. Several of my captors looked for any excuse to punish me with their fists, but one young fellow used a civilized, sober voice, guiding all of us across the street to a little strip mall. Two doors down from the coffee shop was a dentist's office. So important was their mission that the office had been requisitioned, its residents missing. I counted bodies until I lost count. More than a dozen men and women wore masks and gloves and peculiar looking monitors that blinked urgently and occasionally beeped. My first duty was to sit in the dentist's chair and say nothing while various captors passed in and out of the examination room, half of them whispering into sat-phones. My second duty was to do nothing while blood was pulled from fingers and then out of my left arm. Important samples were whisked off. More calls were made, tangles of conflicting orders distilled into a single strategy. The polite youngster stepped to the front, saying, 'Lawrence,' while offering a glove and hand. 'I'm so sorry for the confusion. Let's find a way to make this mess go away.'

A voice of compassion and reason, and I instantly fell under his spell.

'So tell us about your work, Lawrence. What exactly is it that you do for these people?'

These people were my colleagues and friends, but I found myself minimizing the years of idle conversation and shared social occasions. Of course I didn't mention my lover by name. Described by me, my life was

nothing but sitting alone in my lonely office, doing nothing but bloodless analysis of grand trends.

Everybody seemed to listen to that rambling, cowardly description of a life lost.

Then I risked asking, 'What is wrong, exactly?'

'We aren't quite sure,' the youngster confided.

Which caused another person to snort and push him aside. Green eyes stared at me through goggles, and a big abrasive voice said, 'No games. Forget the fucking games. You know what this is.'

'No,' I said.

The eyes shot fire. 'Yes, you do, goddamn it.'

'I don't,' I insisted, turning back to my good cop.

But they weren't playing that traditional game. My new best friend struck me across the face, using an open hand to make a frightful slap. The noise was worse than the sting. I started to tear up, and he said something about growing tired of the lies. Then four or five people were shouting at once. I panicked and with good reason, squirming in the dentist's chair. But somewhere in that misery, it occurred to me that they were in worse shape than I was. I was a novice under pressure. But these were professionals—people who should be poised and cold—and they were at least as scared as I was. I had fallen into a pack of cowards, it seemed, and they were poking and insulting what they saw as the central enemy in a world full of unspeakable hazards.

I cried, begging for explanations.

'Just tell us,' the youngster said.

'Tell you what?'

'Why you wrote it.'

I gasped and said, 'Wrote what?'

He looked at Green Eyes, begging for advice or for permission. Then on his own, he turned back and said, 'That paper.'

'Which paper?'

'The one that matters.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

Green Eyes struck me. This blow was quieter and infinitely more painful, and everybody reacted with stunned surprise. Even my attacker was taken aback by his abrupt violence, staring at knuckles that must have ached, the entire arm shaking as the fear ate away at his disheveled poise.

I hated him for hitting me.

But in the same moment, pain dragged me to a revelation. To the room, I said, 'One of them came true, didn't it? One of my papers is real.'

Nodding, he asked, 'Do you know which one?'

'I have no idea.' An unfortunate giggle trickled out of me. Was it true? Did I really get something right?

They all looked at each other, not at me.

'Which one?' I begged.

Nobody replied.

So I changed my aim, asking, 'How close was I?'

'Very,' Green Eyes conceded.

I focused on that impossibility.

Three different phones began to ring, followed by another half dozen. Suddenly it was just the youngster and Green Eyes in the examination room with me. I glanced at the posters showing tips for good dental care, and I spat blood into the dentist's bowl, and then my two lords gave each other an important look.

The man who had bloodied me said, 'It was your first paper.'

'Oh,' I managed, closing my teary eyes. 'Oh, shit.'

They asked for explanations.

And I started to laugh, if only because this was so glaringly absurd.

They demanded a story.

And I had an absurd story to tell: About my former career and unlikely hiring, my first meeting with my boss and then the helpful advice from a woman in the adjacent office.

They both said her name.

I agreed. 'That's her, yes, my co-worker.'

'Did she tell you what to write?' Green Eyes asked.

I heard myself say, 'Yes,' and then contradicted myself. 'But she didn't point me at any scenario. Nothing specific. Really, she didn't care about my ideas. She just told me to invent some way to kill a lot of people and file my work and go home. Two thousand words a month. That's all they want.'

My explanation was simple and crude, but it had an honest ring. I hoped. I didn't know these men. I didn't have names or ranks, and I could

only guess about the specific training and experience that gave them the tools for this kind of work. But my impression was that they were two bodies unlucky enough to be picked from a limited pool of unwilling candidates. Expecting an ordinary day, they had arrived at their respective jobs to discover chaos. No amount of imagination would have placed them in this particular city, sharing the air with this strange man who gave a banal, utterly reasonable account of events that were nothing but ordinary.

Unhappy with my answer, Green Eyes kicked a trashcan.

But the youngster saw blessings in my story. Turning to his partner, he pointed out, 'If that's true, then this is nothing. This is a coincidence, and he doesn't matter.'

I didn't matter. Couldn't they see that?

'But if it is a coincidence,' Green Eyes said, 'then we're that much farther away from figuring out this nightmare.'

Both men took a moment wrestling with the conundrum. Then Green Eyes announced that he was going to talk to their boss, and he left.

'You know, I wrote that paper five years ago,' I confessed. 'I don't remember the details very well.'

The youngster stared at me, saying nothing.

'Remind me what I wrote,' I said.

And he was tempted. But maybe he hadn't actually read my seminal work, knowing it only as hearsay. Maybe everybody was following some clumsily written script meant to push me into deeper truths. Either way, he said nothing, preferring to stare at the closed door, wishing somebody else would come join us.

Five minutes passed, and the wish was answered. An unmasked man re-entered the room, waving an important piece of paper. 'The son-of-bitch's blood is still clean,' he said.

'Good,' said the youngster. But he kept his mask on.

The unmasked man had green eyes and a familiar voice. 'But we're going to keep him here,' he said. 'You watch him. As soon as we know more, we'll interview him again.'

So that's what this was. An interview.

I spat into the bowl once again. The unmasked man left the room, neglecting to close the door behind him. People were standing in the dentist's hallway. Some had pulled down their masks, while others preferred to sweat. Most were whispering into sat-phones or working with military-band terminals, reading or watching video. Comparing myself to

those faces, I felt calm. Everybody was breathing hard and fast. Not one hand was holding steady. Somebody grabbed Green Eyes as he passed, and pointing at a little screen said, 'Miami.'

Two others pushed their faces to the screen.

The youngster closed the door. He wasn't sure which side of the door he wanted to be on, but he ended up in the little room with me. Looking at my face, he pulled down his mask, holding his breath for a long while. Then he exhaled and cried, leaning back against the closed door.

'What's happening?' I asked.

No response.

'Where did it begin?'

A homely boy with a crooked nose and teeth desperate for braces, he shook his head and said nothing.

'When did it start?' I asked.

And he shrugged, saying, 'I don't know.' Then he spent a full minute thinking about everything, concluding with the words, 'I don't think anybody knows.'

'Probably not,' I said.

He stopped crying. But if the door vanished, he would fall backwards—that's how hard he was leaning against the cheap hollow-core.

People were talking in the hallway

From somewhere near the front door, somebody shouted, 'Fuck this.'

It sounded a little like Green Eyes.

A woman shouted back, 'You're on duty.'

'Not if I quit,' the man said.

I wasn't sure who was talking. But a scuffle definitely broke out. Nothing sounded loud or especially violent, but bodies were pushing against bodies, and at some point the hallway became quiet.

All the while, the homely boy was staring at me.

The dentist's office felt empty. We listened to a car alarm blaring in the distance, and then the alarm vanished, leaving an energized silence.

My boy took an ordinary phone out of his trousers' pocket, touching the screen.

'Dead?' I guessed.

He nodded and put the phone away and looked at his watch. I gave mine a quick study. It was ten minutes after noon, and I wasn't even a little hungry. Stress chemicals lightened my blood and made my mind race. 'So what exactly do you know?' I asked.

He carefully considered my question. Then he said, 'Your blood's clean. Other than that, I don't know much.'

I nodded hopefully.

'I'm not supposed to leave you,' he said.

'But I'm not dangerous,' I promised.

He seemed to accept that verdict. Pulling his weight to his legs, he opened the door and looked for anyone who could give orders. Nobody was visible. He was abandoned, and of course he was angry. I felt sure that we would be leaving. But then he dragged some kind of pistol out of its hidden holster, and after a deep sigh told me, 'Stay here. I'm coming right back.'

'I won't move,' I lied.

And he nodded before shooting me, sticking me in the thigh with a fancy, high-tech dart.

Real tranquilizers work slowly and dangerously. Dart any population with a 'safe' knockout potion, and some portion of your victims will die from complications. I didn't die, although I felt scary-weak going under and ugly-sick coming out again. I managed to drag my numbed leg and cold body into the dentist's lobby before closing my eyes. Then time and life stopped until I awakened, finding vague memories of sirens and shaking earth.

I stood and threw up. I reached the dentist's door and staggered outside and threw up. Despite my expectations, nothing looked too out of place. The mall's parking lot was empty, but according to my watch it was past six in the evening. I shuffled a few feet and threw up for the last time, and then, feeling both better and worse, I finished the trek to the coffee shop. The sign claimed that it was open for business, but the door was locked. Pressing my face to the glass, I saw darkness. Not even the security lights were on. Another prolonged struggle put me at the building's corner, in view of the intersection where dark traffic lights hung over the wreckage of two SUVs, and lying in the street beside them what might or might not have been a big sack of trash.

The power was out, save for inside one building.

Straightening my back, I steered myself toward work. The hour was late enough that I could see the lobby's lights burning. One figure was standing behind the armored glass, watching me through binoculars. I was halfway

across the street when a second man appeared, fumbling with keys before unlocking the door and stepping outside. He waved in my direction. I thought I heard a shout. Then there was a sharp sound that was so crisp and strong that it stole a piece of my ear as it raced past my head.

I collapsed on the street.

The second man began to run toward me, but he was big and slow, and he was wasting breath by shouting at various people to stop whatever it was they were doing.

I obeyed, doing nothing.

My boss knelt beside me. That brief sprint left him gasping. The concern suddenly flowed in the opposite direction. Holding a hand to my bleeding ear, I wondered if the poor fellow was going to have a stroke in the next few moments.

‘We thought you got taken,’ he said.

‘Taken?’

‘They said . . .’ He paused, measuring words and breath. ‘We thought you were with them when they pulled out.’

‘The government people?’

‘Yeah. Yes.’

I said, ‘No,’ and sat up.

My boss was wearing one of the blinking monitors. He didn’t want to be any closer to me. But then a man came up behind him, saying, ‘It’s okay. His blood work came back clean.’

Clean, yes. I was clean.

Green Eyes kneeled, asking, ‘What happened to you?’

In three sentences, I told my story.

‘Who took that shot?’ my boss asked.

‘Not any of my people. It was one of your dumb-ass guards.’

The fat man stood and straightened his back, wishing that he had stayed down. ‘You told me they took Lawrence.’

Green Eyes grabbed me up and put me on my shaky legs. ‘Like I said, my group left the party early. So I guess I don’t know everything, okay?’

The three of us started toward the lobby. A lone siren screamed in the distance. Otherwise it was a beautiful evening, warm with lots of happy birds singing. By the time we arrived, the lobby was jammed with familiar faces. I didn’t see the youngster who sedated me, but the guard who shot my ear made a point of demanding my forgiveness. ‘But I thought you were the first one,’ he said.

‘Well, I’m not,’ I said.

‘Well, I see that now. Sorry.’

Somebody tended to my painful ear. Somebody asked if I wanted anything. I said that I was thirsty, but Green Eyes warned them not to give me too much. I was still trying to detoxify my blood. So the same somebody asked what else I wanted, and I said, ‘To sit.’

Three different chairs were offered.

‘No, in my office,’ I told them. ‘Alone.’

I wasn’t carried, but it felt like being carried. Suddenly I was sitting behind my desk, watching the frozen game on one monitor. Several people were in my office. My boss was at my side, telling me, ‘We’re running on backup power, so we have to be careful how much we use. All right?’

‘All right.’

‘The internet is sporadic,’ he said. ‘The Feds didn’t know what they were dealing with. I guess somebody thought computers were spreading the infection, and they tried to shut the web down. Unless it was something else, of course.’

I put my machinery to sleep, saving juice.

Everybody was staring at me. Green Eyes was standing at the door, and my boss was leaning against my desk, still breathing hard. Nobody was sitting in my guest chair.

‘Where is she?’ I asked.

‘In the building somewhere,’ said my boss.

I sat back in my chair, the room spinning.

‘She feels awful. Just sick. For leading you to them like that.’

‘Get her,’ I said.

Other people started to leave. Everybody looked eager, ready to be the one to bring her back to me.

But she was waiting right outside the door. Crying, she came past Green Eyes and put her hands in front of her stomach, each squeezing the other, and then the fat man thought to say, ‘Maybe we should leave them alone.’

Everybody left, except her and Green Eyes. And he lingered only long enough to tell me, ‘No hard feelings. Glad you’re all right.’

He closed the door.

She held her breath, watching me.

‘Sit,’ I said.

She jumped into the chair.

‘What the hell is happening?’ I asked.

‘Everything you wrote about,’ she said. ‘All of it, down to the last parasitic brain worm.’

I didn’t talk.

She watched me and cried.

I shut my eyes, and the room quit spinning so much.

‘You saw it coming,’ she said.

I guess I had.

‘We’ve gotten provisions and guns,’ she said. ‘We’ve set up firing lanes, and some of us are making fire bombs.’

‘All right,’ I said.

‘Honey?’

I opened my eyes. She was on her knees in front of my desk, hands linked across her sweet scared mouth. ‘Everybody knows what you wrote. Everybody has read your paper, at least once.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’re lucky to have you,’ she said.

I said nothing.

‘What are your orders?’

‘My orders?’

‘What should we do next?’

I didn’t know what they should do next. I didn’t know what I should do. But sitting back in that familiar chair seemed right, and I found myself thinking how life is nothing but a game that you can’t win . . . except for these little moments that sneak up on you, totally unexpected, never lingering long enough to feel real . . .

INDEX OF PLACEBO EFFECTS¹

CAROL GUESS

Ms. Guess's father was a scientist and among his many projects was a co-edited volume titled The Science of the Placebo. 'We were very close,' the author explains, 'and after his death I began studying his research as a way to mourn. Because I'm a storyteller and not scientifically gifted, I was drawn to the strange language of the book rather than to its scientific conclusions. I used the index of the book to craft the story you see here, which I knew belonged with my friends at PS Publishing. Enjoy!' We did, Carol . . . we did.

The project described above led to the author's interest in medical photography, specifically to Frances Glessner Lee's dioramas, 'The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death'. Her eerie artwork became the subject of Ms. Guess's tenth and most recent book, Doll Studies: Forensics (Black Lawrence Press).

analgesia, desire for

AIRPLANES SHOOK THE FENCE BESIDE THE FIELD. A SHAPE appeared outside my window. It wasn't a cell phone tower or a bird's nest gummy with duct tape. It wasn't a stag with a lawn chair stuck to his antlers. The shape was you, returning, after. So long after you'd left I'd stopped looking for signs. Usually I couldn't pace the perimeter of the field without bees flying into my hair. This year the field was ash and the bees were missing. We would live as cockroaches, shiny and scuttling. We would live on Twinkies, skin hardening to shell.

From the start you made me promise not to ask about your other lives. You'd come to me whole, but only in increments. You'd be gone for days and I couldn't ask why. Your visits always began the same way. I'd catch a glimpse of something outside the window. When I opened the curtains, I'd see your face. Sometimes you stood poised to knock, businesslike, as if you were selling something. Sometimes you were panting, as if you'd run a long way.

You had no suitcase, as if I was family and you could borrow what you'd need.

children, as research subjects

You told me a story about wind, how when you were young, wind rattled the room where you slept. You were the oldest of brothers and sisters, so many you couldn't remember their names. Mice slept in the walls of the attic, pink-tipped and garrulous. You never told anyone about your mice because you'd seen the mice in your father's lab. Your room was haunted; no one else wanted it. You covered the nails on the floor with books. One day you saw the ghost, luckless creature everyone else was afraid of. *That's how I learned to read*, you said.

The name I'd been given at birth was not my name. In the hospital I was mistaken for another child, strapped to the wrong wrist with the wrong band. My parents later exchanged one child for another. The pink-and-blue bundles were supposed to be exchanged at the same moment, but for an instant the other couple held both infants. My changeling sibling murmured to me as we passed, leaving behind the only life we'd ever known. We were so good. We never cried, after, afraid for years they'd send us back.

As a child I had small friends. I was small, too, so this didn't matter. One of my friends was imaginary. I held his hand while crossing the street. Now you, and I wondered were you in my head. Was I making you

up so as not to feel lonely. But I still felt lonely inside my invention. That was how I knew you were real.

death, voodoo

Every morning I drank two glasses of water at the kitchen sink. I drank from the juice glasses we'd found at a yard sale. The glasses were clear, with mudflap girls printed on the sides. The mudflap girls were identical, but each glass was chipped in a particular way.

One day one of the mudflap girls decided to change it up. I reached for a glass and instead of a buxom silhouette I saw an Amish girl in a bonnet. I remembered watching buggies shaking, horses shitting on the country roads. My mother bought a quilt at a church sale: vivid, drunken blues and purples. *Broken Star Bow Tie Rolling Stone*. It seemed odd that bright shapes came from such a spare life.

A knock on the door. Two women in long denim skirts, hair coiled in tight buns on their heads. One held a baton and one held a book. The woman with the book was more beautiful than the woman with the baton, but absolutely not my type. Before I could finish assessing their potential for physical beauty, the baton-wielding woman inched forward. She unfolded the baton: a tightly-wound tract, the soft gaze of Jesus like he knew about you.

Morning, and one of the neighbors stopped by with a coffee can. *We're taking up a collection. Replanting trees in the ruined field*. While she spoke she tried to catch a glimpse of the house behind me. I stood in the doorway blocking her view, and came up with three pennies from my jacket pocket. *Here you go*, I said, *first leaf on the tree*. She didn't laugh. She didn't say *Every penny counts*, although my coins were now part of her musical theme.

Later, another knock on the door. It was one of my friends, worried because I hadn't answered his phone calls, voicemails, text messages, instant messages, emails, tweets, express mails, or faxes. We'd never met in person, but I recognized his face from his profile. *What have you been*

up to? I touched his arm. The feeling of skin was not the same as an instant message.

fallacy of the package deal

Floodwaters rose half an inch in the county. Knives clattered and slid off the counter. New milk soured. *Your fault*, I said, *for coming back*. My house was small. My house was tidy. Nothing in my house was out of place until your face floated up to the window and watched. Watching was something we'd done together. Not TV, but something else. There was a place we used to go. Mostly for men but we went there, too. We took turns watching. We took turns being watched. Stage fright smelled of smoke and chemical flowers.

Sometimes, when we both had skirts on, our timing was off because the fabric bunched. It worked best if one of us wore a skirt and the other wore pants, or if one of us wore nothing and the other wore pants, or if one of us wore a skirt and the other wore nothing.

Saucers and cups lined the cupboard over the stove. When we lived together in the blue house, you made me coffee every morning. The stove was gas, so the bottom of the tiny silver pot turned black. You poured my coffee into a china cup. Your coffee always tasted better than anything I drank all day. But it was never enough, and I didn't want you to know. So after you left for work I pulled out my plastic coffee maker. I gulped down half the pot, at least.

It was easy for you to let things go. You'd winnow, detach. You'd learned to hide this, as I'd learned to hide my wanting more. The exception was sex, where what we wanted was equal. This was the thing no one else understood. Sometimes we thought if they could see us together they'd understand. You suggested a film to give to our friends. You called the film *Creature*, which was what you called me. *Why singular?* I asked. *Why not Creatures?* *Fine*, you said, *if that's how you want it*. It turned into a fight on camera, lens wide and startled, a rabbit's red eye.

I didn't want to think about cameras or war. I didn't want to think about *Creatures*. There was a girl who worked in a coffee shop downtown. Her smile was crooked, like one of her teeth. You'd left no way to reach you, birch or black box. *I had a boyfriend once who had a bird, she said, and a girlfriend who had llamas.* I wasn't sure how this was relevant to me. My mice weren't pets or livestock. My mice were just mice, with their own complex lives. She took off her shirt, the color of pine cones. Flooding in the county turned to mudslides. Cows floated face down in mud. Cats clung to red metal rooftops, scrabbling, sliding down to the torrents below.

She wasn't you. I was never confused. Her body came from somewhere else. We lay in the grass along the Fallen Sailors' Promenade. The sea wreck captain wore a shit-speckled raincoat, hands on the wheel, coiled rope at his feet. He knew to go down with his ship if it sank. I wondered what loyalty looked like now. Mozart filtered from the yacht club's bar. At the end of the park lovers stripped in gray light. Past Klein Meats, past dealers on D Street, past crows that had it in for our throats. A policeman slept in an unmarked van while street kids in boas hijacked his tires. On Boxcar Island we walked between stacks, tapping for stowaways who never tapped back. She showed me how to cut barbed wire, scaling the fence beyond range of the lens. Believe me: I wanted to share her with you. Her pack of cigarettes lay flat. She set out for the store to buy another. Hours went by. Then there she was, missing: crooked smile on the back of a milk carton.

Hawthorne effect

One night while we stood almost touching, our backs to the kitchen counter, we heard a sound from beyond the field.

The sound didn't come from the woods, but from the freeway. Smoke plumed past rows of houses and the corner store. Then sirens, as if called by smoke through smoke to reach us. I thought someone had been driving too fast or too slow, the unbearable wait at the stop or red light. In fact, as I learned later, one man said something to another man, or one woman said something to another woman, or one woman said

something to one man. One got out of one's car and walked to the window of another car. One sometimes had trouble controlling one's thoughts and emotions.

*T*ime for supper, yelled the next-door mother. The airplane above crashed into dark trees. Caution tape curled off the fuselage. Strangers in billowy jackets paced the perimeter of the ruined field. From behind the curtains, I heard a knock at my door. Someone from the field had come to ask questions. His pen was chained to a clipboard. *zum zum zum*. As a child I was fluent in German. What remained of this was the Bumblebee song. *zum zum zum* I explained that this was the sound of the engine as it flew too low over skulking trees. After a time he left. What was the sound of the plane, if not the song I remembered from childhood? Why had I confused them? I'd given the wrong answer to the man with the chain. The mice returned with even more mice, burned out of their primary home, the field.

A knock on the door. It was the man with the chain. *We're talking to all the residents on Hemlock*. I explained that although I could see the field from my window, I hadn't intended for the plane to crash. *We're exploring all our options*. This was something you'd said, too. The name of the field was *Field*. It had no name. It was only a place. *The Ruined Field*, people called it, after. The sign was ash, a gash in the earth.

*H*im or me, you said. The man with the chain stood on the stoop. I tried to explain that he was only collecting information for the cameras about The Ruined Field. His pen hung from a silver chain so that no one could steal it, not even you.

incurable patients

*W*hen you filmed my hands you tried to see inside, beyond skin and muscle to the phalanges. You wanted to rattle the tinny carpals. You wanted me to type a word.

It wasn't porn, exactly. It wasn't meant to be watched over and over, sticky with evidence, but once. You told me you'd only watch it once, if I ever left you. But you left me. I don't know what number that translates into. Your favorite number, perhaps. More math.

There was a piano in the room when I arrived. I pulled the bench out from under the piano, but you gestured toward a typewriter in the corner. When I pressed the keys they left indentations, pinprick flowers from the absence of ink.

The blue house we shared went round and round. You knocked out all the walls when we moved in. I'd come home and you'd call from the living room. I'd walk into the living room and you'd call from the kitchen. I'd walk into the kitchen and you'd call from the bedroom. I'd walk into the bedroom and you'd call from the bath.

Occasionally I worked from home, typing words onto the computer. Most of the words I typed were medical: *ulna*, *lunate*, *oblique cord*. While I typed I listened to tapes, strangers' voices floating out of disease. It was my job to transcribe doctors' words. It was someone else's job to read my transcriptions. I had a reputation for being precise, so I was surprised to receive a call from the fact-checker, concerned about errors in my most recent report. Between sentences I'd typed a word out of place. The word was your name, which I couldn't control.

missing data

You wore a watch but the hands didn't move. The battery had long ago died so you wore it as a bracelet, liking the weight at your wrist, drag and pull, the heavy sweep when you gestured. I never wore a watch. I asked others for the time. When I walked into a room with a clock I had trouble keeping my gaze away. I couldn't pay attention to anything but *tock* as the small hand leapt from one line to the next.

Sometimes when we were walking downtown you'd run into someone you knew. You'd chat before introducing me. When the introduction felt like an afterthought, I knew. This was when things changed. When who

owed what came to matter. It wasn't violence that kept us together. But this was what everyone thought, and because this was what everyone thought, they tried to guess which one of us was violent.

To say that I was jealous of your wife or husband would be inaccurate. To begin with, I didn't think you had a husband. There were a few things I knew about you. One was how you liked to be touched. You flirted with men in the most genuine way, such that even people close to you thought you had a boyfriend or a husband. You flirted with men as if you wanted to put a penis in your mouth and then inside you. But this was not what you wanted. Whether you were real or imaginary I knew you hadn't changed your mind about this. I wasn't jealous of your wife. I wanted to spy and steal from her purse. I wanted to put my hand on her clavicle and say *clavicle*. I wanted to press her breasts together. I wanted to open her legs such that opening was an invitation or a question. I knew the answer would be *yes*.

In another country people filled the streets, fists raised in rage and defiance. I tried to talk their walk, strutting around with my hands in the air. You laughed that laugh that mean girls get. We sat at the table with a deck of cards. In another country people died for quiet moments like this: sitting at a table in an affordable rental in a neighborhood ruffled by freeways and trees. *Buy me something expensive, darling*. Sometimes we went shopping. You always talked me down a size. I liked my clothes to hang loosely. The only thing I wanted to cling to my body was water when I washed my hair. The car was a pet with a heart that could be turned on and off. When it was on it purred; when it was off it oozed, and took up asphalt. You sat beside me jostling radio. Religious stations filled the car with desire, coins on our eyes to spend till we died.

What next, you asked. I wasn't sure what you meant. Short-term next, like food or wine? Long-term next, like moving in? Sex was often the answer to your questions, so I said *sex* and watched your face. You smiled as if your face was real. You looked at me as if you'd never left, as if I was a stranger and this was your home. I sat down beside you. After

a time your hand was on my knee. After a time your hand was on my hand. I stood up, and when I sat down again I was straddling your legs. I put my hands on your face. Between us was the same energy we'd always had. Desire was part of it, and something else. Early on I thought we might hurt someone and when we did I wasn't surprised. *I'm married*, you said. I repeated your words back to you. *That's right*. I uncurled my legs from your waist and pulled down my shirt.

What's her name, I asked. Then things got confusing, because we were on the couch and I was straddling you like before. I thought at first maybe I'd dreamed the interlude. Maybe I'd dreamed you married to some nameless girl. I wrapped my legs around your waist. You pushed your hands under my bra and talked to me the way I liked. You gestured toward the kitchen, which was also the bedroom. We lay on the bed and I unzipped your pants and kissed you below the button on your jeans and slid my hand inside your pants and then just to be sure I asked, *Are you still married?*

Yes.

This has to stop now, then. This has to stop. This has to stop and stop and start.

needle freaks

As a child you'd been teased for the ways you were different. After a time the teasing stopped and you became a bully, the thing you'd loathed. Perhaps it should've bothered me that you were a bully, but your bullying wasn't always bad. First, I knew that if anyone ever threatened me—broke through a window while I was sleeping and tried to strangle me; hid in the closet while I was getting dressed and opened the door and stabbed me six times—if, then, you would take care. You would use: teeth bat knife gun. Second, sometimes when what I wanted was for you to force me to do something I wanted to do anyway—that is, to pretend to force me into a choice that was easy to make but carried with it some shame—it was easier to acquiesce because you used the language and gestures of bullying minus actual bullying. Which led to the question: what is bullying, if not language and gestures? But there was

something else. You used the something else when you needed to; for example, when someone cut you off in traffic. With me you didn't mean it when you said *slut* or pushed me into the closet where you bound my mouth.

Maybe you were in the witness protection program. Maybe you were married because you'd always been married, to some man or woman who knew you before. In the shower I sensed something moving behind the curtain. Between the wainscoting and the tub was a tile border. Between the tile and the wainscoting was a gap. Out of the gap crawled the biggest spider I'd ever seen. It scuttled into the sink and down the drain. I thought about chasing the spider with water, but I feared if I killed, I might kill again.

When I was younger I did things to my body and so did you. Most of what I did wasn't visible any longer. The things you did took place outside, on the surface, on your tablet of skin. You never hid these things nor did your friends, who had done some similar and some different things, too. Your friends had track marks and knife scars and bullet wounds and home tattoos. You had calligraphy on your inner thigh, and the lightning scar from a broken bottle. I never asked who broke the glass. One night when I was reading and you were restless, one night you said, as if out of nowhere, *You won't love me anymore when you know what I've done*. I thought of your scar and you told me your secret and then we surprised us as I told you mine.

There are other stories, too. Things you told me not to tell. I wrote them in soap on the walls of the shower, in ink on my arm under my sweater, and on my computer in a file I deleted each day. Someone who knows more about computers than I do told me that nothing is ever really erased. Anything written on a computer can be salvaged later. Maybe I pretended that I didn't know. Maybe I wanted my lists to be found by the right person, although who would that be? There was only us.

neuroendocrine stress response

Lightning struck a car on the bridge. The driver careened into the median, sending other drivers into tinny wrecks while the sky split open. It seemed important to know if you were real. I'd read somewhere that ghosts don't bleed, so I hid a knife in my shirt sleeve. The next time you knocked we could work with the truth.

Except it didn't turn out that way. I pulled a knife on you and you stepped back. *What are you doing?* It was not a question. *I want to know if you're human*, I said. You didn't smile. You didn't say reassuring things. You looked from the blade to my hand to your hand to the blade. I could see you wanted to make a move. In a movie this would've been the moment when your wife entered, pushing herself between us, forcing you to make a choice. But the supporting actress didn't appear. I pulled a knife on you and you stepped back. I stashed the knife in the silverware drawer.

obsessive-compulsive disorder

Lipstick smeared like a hand over a mouth at the end of a robbery when the guards were dead. I lined my lips with *Gentrified Brick*. When I faced my criminal, I faced your face. You made yourself comfortable while I checked the stove. Cleaning followed checking: cordoning off the kitchen, miniature orange construction cones marking off zones. I had to move you from square to square. *Stay there*. You kept crossing boundaries, squishing through suds, until finally the whole damp kitchen was yours.

I was a secret now, ghost furniture to walk around.

On the kitchen table was an envelope. Inside the envelope was a key to my house. Although you were a memory and I couldn't trust you, still I'd grown tired of waiting for shadows to collect outside my window. If you had a key, I wouldn't have to watch all day. I thought you'd be pleased and ruffle my hair. Instead your face pursed its lips. *What's this?* Galaxies of seeds starred the ruined field, but not one seed took root. You stood in the field among so much metal, tilth of a brownfield, and the

smoggiest air. With the heel of your boot you scuffed dirt, then dug. When the hole went deep you buried the key.

quarantine

Sometimes in bed your body disappeared. You were only a face, not even a familiar face but a shadow crossing the wall. When you disappeared I tried to find you, worried that you'd turn up dead. You had strange ways of loving and often loved strangers. Some were pretty and some were not. Like the girl in the fairy tale I snuck out at night into the field and spoke to the dead of the unspeakable. You sent me a letter after you left. I didn't open your letter because you made sense as a ghost. The letter sat on the kitchen table, but I couldn't stop seeing it. Finally I hid it in a cereal box.

The earth tilted and righted itself. I woke with scratches all over my body. Something bound me round my wrists. Through the window beside my bed forsythia squirmed between sill and screen. Green, growing greener. I was its mother. I gnawed at stems and yellow flowers.

When we lived together in the blue house we had a mouse, courtesy of my wall-eyed tabby. At first we thought the mouse was dead, which didn't bother you but bothered me. Then it skittered off into the kitchen, which bothered both of us. It left a slim trail of blood. I fought back sick. I wanted to save it, set it loose in the field. You barricaded the kitchen door. Waged war. When it was over the mouse was very dead and my wall-eyed tabby was frisky. I swore I'd leave you but you left me. It was a windy day. You walked away from the field. When you turned back I watched your face change in sunlight, your eyes adjusting to the hole where I stood.

sham procedures

At the end your friends carried chairs downstairs while I stared out the window at the birds, which weren't back. One of your friends read

from a list while the others searched our closets and drawers. I hadn't remembered that the soup was yours, but it was, I agreed, and it went into a box. The cupboards in the kitchen were small. Your friends lined more boxes until they were full. Soup cans lined the cupboards in rows, while the food I liked was on the floor. Another box from your black-eyed truck. Your friends held the door. Waved goodbye from the porch.

The postman stopped delivering mail with your name.

My parents had trouble choosing my name. Father thought heroes, galaxies, myths. Mother thought quiz shows, perennial flowers. Horses, religion. Towns burned to the ground. In the end, my father named me after an ex. My mother didn't find out until after he died. Then she was weird when I called on the phone, not saying my name, just *Daughter* or *You*.

You changed your name so I couldn't find you. That's the thing about women, always changing their names. I made a list of names you might have liked. Spices and weapons. Lipsticks and knots. I found the list my parents made before I was born and crisscrossed the list with your lipsticks and weapons. Horses, religion. Towns burned to the ground. The two lists of names were exactly the same.

signal detection theory

Cars crashed in waves on the highway beyond the ruined field. A bus split in two over the bascule bridge. Sometimes I caught a glimpse of someone else, a stranger's face in a stolen car. I thought it must be her, the one you left me for over and over. I thought she must be very beautiful, but tinted glass kept her eyes invisible.

Crows stole your key to unlock their babies, babies stolen from other birds. I saw it glinting in a nesting tree. The tree seemed sure of its roots, something I wanted for myself. I hitched my skirt and climbed. With

my skirt bunched around my waist all I was, was reach. Into a forest of branches where scratches rose in swatches, a hound's-tooth pace. I couldn't see tree or key or face. What bit was bird warring over the key. Flying, I fell, skirt in an uproar. You stood laughing at the door.

treatment, abandoned

All the things we do must look, through the cameras overhead, clumsy uncomfortable stupid fake; but all the things we do feel easy innate unstoppable beautiful. I take off my shirt and lean into you. You have an expression on your face I've never seen before and won't see again. The expression is surprise mixed with pleasure. It's very pure, which you're not, and I'm not, either. This is a memory, something that happened long ago, when we lived together in the house with no doors.

Beyond the window something comes into focus. We're outside the range of the cameras for once. The field stretches green and grassy, anchored by oaks and corkscrew willows, purple with lilacs and red with salvia. Kingfishers hover at the edge of the water, slate blue and black, a child's drawing of a pretty bird. I've seen them dive headfirst into the sea, snaring prey below the surface of the wet. I've seen them drop mice from trees, then feast. They nest in sandy burrows, fused toes digging holes to lay their eggs. Sparrows seem dull by comparison, worms no match for the bloodthirsty diet of their brazen relations.

truth-telling

Sometimes I listen for your knock at my door. I'll open the door and you'll touch my arm. We'll walk into the bedroom and turn off the cameras. We'll move through privacy as if we still know how, as if what happens when no one is watching is real.

1. Titles in 'Index of Placebo Effects' come from the index of *The Science of the Placebo*, edited by Harry A. Guess, Arthur Kleinman, John W. Kusek, and Linda W. Engel, BMJ Books, 2002, pages 323-332. Information on kingfishers comes from the Seattle Audubon Society's BirdWeb. Kelli Connell's photography series 'Double Life' provided visual inspiration for this story.

SELECTIONS FROM THE EXPECTANT MOTHER DISINFORMATION HANDBOOK

ROBERT GUFFEY

The author began writing 'Selections from The Expectant Mother Disinformation Handbook' when he discovered, to his considerable surprise, that his girlfriend was pregnant. 'While trying to deal psychologically with the delightful chaos this created in my life,' he recalls, 'I dreamed up the title The Expectant Mother Disinformation Handbook. I immediately envisioned such a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore as being a cross between Jorge Luis Borges's The Book of Imaginary Beings and Ambrose Bierce's The Devil's Dictionary. I then began writing one chapter per day throughout my girlfriend's (later, my wife's) pregnancy. Since the average pregnancy lasts 280 days, there are 280 chapters in the unexpurgated version of the handbook.' Mr. Guffey wrote the final chapter on the day his daughter was born, which is why, he explains, 'this shortened version (a representative sampling of the handbook as a whole) is dedicated to the XX Chromosomes.'

Mr. Guffey's first book of nonfiction, *Cryptoscatology: Conspiracy Theory As Art Form*, was published by TrineDay in May of 2012. His first book of fiction, a collection of novellas entitled *Spies & Saucers*, is forthcoming from . . . where else! PS Publishing, of course, sometime in 2013. Forthcoming short stories include 'The Couch' in Pearl #46 and 'Cryptopolis' in Phantom Drift #2.

ORIGAMI BABY

ACCORDING TO DR. KOGORO OGAWA, NOTED EXPERT IN medical anomalies of Japan, in the year 1866 AD Yoshiko Takiyama

of Usuitoge gave birth to what appeared to be a carefully folded piece of paper in the shape of a rose. To everybody's surprise, that's precisely what it was. Seconds after birth, the origami rose unfolded and bloomed into a paper baby. The baby was just like any other; it certainly cried and fussed like one. Every time it kicked, the baby would make a crinkly sound like somebody crumpling up a newspaper. The mother named her Bara.

Defying all expert prognoses and predictions, Bara went on to live a healthy life for almost five years and would no doubt have continued to do so if the child had not been kidnapped by a greedy carnival owner traveling through Yoshiko's village. Alas, one fateful evening curious patrons snuck into the carnival after dark to get a closer look and drew too close to the child's bed with a lit cigar. Not a single speck of Bara's ashes remains.

We report this curious event in these pages for a good reason: so that all of you reading this will appreciate the advanced medical care of the 21st century. Today's doctors would have detected the true nature of the origami baby within the first trimester, and the parents would have then taken precautions to prevent such a thing from entering our world. God does not approve of preventing a child's birth, except of course when the child represents a 'statistical outlier'¹ with regard to His plans for us.

As Dr. Ogawa himself once wrote, 'Some creatures are for too strange and fragile to live in a world such as ours.'

ONEIROPAEDION (ARTIFICIAL BABIES PART I)

In 1962 Roy Orbison recorded the popular rock song 'Dream Baby' written by a prolific songwriter and dancer named Cindy Walker. The song, far from being just a catchy ditty, was born out of a genuine phenomenon. In 2006, the same year of her death, Walker told an *L.A. Times* reporter that she was inspired to write the song while researching a rare medical condition called *oneirokyesis* by the ancient Greeks. This condition occurs when the mother imagines she's pregnant so strongly that she exhibits all the signs of a genuine pregnancy. Some people think this is the same as *pseudocyesis*, also known as a 'hysterical pregnancy,' in which a woman will exhibit such classic symptoms as morning sickness, amenorrhoea, tender breasts, and weight gain—almost everything associated with pregnancy, in fact, except for the presence of a fetus. The phenomenon

¹ The accepted definition of 'statistical outlier' is as follows: 'In statistics, an 'outlier' is an observation that is numerically distant from the rest of the data.'

under discussion here, however, is radically different from *pseudocyesis*.

In cases such as these the delusion of the woman is even stronger, so much so that she *actually gives birth* to the child at the end of nine months. Such a child will only be revealed to be an *oneiropaedion* when the mother shifts her attention away from the child or leaves his or her vicinity for a great length of time. Some *oneiropaedions* have been known to lead a normal existence until the onset of puberty, or even later, before vanishing into nothingness like a mist. In these cases the mother is often so crushed psychologically that she never recovers from the knowledge that her child didn't even exist in the first place.

Sometimes the sudden death of the mother will also cause the physical dissolution of the child, resulting in a double blow for the remaining family members.

The ancient Greeks considered an *oneiropaedion* to be at best the prank of a mischievous and uncaring demigod or, at worst, the curse of an angry god.

The last verifiable *oneiropaedion*, Mr. Oliver Lerch, was born in 1870 in South Bend, Indiana. On December 24th, 1890, at roughly 10:00 P.M., while fetching a pail of water from a well, Mr. Lerch suddenly returned to the immaterial plane from which he had emerged, never to be seen or heard from again. This strange disappearance occurred in front of several respectable witnesses, including the Reverend Samuel Mallelieu, all of whom were interviewed extensively by local police. Days later, after being accused of foul play by the police, Oliver's mother admitted she was a virgin but never wanted to accept the obvious truth. Subsequent medical examinations confirmed this was the case. This incident is documented in the police records of South Bend, Indiana and still discussed in the town to this day.

DER GOLEM (ARTIFICIAL BABIES PART II)

We, the authors of this handbook, do not recommend the creation of imaginary and/or artificial beings, whether on purpose or by accident. When Man has tried to overstep his God-given boundaries, he has always regretted it. Observe the mythological example of Prometheus, the brash human who was punished eternally by the gods for stealing fire from their domain, or the real-world historical examples of those who have dab-

bled in black magic and the alchemical arts, infamous and tragic personages such as Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezabel, Johann Konrad Dippel and Victor Frankenstein.

Both Dippel and Frankenstein made the mistake of studying the forbidden writings of the ancient Kabbalists who sought the secrets of creating living beings from primordial matter by deciphering hermetic codes they believed were embedded in the Bible. According to the eminent Central American scholar Jorge Luis Borges (in his classic historical text *The Book of Imaginary Beings*), “Golem’ was the name given to the man created by combinations of letters; the words mean, literally, a shapeless or lifeless clod [. . .]. The procedures involved cover some twenty-three folio columns and require knowledge of the ‘alphabets of the 221 gates,’ which must be recited over each of the Golem’s organs. The word *Emet*, which means ‘Truth,’ should be marked on its forehead; to destroy the creature, the first letter must be obliterated, forming the word *met*, whose meaning is ‘death” (112-14).

Alas, this foolproof safeguard did not protect the aforementioned Rabbi Bezebel who, according to the Austrian historian Gustav Meyrink, created a golem from clay in order to take over the menial tasks of his synagogue such as sweeping the floors and making lunch. This artificial being was granted a robotic, pseudo-existence during daylight hours thanks to a magic tablet placed under its tongue. One evening the rabbi failed to remove the tablet and the golem went into an uncontrollable frenzy, maiming and killing many local villagers until the rabbi managed to wrest the tablet from its mouth, returning the creature to its original primordial form.

Borges’s respected colleague, Michael A. Hoffman, president and founder of The Independent History and Research Company, believes the spiritual descendents of Rabbi Bezebel and his ilk repeated the rabbi’s unholy mistakes in 1945 and are even now attempting to extend their transgressive researches further. These descendants, who masquerade as ‘scientists,’ of course . . .

[. . .] teeter on the brink of the synthesis of the darkest dream of the Kabbalists, a marriage frantically sought, between E. coli bacteria from the colon of man, the genome code and the power of computer automata, for the creation of the Golem [. . .]. [A] Kabbalistic substance was inside the giant steel bottle weighing nearly half a million pounds which the U.S.

government placed near 'ground zero,' on July 16, 1945, immediately preceding the first atomic bomb explosion (creation and destruction of primordial matter), at the 'Trinity Site' in New Mexico.

'The U.S. Government has never offered any cogent explanation of exactly what purpose the Golem-proportioned (25 ft. long, 12 ft. in diameter) capsule, custom-fabricated at an eastern steel mill and trucked in at great expense by a 64 wheel trailer, served at the Trinity Site.' (*Secret Societies and Psychological Warfare* 102-08)

But we, dear friends, armed with *true knowledge*, can make an educated guess. What with unchristian, evil powers of a decidedly Hassidic nature weaving their black magic behind the scenes of the U.S. government, we don't need honest common folk such as yourself mirroring such Luciferian follies. If you are, in fact, infertile and are studying this handbook out of an ineffable longing for something you can never possibly attain, please, for the sake of all that's holy, consider adoption instead.

THE MOONCHILD (ARTIFICIAL BABIES PART III)

YET another artificial method for creating a child is that of the Babalon Working, commemorated in a 1929 novel titled *Moonchild* written by the black magician Aleister Crowley and eventually performed by three of his most famous disciples in 1946 in the middle of the Mojave Desert. These three disciples were Jack W. Parsons, L. Ron Hubbard, and Marjorie Cameron.²

The Babalon Working is a complicated method of birth requiring a grueling weekly schedule of magical ceremonies that can last well over a year and culminate in the implantation of an ethereal spirit-being into a woman's otherwise barren womb. This entity, known to occultists as a 'Moonchild,' will then, theoretically, mature into a spiritually-evolved 'demigod' possessed of supernatural powers far greater than any attained by even the most disciplined human yogi or seer. This unique entity, according to Francis King's *The Rites of Modern Occult Magic*, would be considered the incarnation of Babalon, an aspect of 'the mother of the universe.'

2. Parsons was a rocket scientist who created the fuel that propelled America to the moon and was one of the most prominent founders of Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, CA; Hubbard made a name for himself writing pulp science fiction novels in the 1940s and '50s and later founded the Satanic Church of Scientology; and Cameron was a painter, poet and actress whose burnt corpse later starred in Kenneth Anger's 1954 film 'Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome'.

All three participants of the Babalon Working came to bad ends. Recently unclassified documents have revealed that Parsons faked his death in 1952 and literally went underground for the U.S. government, working to back-engineer crashed extraterrestrial spacecraft at the top secret S-4 military base in Nevada until dying of cancer in the mid-nineties; he was a virtual prisoner of the U.S. Government for almost five decades in which time he never once saw the rays of the sun. Hubbard died in 1978 when attacked by an army of red ants in South Africa while searching for gold he'd apparently buried during a previous incarnation as Cecil Rhodes. In late 1953 Cameron was burned at the stake in Mexico by a renegade Catholic priest, who was then expelled from the Roman Catholic Church for his 'crime,' if indeed such an act could be deemed criminal.

THE WOMAN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO A BUILDING

On April 16th, 1999, Mrs. Fiona Naylor of Hoboken, New Jersey thought she was giving birth to quadruplets, but gave birth instead to a three-foot-tall replica of a Bronx brownstone complete with a full load of almost fifty miniature tenants, operable electricity, and all other utilities. According to the little sign on the iron gate outside, no pets or children were allowed inside this building, but nonetheless some of the tenants came readymade with cats hidden inside their bedrooms. The tenants were fully sentient and went about their tiny lives like unemployed homunculi. Most of them spent their days watching TV or arguing passionately with one another. When something would go on the fritz, they would stick their head out the window and complain to Mrs. Naylor, who they perceived to be their omniscient landlord.

At first Mrs. Naylor was devastated by this strange twist of fate. After only a few weeks, however, she seemed to adjust. She placed the brownstone inside the crib her grandmother had given her and decided to care for her fifty-plus tenants (including the cats) as if they were her own children—which, according to all the DNA tests, they were.

Mr. Naylor was so disgusted and ashamed by the media attention that he fled the country and never returned. Mrs. Naylor wasn't too upset. She realized she loved her children more than her husband.

After a flurry of attention from various medical journals, Mrs. Naylor changed her last name back to Yulish (her maiden name), then she and

her children settled down to a relatively normal life. No scientific expert can explain how this anomaly occurred, but Ms. Yulish has gone on record as stating that she doesn't care the least bit about *hows* or *whys*. She says she and her children are content, and that's all that matters. Who are we to disagree?

According to our sources, Ms. Yulish has been dating again. In fact, she has been seeing someone on a fairly regular basis. Who knows? Perhaps there will be more little brownstones in Ms. Yulish's future.

If so, soon she might be able to throw the most unique and liveliest block party in the history of Hoboken, New Jersey.

VEGETATIVE REPRODUCTION

As hard as it is to accept, it's now possible to eliminate the mother from the birth process entirely. Experiments involving what is known as 'vegetative reproduction' have occurred at respectable institutions of learning such as Oxford in England as well as in the private sector. Back in 1988, a misogynistic group of all-male terrorists known as The Wild Boys formed a base of operations in the jungles of North Africa where they practiced this form of reproduction quite regularly. These commandos established secret enclaves from the outskirts of Tangier to the Blue Desert of Silence, but their influence extended far beyond just the African continent.

According to recently declassified CIA documents prepared by an intelligence agent codenamed 'Old Bull Lee': 'The legend of The Wild Boys spread and boys from all over the world ran away to join them. Wild Boys appeared in the mountains of Mexico, the jungles of South America and Southeastern Asia [. . .]. The Wild Boys exchange drugs, weapons, skills on a world-wide network. Some Wild Boy tribes travel constantly taking the best cannabis seeds to the Amazon and bringing back cuttings of the Yage vine for the jungles of Southern Asia and Central Africa [. . .]. A common language based on variable transliteration of a simplified hieroglyphic script is spoken and written by The Wild Boys. In remote dream rest areas the boys fashion these glyphs from wood, metal, stone and pottery.'

According to one highly placed narcotics official who once debriefed President Ronald Reagan on this matter, 'The Wild Boy thing is a cult based on drugs, depravity and violence more dangerous than the hydrogen bomb.'

These Wild Boys were well trained in hand-to-hand combat and had access to advanced technology such as 'gold laser guns' that were, according to one report, capable of shooting highly destructive 'arrows of light.' It's been documented by African journalists that this terrorist group could travel through the trees on prehensile hemorrhoids; other modes of travel included streamlined gliders and, according to the CIA, hi-tech roller skates.

One particular intelligence document states that the group was divided into numerous 'units' for strategic purposes. These units were made up of various Wild Boys such as 'glider boys,' 'naked blowgun boys,' 'slingshot boys,' 'shaman boys,' 'Juju boys,' 'dream boys,' 'weather boys' and the 'silent boys of the Blue Desert.' The vast majority of these guerilla warriors were produced from single cells extracted from the intestines of other boys, genetically engineered to perform specific tasks for the overall group.³

The aforementioned CIA report goes on to say: 'Each [unit] developed special skills and knowledge until it evolved into a humanoid subspecies. One of the more spectacular units is the dreaded Warrior Ants made up of boys who have lost both hands in battle [...].' The Wild Boys were masters of stealth and the only warning of their presence was the 'overpowering odor [of] roses, carbolic soap, gardenias, jasmine, oil of cloves, ambergris and rectal mucus.'

Rumor has it that The Wild Boys insurgency was instrumental in the highly destructive Medical Riots of 1999, also known as 'the week of the Long Scalpels,' which started in the Burn Unit of a midwestern hospital that need not be named here. It is estimated that at least ten thousand doctors, medical bureaucrats and directors of pharmaceutical companies were massacred by The Wild Boys and their sleeper agents during that one week. The Wild Boys and their sympathizers have not been heard from since. Let's hope their ungodly 'vegetative reproduction' techniques have vanished with them.

We here at the offices of *The Expectant Mother Disinformation Handbook* wish to state that we do not approve of The Wild Boys or their treasonous philosophy. If you encounter anyone you suspect of having ties to The Wild Boys, we urge you to contact your local FBI office immediately. This is the phone number for their main office: 714-542-8825.

3. According to the FBI, a Midwestern surgeon named 'Dr. Benway' was involved in the black market trafficking of valuable organs used by The Wild Boys for their illicit experiments, but Benway fled the U.S. before he could be arrested. His whereabouts are unknown. He's currently on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List.

MARCO POLO'S REPORT CONCERNING FAUNA OF THE INNER WORLD

The exact nature of the fauna produced in the womb during pregnancy is open to debate, but the few facts we know are these:

The womb is, as the great Dr. Kogoro Ogawa once said, 'another world unto itself,' populated by its own animal life and sociological structures. Some say there is a central sun that exists inside the womb, giving light and life to a miniature world, the entire purpose of which is to tend to the health of the growing fetus.

In 1284 Marco Polo—through ancient and alchemical sorcery unknown to us—was shrunk by Kublai Khan's court seer to the size of a poppy seed and sent inside the womb of the Khan's pregnant mistress to chart out the topography of this strange inner world. Many of his findings bordered on the fantastic, but we feel compelled to relate them to you now nonetheless.

Upon arriving in this world Messr Polo uncovered a city of towering monoliths called Walandra in which tiny replicas of the Khan's mistress sat quietly behind guarded parapets weaving the Khan's gestating baby from silken spider webs the color of night.

From there he traveled west, over the Bridge of Sighs, to the Unborn Land. There he met all the various future selves the Khan's progeny—both male and female—might one day become.

He briefly dallied on the banks of the River of Blood and rode the backs of the manphibian rodents that slumber deep beneath the coagulating river where they can hibernate for months at a time, eventually producing a rare, protein-rich, clear liquid from their multitudinous tear ducts which the infant will imbibe when he or she at last enters the world without.

He saw the immense man-devouring flowers of Langerhans through a bamboo telescope, but knew enough not to venture too close due to the warning of the All-Frog, an omnipotent, bloated beast that lay on its back atop a throne of miscarried fetuses forever predicting certain doom for the inner world on an hourly basis, his croaking prophecies often escaping through the medulla oblongata and floating upwards into the dreaming brain of the Khan's mistress.

Messr Polo swam with the lamiae of the inner sea, wrestled with the prehistoric reptiles in the Land of Unshadow just beneath the central sun, and scaled the onyx cages within the Arena of Pain, but despite these and other near-misses with death, Polo managed to escape to the outer

world eight months later hidden within a hair follicle of the Khan's newborn baby. The seer practiced his magics, returning Polo to his original size. Polo then related all of what you have learned here today, and so much more. These and other adventures are delineated in far greater detail in Polo's journal *Being the Adventures of Messr Marco Polo in the Inner World of the Womb of Kublai Khan's Lady, the Fair Xanadu Khan*.

THE FETUS WHO SURVIVED HIS MOTHER'S UNTIMELY DEATH

On January 15, 1947, the body of twenty-two year old Elizabeth Short (later to be known as The Black Dahlia) was found in a lot on the corner of 39th and Norton Avenue in the Leimert Park section of Los Angeles. Having been impregnated by Norman Chandler, the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, she naturally became the target of a mob hit. Chandler ordered his henchman Bugsy Siegel to take Short for a little ride that ended with the young woman's body being cut open and her unborn child ripped from her womb. A local secret society of Theosophical magicians led by Manly P. Hall of The Philosophical Society (located at 3910 Los Feliz Blvd. in L.A., not far from the scene of the crime) immediately recognized the occult significance of this blood sacrifice and wished to retrieve the fetus from Siegel, believing it to be infused with magical powers. Funded by a cabal of rabbis located in the Dead Sea Desert, a team of alchemists made up of Hall, John Huston (the director of *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The Man Who Would Be King*, and other classic films), and George Hodel (an influential physician based in L.A. who specialized in sexually transmitted diseases and performed illegal abortions for politicians and prominent businessmen on the side) planned a raid on Siegel's heavily fortified Hill Mansion in Beverly Hills and murdered Siegel on the night of June 20, 1947 with the help of a U.S. Military M1 Carbine provided by their masters in the Middle East. After the dark deed was complete, the trio fled back to the underground vaults beneath The Philosophical Research Society and resurrected the fetus, imbuing it with life once more. Though the magicians wished to manipulate this powerful fetus to take control of the world, they didn't count on the progeny of The Black Dahlia retaining the conscience of his mother and betraying the Society at the last second, foil-

ing their iniquitous plans for world domination. Some say the living fetus still stalks the night-shrouded streets of Los Angeles to this day, avenging the random hurts and mutilations and murders of abused women the city over. They say the thought of his mother is never far from his fetal mind. He can sometimes be seen standing on the corner of 39th and Norton, motionless, contemplating a past forever lost to him and mourning a mother forever out of reach.

IN VITRO PREGNANCY

There have been cases, some of them documented and reported extensively in reputable medical journals, in which one's baby will somehow become pregnant while in the womb. In turn, *that* baby might become pregnant and so on: embryos within embryos, resembling living Russian dolls. *In vitro* pregnancy is believed to be a form of parthenogenesis. How this process can occur within humans is still not known. The condition is rare, however, so new mothers need not worry about it too much. It occurs in only 0.8% of females in North America, 0.14% in South America, 0.15% in Latin America. Only two cases have been reported in the Arctic Circle within the past 100 years. It has never been known to occur with small animals or insects.

CERAMIC BABIES

People who can't have children will go to extreme lengths in order to attain them, even going so far as to create simulacrum. We've already discussed such beings as golems, tulpas, and the like. However, we have not yet discussed the Ceramic Baby of Bluff Park.

On October 25th of 2007 sculptor Matt Wendel, using an esoteric mixture of ceramics and certain hermetic resins found only in the Far East, created a sixteen-foot-tall bright yellow baby that he chose to display in the Ella Reid Rose Garden of the famous Long Beach Museum of Art in Long Beach, California. The Gallery is located on Ocean Boulevard in a historic area that has a world-class—and, therefore, highly *expensive*—view of the Pacific Ocean. Dozens of Craftsmen-era homes face the Museum as well as the exhibit in question, titled by Wendel, simply, *Child*.

A twin of the sculpture, this one colored a bright red, went on display on the very same day at the Werby/Gatov Gallery on the campus of CSU Long Beach only a few miles away. Though the red sculpture elicited no controversy whatsoever, its yellow twin was not so fortunate. The highly conservative residents of the Bluff Park Historic District initiated a petition to have the baby removed due to the fact that it was naked—and therefore ‘offensive.’

In the 11-7-07 edition of *District Magazine* Melinda Rooney, the person who started the petition, was quoted by journalist Theo Douglas as saying, ‘This is a historic neighborhood and it’s totally out of character in a historic neighborhood. It totally offends it. The whole neighborhood is going berserk.’

Meanwhile, seventy-year-old Elizabeth Handley had this to say: ‘Everyone’s interpretation of art is different. That’s what we keep telling ourselves. My opinion is, I don’t like the color. I do believe in art and I believe in this art. But it’s not appropriate for the neighborhood.’

This violent controversy continued to snowball, finally peaking on November 10, 2007. Late in the afternoon, at around 5:00 P.M., the giant yellow baby uprooted itself from its massive square pedestal, kicked its way through the museum’s landscaping, then stomped across Ocean Boulevard during rush hour traffic, miraculously causing no damage to any of the oncoming cars or injuries to the drivers and passengers (though traffic was jammed for awhile as lookie-loos stopped and stared at the sculpture’s sudden rampage).

According to witnesses, the baby crushed Melinda Rooney’s historic house with its right fist, plucked out the crabby woman as if she were a plastic monkey in a barrel, then squeezed her head off and dropped the mutilated body on the front lawn. Seconds later Elizabeth Handley hobbled out of her house with the help of a metal walker in order to see what all the hubbub was about. The child turned its bitter, pained expression on the woman, then slammed its golden foot into her fragile back and squished her into the front lawn with its massive heel until her spine was heard to crack in two by shocked passersby. Several other signers of the petition were ripped to shreds that evening, after which the baby returned to its temporary home on the pedestal located in the luxurious Ella Reid Rose Garden.

The yellow baby was briefly taken into custody by the local police until its red twin uprooted itself from the campus of CSU Long Beach, stomped

across town at around 9:00 p.m., then crashed through the walls of the Long Beach Police Department, releasing its sibling from the massive iron chains in which the law enforcement officers had bound the fussy creature. Though Homeland Security officers stationed at the nearby Long Beach Port, along with brave members of the U.S. Coast Guard, joined forces with local police to halt this rampage, nothing seemed capable of destroying either of the giant infants.

The pair were last seen heading into the Pacific Ocean together at around midnight, hand-in-hand, perhaps intent on finding a quiet place somewhere within the whispering ocean where they could be free to be themselves without worrying about the persecution of little minds and—worse yet—little hearts.

As could be expected, Matt Wendel was questioned by the authorities, but he insisted he had nothing to do with the sudden sentience exhibited by his creations. Some say he programmed the monsters to destroy those who reacted negatively to his art, while others believe that a random electrical storm on the night of November 6th somehow granted the statues a freakish and anomalous simulacrum of human consciousness. Others blame the contents of a mysterious fog that rolled in off the Pacific Ocean only hours before the rampage. Some say the U.S. Navy was testing experimental chemical-biological warfare gases just off the coast that night, that the testing grew out of control and had unforeseen effects. Subsequent attempts by *District Magazine* and other local publications to obtain Freedom of Information records regarding these experiments have, predictably, been denied on the grounds that releasing such documents would threaten National Security. This reticence on the part of the military has fueled the bizarre conspiracy theories that swirl around such mysteries.

Perhaps the truth will never be known about that strange night. All that can be known is this: when you're wide awake at two in the morning wishing you'd never gotten pregnant in the first place, just think about how many people want to have babies and can't . . . people so deranged by their failure to procreate that they turn to forbidden black magicks and hermetic, Luciferian formulae to simulate what only the wisdom of God can grant: the sacred ability to create human life.

Wendel's children, no matter where they are right now, no doubt wish they had been allowed to remain as unformed clay that could neither feel pain nor inflict it so casually upon others.

The moral is the same that Dr. Baron Von Frankenstein and Prometheus before him learned: the Natural way is the Best and Only way.

THE COMPRACHICOS

Beware the Comprachicos, a band of wandering gypsies who plague every corner of this earth. They are not bound to any one particular country. Reports of their iniquities crop up in folklore from continent to continent all throughout recorded history. They are, according to those whose lives have been destroyed by their evil, traders in stolen fetuses and newborn children. It is said that they kidnap women around their thirtieth week of pregnancy and forcibly remove the almost-grown fetuses from the womb in a manner most unspeakable, often leaving the mother to die. These gypsies practice certain unlawful surgical arts, whereby they carve the living flesh of these children and transform them into monstrous clowns and jesters. The children are then accepted as members of the tribe and forced to perform in gypsy carnivals; many of them no doubt grow old and die without ever knowing their true origins or the devastated and loving parents from whom they were stolen. Beware the Comprachicos, ladies. Beware.

THE STRANGE CASE OF THE TRANSPARENCY BABY

One case that came across our desk in the Fall of 1999 was very unorthodox indeed. An English teacher at UC Santa Cruz made a transparency of his child's ultrasound and projected the image on a whiteboard to make a rhetorical point about the significance of visual images in our 'post-postmodern culture.' Inexplicably, while the teacher was lecturing about the work of Jean Baudrillard, the image turned its head to observe the students, then shocked everyone in the room by peeling itself off the whiteboard and willing itself into three dimensions. The image has since gained its own independent life separate from the fetus that spawned it—or, rather, the *image* of the fetus that spawned it. Flesh slowly formed around the sentient image and the child matured like any other newborn infant. Over the years it has grown into a healthy and otherwise normal eight-year-old girl. She has been welcomed by the English teacher and his wife as a proud addition to their family. All their friends and relatives are

under the impression that this ‘transparency’ is a twin of the daughter to whom the teacher’s wife gave birth; the family simply allows everyone to think this for convenience sake. This transparency baby has more than proved its worth to the family. The image has even surpassed her own sister in various unexpected ways. She’s superior in athletics, mathematics, reading comprehension, history and the sciences. In fact, many of her elementary school teachers say she’s one of the brightest and *livieliest* students they’ve ever laid eyes on.

SHAKESPEARE CREATED PREGNANCY

According to the respected literary scholar and historian Harold Bloom, the biological process of pregnancy did not exist in humans until William Shakespeare created it in one of his famous plays circa 1600. The first reference to pregnancy in a Shakespeare play is Act 4, Scene 5 of *Hamlet* (1600). Before that moment, humans had not yet conceived of the notion of procreating via sexual intercourse. Only the legendary bard of Stratford-upon-Avon could dream up such a poetic and yet utilitarian process. Bloom also claims that Caesarean birth was created by Shakespeare for his famous tragedy *Macbeth* in 1603 despite the fact that traditional history states that Julius Caesar, for whom the Caesarean is allegedly named, lived well over 1600 years *before* Shakespeare. Of course, traditional historians don’t understand that Julius Caesar did not exist as a historical figure until Shakespeare created him as the titular character of his famous 1599 tragedy. How Shakespeare’s history could be retroactive is still not known (though it may have something to do with the rarefied field of hyperdimensional physics). Bloom sets forth various theories, each of them eminently reasonable, in his voluminous study published by the Riverhead Books, *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*.

On a related note, reading Shakespeare aloud to your fetus can also reverse breech births. Bloom discovered that the best plays to read aloud for this purpose are as follows: *Love’s Labours Lost* (1595), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595), *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure* (1603), *Macbeth*, and—maybe—*The Tempest* (1610). Bloom is hesitant to include this last play, for various obscure reasons, amongst Shakespeare’s official *pharmacopeia*.

BLACK HOLE SYNDROME

There have only been six reported cases of this syndrome in the last sixty years. In this tragic syndrome a black hole no larger than the head of a pin can form spontaneously within the brain of the infant. Within seconds, the infant will then fold in upon itself and be sucked into the center of the black hole, leaving no trace of itself behind. (Unlike in other rare conditions such as Quantum Singularity Syndrome, however, the parents will indeed remember that the child did exist at one time.) What happens to the child after the black hole has taken him or her is unknown, but eminent physicists like Stephen Hawking have speculated that the infant's body is most likely stretched to infinite lengths before being torn to shreds and ejected into a sea of quantum foam through which his or her pulpy remains will then drift for an indefinite period of time, tumbling into an endless series of different universes, all of them far stranger and younger than our own.

Many great minds helped give birth to this project. *The Expectant Mother Disinformation Handbook's* exhaustive 280 chapters are the product of numerous scientific researchers and over three decades of work. Dozens upon dozens of brilliant obstetricians had their hand in checking and rechecking the facts presented herein. These doctors hail from different religious, philosophical, and cultural backgrounds, but the one trait they have in common is an intense and burning desire to help the women of this world experience stress-free pregnancies devoid of unnecessary complications. Another trait they share is a complete inability to tell a LIE. Though the entries you've read are derived from diverse points of view, not one of them contradicts our basic mission statement: *To tell women the truth about the best ways to bring life into this wonderful and miraculous universe.* Let's pause a moment and pray to the Creator for granting us the greatest gift of all: the Sacred Gift of Life.

Amen, brothers and sisters, amen.

If you have uplifting, pregnancy-related experiences you wish to share with the staff of *The Expectant Mother Disinformation Handbook*, don't hesitate to contact us at expectantmotherdisinformation@gmail.com. Thank you for your time and attention.

BEHIND THE DOORS

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

‘Like many of my tales, this one began life when my thoughts fell on a familiar item—in this case an Advent calendar—and showed me its potential for strangeness. Once I began amassing material for the story I decided that the calendar would be presented by a mathematics teacher as a kind of teaching aid, and a loathsome schoolmaster from my adolescence presented himself as the model. Robinson (“Gobbo”) was a shit who dedicated himself to terrifying pupils, not least with a kidney punch. What he thought this had to do with learning, if indeed he cared, I have no idea. Decades later, having returned to the school for a visit, I came face to face with him. I’ve always regretted not giving him my opinion of him, on behalf of many others of his victims as well. Still, I think that revenge is about the worst reason for writing fiction, and “Behind the Doors” doesn’t seem to me to take revenge so much as look at its effects.’

PS has published a dozen of Mr. Campbell’s books but that’s only because he hasn’t written more in the time we’ve been operating. Paperback editions of several titles (with more to come) have been made available from Drugstore Indian Press, PS’s sister imprint. We strongly urge you to seek them out and give them a try. It’s not without reason that the late Robert Bloch said, ‘Ramsey Campbell has a talent for terror—he knows how to give you nightmares while you’re still awake.’ Very good reason indeed. Better make sure that door’s locked.

AS ADAM RAN TO THE SCHOOL GATES HE CRIED, ‘LOOK WHAT the teacher gave me, grandad.’

It was an advent calendar, too large to fit in his satchel. Each of the little

cardboard doors had the same jolly bearded countenance, with a bigger one for Christmas Day. 'Well,' Summers said as the mid-December air turned his breath pale, 'that's a bit late.'

The ten-year-old's small plump face flushed while his eyes grew wider and moister. 'He gave me it because I did best in the class.'

'Then hurrah for you, Adam.' Summers would have ruffled the boy's hair if it hadn't been too clipped to respond. 'Don't scoff all the chocolates you should have had already,' he said as Adam poked at a door with an inky finger. 'We don't want your mum and dad telling me off for letting you spoil your dinner.'

'I was going to give you one,' the boy protested, shoving the calendar under one arm before he tramped across the road.

Summers kept a sigh to himself as he followed Adam into the park opposite Park Junior. He didn't want to upset the boy, especially when he recalled how sensitive he'd been at Adam's age. He caught up with him on the gravel path along an avenue of leafless trees, above which the sky resembled an untrodden snowfield. 'How did you earn the prize, Adam?'

'The maths teacher says I should be called Add 'Em.'

'Ha,' said Summers. 'Who's the witty teacher?'

'Mr Smart,' Adam said and glanced back to see why Summers had fallen behind. 'He's come to our school because Miss Logan's having a baby.'

Summers overtook him beside the playground, a rubbery expanse where swings hung inert above abandoned cans of lager. 'What else can you tell me about him?'

'I expect he was teaching when you were at school.' With some pride in the observation Adam said, 'He must be as older than you than I'm old.'

'Does he always give his pupils calendars like that?'

'I don't know. Shall I ask him?'

'No, don't do that. Don't mention me, that's to say anything I said.'

'Didn't you ever get one?'

Summers attempted to swallow a sour stale taste. 'Not that I could tell you.'

Adam considered this while his expression grew more sympathetic, and then he said, 'You can have mine if you like.'

Summers was touched by the offer but disconcerted by the prospect. 'I tell you what,' he said, 'you give me that and I'll buy you another.'

He was glad for Adam as soon as the boy handed him the calendar. Even if only the winter day made the cardboard feel cold and damp, the

corners were scuffed and the colours looked faded. The jovial faces were almost as white as their beards, and the floppy red hats had turned so brown that they resembled mounds of earth perched on the heads. Summers thrust the calendar under his arm to avoid handling it further. 'Let's get you home,' he said. Beyond a bowling green torn up by bicycles a Frugo Corner supermarket had replaced a small parade of shops that used to face the park. As the automatic doors let out the thin strains of a carol from the overhead loudspeakers, Summers wondered if it was too late for advent calendars to be on sale. He couldn't bring the date to mind, and trying to add up the spent days of December made his head feel raw. But there were calendars beside the tills, and Adam chose one swarming with creatures from outer space, though Summers was unclear what this had to do with Christmas.

His old house was half a mile away across the suburb. Along the wide quiet streets the trees looked frozen to the sky. He saw Adam to the antique door that Paul and Tina had installed within their stained-glass wrought-iron porch. 'Will you be all right now?'

The boy gave the elderly formula an old-fashioned look. 'I always am,' he reminded Summers and slipped his key into the lock.

The streets narrowed as Summers made his way home. The houses grew shabbier and their doorbells multiplied, while the gardens were occupied by seedy cars and parts of cars. Each floor of the concrete block where he lived was six apartments long, with a view of an identical block. Once Elaine left him he'd found the house too large, and might have given it to his son even if Paul hadn't moved in with a partner.

The apartment was something like halfway along the middle balcony, two doors distant from the only other number with a tail, but Summers knew it by the green door between the red pair. He marched down the hall to the kitchen, where he stopped short of the bin. If the sweets in the calendar weren't past their edible date, why shouldn't he finish them off?

He stood it on the mantelpiece in the main room, beneath Christmas cards pinned to the nondescript wallpaper. As he searched for the first cardboard door he heard an object shift within the calendar, a sound emphasised by the silence of the hi-fi and the television and the empty suite that faced them. At last he located the door in the midst of the haphazard dates and pried it open with a fingernail. The dark chocolate behind the door was shaped like the number. 'One up for me,' he declared, biting it in half.

The sweet wasn't stale after all. He levered the second door open as soon as he found it, remarking 'Two's not for you' as he put the number in his mouth. How many did he mean to see off? He ought to heed the warning he'd given Adam about dinner. 'Three's a crowd,' he commented once he managed to locate the number. That had certainly felt like the case when, having decided that Paul was old enough for her to own up, Elaine had told Summers about the other man. The taste in his mouth was growing bitter yet sickly as well, and any more of it might put him off his dinner. Perhaps it already had, but since taking early retirement he'd gained weight that he could do with losing. There was no point in eating much when he was by himself.

For a while he watched the teachers' channel, which seemed to be the only sign of intelligence on television. An hour or two of folk music on the hi-fi with the sound turned low out of consideration for the neighbours left him readier for bed. He brushed his teeth until the only flavour in his mouth was toothpaste, and then he did his best to be amused by having to count a multitude of Santas in the dark before he could fall asleep.

At least his skull wasn't crawling with thoughts of tomorrow's lessons and more lessons yet to plan, and tests to set, and conflicts to resolve or at any rate address, both among the children and within themselves. However badly he might sleep, he no longer had to set the alarm clock, never mind lying awake for hours before it went off or struggling to doze until it did. Since it was Friday he needn't bother with breakfast; he would be meeting some of his old colleagues from Dockside Primary—and then he realised he'd lost count of the weeks. His friends would be preparing for tonight's Christmas play at the school, and they'd cancelled their usual Friday lunch.

He could still do without breakfast, given the stale sweetish taste in his mouth. He brushed his teeth at length and used mouthwash before swallowing his various pills. Once he was dressed heavily enough to switch off the heating he wandered into the living-room to feed himself today's date from the advent calendar. When at last he put his finger on the eighteenth he felt he'd earned a walk in the park.

In spring he'd liked to take his classes to the one near Dockside Primary—to imagine that their minds were budding like the trees. That was before teaching had turned into a business of filling in forms and conforming to prescribed notions as narrow as the boxes on the documents. Now he could think that the children in the schoolyard of Park

Junior were caged not just by the railings but by the educational system. He couldn't see Adam, but if he ventured closer the boy might be embarrassed by his presence. What was Summers doing there at all? The children's uninhibited shouts must prove that Smart was nowhere near.

Summers watched the school until he saw teachers trooping back from lunch, but none of them looked familiar. Once the yard was empty he stood up from the bench. Ambling around the park used up some time, and then he strolled to the Dockside library, where he might have found work if the job had involved fewer numbers. People even older than he was or just as unemployed were reading the papers, and he had to content himself with a tabloid. Perhaps the prose as terse as the bitten-off headlines was all that some people could read. That was a failure of education, like the young and even younger criminals who figured in many of the reports. The paper took him a very few minutes to read, and then he hurried back to the school. He wanted to be there before anyone emerged.

Some teachers did in the midst of the flood of children, but he recognised none of them, and Adam was impatient to question him. 'How many did you have?'

Summers was thrown by the irrational notion that it could have been a problem set by Smart. 'Not as many as you, I expect,' he retorted.

'I just had one and then we had some after dinner.'

'Good boy.' Summers felt a little sly for adding, 'Did your teacher say anything about it?'

'He wanted me to add up all the days till today in my head.'

'Just this month, you mean. And did you?'

'I got it right. He said everyone should be like me.'

'It wouldn't be much of a world if we were all the same, do you think?' Summers sensed that the boy had more to tell. 'Is that all he did?'

'Jimmy was next to top in class but he got the answer wrong.'

'What happened, Adam?'

'Mr Smart gave him a calendar as well but now Jimmy has to give it back.'

'I knew he couldn't change. He's the shit he always was.'

Summers had done his best to lower his voice, but Adam giggled with delight. 'What did you say, grandad?'

'You didn't hear it, and don't tell your parents, all right? There's no need for language like that.'

'I don't mind. Some of the boys in my class say worse, and the girls.'

‘Then they shouldn’t, even about—’ Although Summers had already said too much, his nerves were prompting him. ‘Just so long as your teacher never tries anything like that with you,’ he said. ‘He’ll have me to deal with. I’ve got the calendar.’

‘He won’t, grandad. He says he wishes all the summers were like me.’

Summers recalled Smart’s jokes about his name, but they’d been vicious. ‘So long as you are, Adam,’ he said, and nothing more until they reached the house. ‘I’ll see you all tomorrow,’ he said, which meant once a week.

He brought dinner home from the Donner Burger Pizzeria, and ate nearly half of the fish and some of the chips before thoughts of Smart stole his appetite. He’d prove he deserved to have the prize. He cleared the kitchen table and laid the calendar face up on it. The open doors stood more or less erect, and he totted up their numbers while he looked for the fourth. There it eventually was, and he rewarded himself with the contents as he added to the total in his head and carried on the search. Ten became fifteen, and he swallowed to make room for the five in his mouth. He needn’t eat any more chocolates; he certainly shouldn’t see off however many led to today’s, even if it would feel like saving Adam from any reason to be grateful to the teacher. Twenty-what, twenty-one, twenty-more. . . At the eighth he lost count and had to start again. The relentless glare of the fluorescent tube overhead intensified his sense of sitting an examination, but it was only a mock one. One, three, six, ten. . . This time he progressed as far as the eleventh, and then searching through the numerical maze drove the total out of his head. He did his best to add up the numbers without looking for them, but he’d tallied fewer than many when he found he had to see them. He tried saying them aloud as he found them and repeating the latest total over and over while he searched for the next number, though he had to keep raising his voice to hold the count in his head. At last he arrived at the date and shouted the total, not loud enough to bother the neighbours, he hoped. He was about to feed himself one more sweet when he wondered if he’d arrived at the right answer.

He added all the numbers up again, and the total was even louder than the process. It was a shout of frustration, because the amount was twenty-two less than his previous answer, which couldn’t even mean he’d missed a number out. He tried another count, though his throat was raw with shouting before he came to the end. Figuring out the difference aggravated the headache that was already making his vision throb. The total was nineteen more than the last one, which meant it was three less than he’d

added up in the first place, but why did he need to know any of this? His head felt as if it was hatching numbers, a sensation that exacerbated a greasy sweetish sickness in his mouth. He stumbled to the bathroom to gulp water and splash some on his face. When none of this seemed to help he groped his way into the bedroom, but his thoughts came to bed with him. The year Smart had taken him for mathematics had been one of the worst of his life.

‘I’m here to make you smart like me,’ the teacher had informed the class. ‘If I don’t do it one way I’ll do it another.’ With his plump petulant constantly flushed face he’d resembled an overgrown schoolboy, and he’d revealed a schoolboy’s ingenuity at inventing tortures, tweaking a tuft of hair at the nape of the neck to lift his victim on tiptoe and hold them there until he’d delivered a lecture to them or about them. He’d called his favourite victim Summer because, he’d said in anything but praise, the boy was so singular. Before long Summers had spent every school night lying awake in terror of the next day, but he’d been too ashamed to tell his parents and afraid that any intervention would only make the situation worse. He’d lost count of how often he’d been singled out before the first of December, when Smart asked him to add up the days of the month.

Everyone had found his bewilderment hilarious. He’d had to risk answering at last, and Smart had given him a round of dry applause. When he’d produced an advent calendar from his briefcase Summers had felt encouraged until he was called to the front of the class to find the date. Long before he did, the teacher was declaring ‘Summer means to keep us all here till next summer.’ After that every mathematics lesson began with Summers on his feet to announce the total to date. He’d succeeded for over a week, having lost even more sleep to be sure of the answers, but he’d gone wrong on the ninth and on every school day for the rest of December. He’d still had to find the day’s sweet as he stood on tiptoe, raised ever higher by the agonising drag at his neck, and then he’d had to drop the chocolate into the bin.

His anger at the memory kept him awake. Counting Father Christmases no longer helped, and he tried adding up punches to Smart’s cruel smug face. That was satisfying enough to let Summers doze, only to waken in a rage, having realised that he didn’t need to find the numbers on the calendar to count them. He turned it on its face and listed all the dates in a column on a pad—if he hadn’t felt that mobile phones involved too many numbers he would have had a calculator to use now. He tapped each date

with the pen as he picked his way down the column. A smell of paint threatened to revive his headache, but eventually he had a number to write at the foot of the last row and another to add at the top of the next one. At last he had the full amount, and muttered something like a prayer before adding up the dates again. He did the sum a third time to be certain, and then he rewarded himself with a bath. Three times in a row he'd arrived at the same answer.

He oughtn't to have tried to prove he could repeat the calculation in his head. By the time he succeeded, the water was too cold to stay in. He meant only to glance at the bedside clock to see how soon he ought to leave for Paul's and Tina's, but he was already late. He almost snagged the padding of his jacket with the zip as he hurried out, to be hindered by tins of paint on the balcony. His left-hand neighbour's door had turned green. 'Just brightening the place up for you,' the overalled workman said, sounding rather too much like a nurse in a sickroom.

Summers had scarcely rung the bell in the wrought-iron porch when Adam ran to open the door. 'I said grandad said he was coming.'

Paul emerged in a chef's apron from the kitchen as Tina appeared from the dining-room with an electric corkscrew. 'I didn't mean to keep you waiting,' Summers said.

'Don't give it a thought.' To his wife Paul said, 'I told you he'd never mistake the date.'

'He's just being silly, Teddy,' Tina assured Summers, which only made him wonder what else she'd said about him. 'Take your grandfather's coat, Adam,' she said and blinked at Summers. 'Haven't you been well?'

'Perfectly,' Summers said, feeling too defensive to be truthful. 'What makes you ask?'

'You look as if you could do with feeding,' Paul said.

'You can have one of my chocolates if you like,' said Adam.

'I hope you thanked grandpa for the calendar,' Paul said. 'I never had one at your age.'

'I gave grandad one as well.'

'Poor mite,' Tina said to Paul, and less satirically, 'That was kind of you, Adam.'

'He gave me mine so he could have the one the teacher gave me.'

'I don't think I understand.'

She was gazing at Paul, but Summers felt interrogated. 'Perhaps we could discuss it later,' he said.

‘Adam, you can set the table,’ Tina said as if it were a treat, and gestured the adults into the lounge. Once the door was shut she said ‘What’s the situation?’

‘I shouldn’t really think there is one,’ Summers tried saying.

‘It sounds like one to us,’ Tina said without glancing at Paul. ‘Why did you want Adam’s present?’

‘I just took it off him because it looked a bit ancient. Exactly like his grandfather, you could say.’

‘You mean you binned it.’

Summers might have said so, but suppose Adam learned of it? ‘I didn’t do that, no. I’ve still got most of it.’

‘Most,’ Paul said like some kind of rebuke.

‘I ate a few chocolates.’ Summers felt driven to come up with the number. ‘Five of them,’ he said with an effort. ‘I’m sure they’re nowhere near as good as the ones I gave Adam.’

‘They can’t be so bad,’ Tina said, ‘if you saw five of them off.’

‘All right, it wasn’t only that. I just didn’t want Adam taking anything from that man.’

‘Which man?’ Tina demanded as Paul said even more sharply, ‘Why?’

‘The maths man. I hope he won’t be there much longer. Smart,’ Summers made himself add and wiped his lips. ‘I wouldn’t trust him with a dog, never mind children.’

‘What are you saying?’ Tina cried as Paul opened his mouth.

‘I had him for a year at Adam’s age. It felt like the rest of my life.’ Summers saw he had to be specific so that they wouldn’t imagine worse. ‘He loved hurting people,’ he said.

‘He’d never get away with that these days at school,’ Paul protested.

‘There are more ways than physical. Let’s just hope Adam stays his favourite.’

Tina gave Summers a long look before enquiring, ‘Have you said any of this to Adam?’

‘I wouldn’t put him under any pressure, but I do think you should keep a close eye on the situation.’

‘I thought you said there wasn’t one,’ Tina said and opened the door to the hall. ‘We’ll be discussing it further.’

Summers gathered that he wouldn’t be involved, and couldn’t argue while Adam might hear. He offered to help but was sent into the dining-room, where Tina served him a glass of wine while his son and grandson

brought in dinner. He saw they meant to make him feel at home, but every Saturday he felt as if he'd returned to find the house almost wholly unfamiliar, scattered with a few token items to remind him he'd once lived there—mostly photographs with Elaine in them. At least he could enthuse about Paul's casserole, but this gave Adam an excuse to ask, 'Do you know what it's called, grandad?'

'Adam,' his mother warned him.

'It's not called Adam.' Perhaps the boy was misbehaving because he'd been excluded from the conversation in the lounge. 'It's cock off, Ann,' he said.

'That's very rude,' Tina said, 'and not at all clever.'

'Maybe it's cocker fan.'

'That's rude too.' Apparently in case it wasn't, Tina insisted, 'And silly as well.'

'Then I expect it's cock—'

'Now, Adam, you've already impressed us with your schoolwork,' Summers said as he thought a grandparent should. 'You're an example to us all. You're even one to me.'

'How am I, grandad?'

'I've been doing some sums of my own. I can tell you what the month adds up to so far.' When nobody asked for the answer Summers felt not much better than distrusted, but he'd repeated the amount to himself all the way to the house. 'One hundred and eighty-one,' he said with some defiance.

Adam squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. 'No it isn't, grandad.'

'I'm sure it is, you know.' On the way to growing desperate Summers said, 'Hang on, I've left today out, haven't I?'

'That's not it, grandad. One hundred and ninety, you should have said.'

'I don't think that can be right,' Summers said to the boy's parents as well. 'That's ten times whatever it's ten times, nineteen, isn't it, of course.'

'I should have thought the last thing you'd want to do,' Tina said, 'is undermine his confidence.'

'He's undermining mine,' Summers complained, but not aloud. He was silent while he tried to make the days add up to Adam's total. They either fell short or overshot it, and the need to carry on some sort of conversation didn't help, any more than the drinks during and after the meal did.

The streets were full of numbers—on the doors of houses and the gates, on the front and back of every car and, if they were for sale, in their

windows too. There were just three digits to each registration plate, and he tried to add up each group as it came in sight. He was absurdly grateful to reach home, although the orange lights on the balcony had turned his door and its neighbours identically black. 'Nine,' he repeated, 'nine, nine,' and felt as if he were calling for aid by the time he managed to identify the door.

The advent calendar was still lying on its numbers, and he hoped that would keep them out of his head—but they were only waiting for him to try to sleep, and started awake whenever he did. They got out of bed with him in the morning and followed him into the bath. Couldn't he just add today to Adam's total? That seemed too much like copying an answer in an examination, and in any case he wanted to learn how Adam had arrived at the result. When it continued to elude him he floundered out of the bath.

He did his best to linger over dressing, then listed all the numbers on a new sheet of the pad, pronouncing them aloud to make certain he missed none. Today's date could be added once he'd written down the total. He poked each number with the ballpoint as the amount swelled in his head, only for the pen to hover above the space beneath the line he'd drawn at the foot of the column. He went down the list of figures again and again, jabbing at them until they looked as though they'd contracted a disease. He announced every amount on the way to the total—he might almost have been uttering some kind of Sunday prayer—but none of this was much use. One hundred and seventy-nine, one hundred and ninety-three, one hundred and eighty-seven. . . He hadn't hit upon the same amount twice, let alone the one Adam had told him, when somebody rang the raucous doorbell.

He thought they might have come to complain about his noise, especially once he noticed it was dark. He couldn't leave the table until the sum was done. 'One hundred and ninety,' he said, but that wasn't the whole of the total. 'Seven,' he yelled in a rage, 'one hundred and ninety-seven,' and shoved back his chair to tramp along the hall.

He was preparing to apologise, if hardly to explain, but Tina was outside. 'Well, this is a surprise,' he said. 'Come in.'

'I won't, thanks, Teddy. I just came to tell you—' With a frown that Summers felt was aimed to some extent at him, she turned to say, 'Adam, I told you to wait in the car.'

'I wanted to say goodbye to grandad.'

‘Why,’ Summers said in bewilderment, ‘where’s anybody going?’

‘Adam will be going home with a friend next week.’ Apparently in recompense, Tina added, ‘You’ll still be coming to us for Christmas.’

‘You mean I’m not wanted for picking up Adam from school.’

‘I’ve explained the situation.’

As Summers managed not to retort that he suspected the opposite, Adam said, ‘Grandad, did you go to school when you were a baby?’

‘I wasn’t quite that young. Why do you ask?’

‘Grandma said you were a baby when Mr Smart had you at school.’

Elaine had been in the same class—Summers used to thank their schooldays for bringing them together. Now he was almost too enraged to ask, ‘What else did she say about me?’

‘We won’t talk about it now if you don’t mind,’ Tina said, ‘and I hope it won’t spoil Christmas either. Just say goodbye to your grandfather till then, Adam.’

‘Bye, grandad,’ the boy said. ‘You got something nice from Mr Smart, didn’t you? All the chocolates.’

‘I won’t argue,’ Summers said and watched Tina shoo Adam back to the car. When he returned to the kitchen the clamour of numbers and emotions in his head robbed him of the ability to think. Turning the calendar over didn’t help, especially since every open door had been flattened shut. He stared at however many identical idiotically grinning faces there were, and the pad swarming with diseased amounts, and all at once his mind seemed to clear. Had Tina freed him? Now that he wouldn’t be associated with Adam, surely he could deal with the teacher.

He didn’t feel beset by numbers once he went to bed. He slept, and in the morning he was able to ignore the calculations on the pad. He listened to symphonies on the radio until it was time to head for Park Junior, and was in a shelter with a view of the school several minutes before the last bell. When the children streamed out under the grey sky, the explosion of colours and chatter felt like a promise of spring. He was cut off from it, skulking in a corner so that Adam wouldn’t notice him. Soon he saw his grandson with another boy, and they set about kicking a ball as they followed a young woman into the park.

As Summers turned his face to the wall to make sure he wasn’t recognised, he felt like a schoolboy sent to stand in the corner. Surely Adam hadn’t looked happier than he did when his grandfather met him. As soon as the thumps of the football passed the shelter Summers peered towards

the school. Suppose the teacher had sneaked away unobserved? Summers hurried to the railings opposite the school but could see nobody he knew. The doors let out some teachers and then even more he didn't recognise, and he was clenching his shaky fists in frustration by the time a man emerged into the deserted schoolyard.

He was thin and bent, and as grey as the sky—his suit, his thinning hair, the smoke of the cigarette he lit before stalking to the gates. For a moment Summers wondered if the teacher was too old to bother with—even old enough to be given some grudging respect—and then he saw that Smart had become the vicious old man he'd resembled forty years ago. Any hesitation felt too much like fear, and he barely managed to unclench his fists as he strode out of the park. 'Mr Smart,' he said in triumph. 'Can I ask you a question?'

The teacher stared at him with no more interest than emotion. 'Are you a parent?'

'That and a lot more.' Summers was determined to relish the confrontation. 'Can you tell me what December adds up to so far?' he said.

'Are you asking for one of my pupils?'

'No, I'm speaking for myself. I've learned to do that.' Summers struggled to contain his rage as he enquired, 'Can you do it in your head?'

'Quite obviously I can.' Smart took a measured puff at the cigarette and exhaled smoke, disturbing a stained hair in his left nostril. 'It's two hundred and thirty-one,' he said, 'if that's of any consequence to you.'

'Not so sure of yourself for a bit there, were you? That's a taste of what it feels like.'

'I fear you have the advantage of me,' Smart said and made to step around him.

'You bet I have. It's taken long enough but it was worth the wait.' Summers sidestepped to block his way. 'Don't you know me yet?' he demanded. 'Tortured so many youngsters you've lost count, have you?'

'What on earth do you imagine you're referring to?' Smart narrowed his already pinched eyes at a clatter of cans in the park, where Summers had seen teenagers drinking lager on the swings. 'That's what comes of undermining discipline in school,' Smart said. 'They'd never behave like that if we were still allowed to touch them.'

'It's your sort who undermined it. Made everyone who suffered from the likes of you want to make sure nobody ever does again. It's your fault it's

so hard to keep discipline now. It's swine like you that lost teachers their respect.'

Smart lifted the cigarette towards his face but seemed uncertain where his mouth was. 'Did I have you at school?'

'Recognised one of your victims at last, have you? One of the ones you could touch. Do you dream about touching children, you filthy shit? I've often thought that's what your sort wanted to get up to. You took out on children because they made you want to fiddle with them. I bet having them at your mercy worked you up as well.' Was Smart's face turning grey just with the winter twilight? 'Just remember I know where you are now,' Summers murmured. 'If I even think you're mistreating anyone I'll make it my business to lose you your job. What are you going to do with your fag? Thinking of using it on me, are you? Just try and I'll stick it somewhere that'll make you scream.'

Smart's mouth had begun to work soundlessly, and Summers was reminded of a masticating animal. The cigarette looked close to dropping from the man's fingers, which were shaking the ash loose. Had Summers gone too far? Not unless Smart could identify him, and surely the man would have done so aloud. 'Have the Christmas you deserve,' Summers told him and turned away from him.

When he glanced back from the park he saw the teacher standing just where he'd left him. Smart raised his hand as though bidding him some kind of farewell, but he was finding his mouth with the cigarette. 'Who's the baby now?' Summers muttered. 'Go on, suck your dummy. Suck yourself to death.'

He felt exhilarated as a schoolboy who'd got away with a prank. He might almost have boasted to the teenage drinkers on the swings. If he had any doubts about how he'd spoken to the teacher, they left him as soon as he saw his old house. It was Smart's fault that he wasn't trusted to bring Adam home, and when he reached the apartment block he might have thought the teacher had played another trick. The glare of the declining sun showed him that both doors flanking his had turned green, so that every door on the balcony was the same colour.

'It's nine, you swine,' he said, he hoped not too loud, and let himself in once he was sure of the number on the door. Smart couldn't undermine his confidence any longer, and so he tore the calculations off the pad and flung the spotty wad of paper in the bin. The calendar was a trophy, all the more so since Smart didn't know he had it. He microwaved a cottage pie and a

packet of vegetables, and gobbled the lot like a growing boy. He could have thought he was growing up at last, having dealt with the teacher.

How many doors had he already opened on the calendar? He wasn't going to reopen them; taking chocolates at random was one more way to taunt the teacher. 'Unlucky for you,' he mumbled as he crunched the thirteenth sweet, and, 'That's how old you like them, is it?' on prising open the tenth door. He might have finished all the chocolates except for not wanting to make himself sick. The best celebration would be a good night's sleep.

At first he didn't understand why it kept being interrupted. Whenever he jerked awake he felt as if he'd heard a sound, unless he'd had a thought. He stayed in bed late; he couldn't be seen with Adam at the school in case Smart took some revenge. What if he'd simply made the teacher even more vindictive? Suppose Smart had recognised him after all and meant to take it out on Adam? A sour stale taste urged Summers to the bathroom. Water didn't rid him of the taste, and he stumbled to the kitchen, only to falter in the doorway. More compartments than he'd opened on the calendar last night stood open now—six doors, no, seven. Those that had reopened were the five he'd previously emptied. With its upright tabs the calendar resembled a miniature graveyard.

'I wish it was yours, you swine,' Summers muttered. He was growing more anxious, and once he was dressed he headed for Park Junior. Soon he saw Adam, though not soon enough for his nerves. The boy was chasing other boys in the schoolyard and being chased, and looked entirely carefree, but had he encountered Smart yet? For a moment Summers had the irrational notion that the teacher was not merely hiding like himself but skulking at his back. There was nothing in the corner of the shelter except a scattering of cigarette butts on the floor and on the end of the bench.

Once the schoolyard was deserted Summers lingered in the shelter, listening for Smart's cold high voice—straining his ears so hard that he thought he heard it amid the scrape of windblown leaves on gravel. The idea that Smart was still at large in the school made him want to storm into the school and report the swine to the headmistress—to say whatever would get rid of him. To overcome the compulsion he had to retreat out of sight of the school. Long before the final bell he was back in the shelter. He hadn't counted the cigarette ends, and so he couldn't tell if they'd multiplied or even whether they'd been rearranged like an aid to a child's arithmetic. He spied on the schoolyard until he saw Adam, who looked

happier than ever. Summers hid his face in the corner while the boys and their football clamoured past, and then he turned back to the school. He watched until the doors finished swinging at last, but there was no sign of Smart in the secretive dusk.

Had he been moved to another school? ‘So long as you’re safe, Adam,’ Summers murmured, but the comment seemed to sum up how little he’d achieved. He was so preoccupied that he nearly tried to let himself into the wrong flat. Of course the number on the door was upside down. He shut his door and tramped along the hall to stare at the advent calendar as if it might inspire him. The shadows of the cardboard markers appeared to deepen the empty compartments, and he was seeing them as trenches when the doorbell rang.

Paul’s expression was oddly constrained. ‘Well, you’ll be pleased,’ he said.

‘You’re trusting me with Adam again.’

Paul took a breath but didn’t speak at once. ‘The teacher you had trouble with,’ he said, ‘you can forget about him.’

‘Why would I want to do that?’

‘He’s no longer with us.’ Since Summers didn’t react Paul added ‘He’s dead.’

‘Good heavens,’ Summers said, although he hoped those weren’t involved. ‘When did that come about?’

‘He had some kind of stroke when he was driving home yesterday. People saw him lose control and his car went into the front of a bus.’

‘That’s unexpected.’ Summers did his best to control his face but thought it prudent to admit, ‘I can’t say I’m too distressed.’

‘I wasn’t expecting you to be.’

‘So I’ll be collecting Adam from school tomorrow, yes?’

Paul made another breath apparent on the way to saying ‘Let’s leave it for this week, shall we? We’ll sort it out after Christmas.’

‘Is it you who doesn’t want me looking after him?’ When Paul was silent Summers said, ‘I didn’t know I’d raised you not to stand up for yourself.’

His son paused and said, ‘Mum makes it sound as if you didn’t stick up for yourself at school.’

‘Then she’d better know I’ve changed. Just hope you never find out how much, like—’ Summers’ rage was close to robbing him of discretion. ‘Go home to your family. I’ll leave you all alone till Christmas,’ he said and shut the door.

Any qualms he might have suffered over causing Smart's demise were swallowed by his fury with Elaine and Tina and, yes, Paul. He stalked into the kitchen to bare his teeth at the calendar. 'I wish I'd been there,' he said in a voice that wasn't far from Smart's. 'Did you count the seconds when you saw what was coming? It'd just about sum you up.' Talking wasn't enough, and he poked a door open at random. 'Revenge is sweet, don't you think? Revenge is a sweet,' he said and shoved the pair of digits he'd uncovered into his mouth.

Perhaps it was too sweet, the chocolate plaque bulging with numbers. He didn't much care for the taste that filled his mouth once the unexpectedly brittle object crumbled like a lump of ash. As the sweetness immediately grew stale he had the impression that it masked a less palatable flavour. He grabbed a bottle of brandy still half full from last Christmas and poured some into the Greatest Granddad mug Adam had given him. A mouthful seared away part of the tastes, and another did more of the job, but he still felt as if some unpleasant sensation lay in wait for him. Perhaps he was exhausted, both emotionally and by insomnia. He could celebrate the end of Smart with a good night's sleep.

His nerves didn't let him. He kept thinking he'd heard a sound, unless he was about to hear one, or was it too stealthy to be audible? He didn't know how often he'd opened his aching eyes to confront the cluttered darkness before he saw a pair of red eyes staring back at him. They were two of the digits on the bedside clock until one pinched into a single line. It was a minute after midnight, and a day closer to Christmas.

The thought sent him out of bed. While he wouldn't be putting any of the contents of the calendar anywhere near his mouth, perhaps he could relax once he'd located the date and opened the door. As the fluorescent tube jittered alight he could have imagined he glimpsed a flap staggering upright on the calendar. He peered at the swarm of identically mirthful faces in search of the date. How many of the doors were open? Seven, or there should be, and he prodded them while counting them aloud. However often he added them up there was one more, and it was today's.

Could he have opened the door and forgotten? Was that a blurred fingerprint on the chocolate? He grabbed the calendar and shook the sweet into the bin. He was tempted to stuff the calendar in as well, if that wouldn't have felt too much like continuing to fear the teacher. 'Do your worst,' he mumbled, still not entirely awake. Throwing the calendar on the table, he sat down to watch.

Before long the lids of some of the compartments began to twitch. It was his debilitated vision or the shaking of the table, if not both. Whenever his head lurched more or less upright, having slid off his fists that were propping it up, he had to force his eyes wide and count the open doors afresh. 'Eight,' he kept declaring, even when someone thumped on the wall of the kitchen. 'Had enough for one day, have you?' he retorted, though he wasn't sure to whom. He didn't notice when the fluorescent glow merged with pallid sunlight, but it seemed to be an excuse for retreating into bed.

It was almost dark by the time he gave up dozing. He had enough food to last until Christmas—enough that he needn't be troubled by the identical doors on the balcony. He ate some of a bowl of cereal while he glared a raw-eyed challenge at the calendar, and then he listened to a carol concert on the radio—it was many years since he'd heard carollers at his or anybody's door. The music lulled him almost to sleep until the choir set about amassing the twelve days of Christmas and all that they brought. Even after he switched off the radio, the numbers kept demanding to be totalled in his head.

Well before midnight he was at the kitchen table, where he stood the bedside clock next to the calendar. The digits twitched into various shapes on their way to turning into eyes, which he could have imagined were refusing to blink because they were determined to watch him, even without pupils. At last—it seemed much longer than a minute—the final digit shrank, but nothing else moved. Didn't that last number look more like an I than a 1? Summers was attempting to ignore it when it crumbled into segments, but he mustn't feel compelled to count them; he had to catch the calendar opening today's door, or see whatever happened. He gripped his temples and dug his thumbs into his cheeks, feeling the bones of his skull. His face began to ache, but not enough to keep him alert, though he didn't know he'd dozed until his head jerked up. 'Eight,' he said when at last he thought he was sure of the number. He oughtn't to start bothering the neighbours again, and there was a way to avoid it—by tearing all the open doors off the calendar. They and the boxy holes they left put him in mind of a vandalised graveyard, an idea that felt capable of shrinking Smart no larger than an insect. 'That's all you are. That's all you ever were,' Summers muttered as his head drooped.

When had he eaten last? No wonder he was weak. At least he didn't need to leave the table to find food. He dragged the calendar to him and

fumbled a door open. Some instinct must have guided him, since it was the first unopened one—the number of his flat. As he bit the chocolate, the coiled object on the little slab writhed into life. Its tail slithered from between his teeth, and it wormed down his throat as though it had rediscovered its burrow in the earth.

His head wavered up, and he clapped a hand over his mouth. No more doors were open after all—only eight, he was able to believe once he'd counted the gaping compartments several times. The calendar wasn't as close to him as he'd imagined, and he might have been sure he'd dreamed the grisly incident except for an odd taste in his mouth. Perhaps it was merely stale and sweetish, or was there an underlying earthiness? It sent him to gulp brandy straight from the bottle, and he turned back to the table just in time to glimpse a movement. A lid had been lifted, although it was instantly still.

'Caught you,' Summers cried. It bore today's date. The prize it had exposed was marked with scratches, as if someone had been clawing at it for want of a better victim. He shook the chocolate into the bin and tore off the date. 'Finished for today?' he demanded, but couldn't interpret the lack of an answer. He was sinking shakily onto the chair when he glanced at the clock. The number beside the blind red eyes was his apartment's. No, it was upside down with its tail in the air, but it still showed he'd spent the night in front of the calendar.

He felt as if Smart had robbed him of all sense of time as well as any confidence about numbers. He would be no fun on Christmas Day if he'd had so little sleep. 'You won't spoil this Christmas as well,' he vowed. Suppose the presents for his family and Tina were ruined somehow? He threw the calendar on its face and pinned it down with a saucepan so heavy that his arms shook. Once he'd returned the clock to the bedside table he fetched the presents from the living-room and lined them up in bed before he joined them.

He had to keep reminding himself that the muffled rustling came from the presents, especially whenever it wakened him after dark. His lurches into consciousness were too reminiscent of the Christmas he'd spent dreading next year's days with Smart, far too many to count—shivering awake to realise the worst nightmare wasn't in his sleep. The nights leading up to his retirement had been just as bad, and Smart's fault too. He saw the eyes blink wide to stare towards him, and managed to name the digits next to them. 'One and two, that's three to you,' he mouthed, and 'Happy

Christmas' when the right eye narrowed to a slit. He didn't need to go and look at the calendar; surely he would hear if anything happened. He lay awake listening, and tried not to move in case that disturbed the wrappings of the presents, though why should he fear being heard? It was almost dawn by the time he went to look.

The light in the fluorescent tube buzzed and fluttered like an insect and eventually grew still. Summers used both hands to remove the saucepan and then turned over the calendar. It put him in mind of lifting a slab—one from beneath which something might scuttle or crawl. Nothing else stirred, however. That wasn't why he let the calendar fall on its back with a hollow flimsy sound. All the numbers on the remaining doors were blurred beyond any possibility of recognition, while the festive faces were no more than blotches with misshapen blobs for eyes. Had age overtaken the calendar? Summers only needed to open today's door to finish celebrating his triumph. He could open all of them to find it if he had to—but prising one open revealed that the sweet was as unrecognisably deformed as the number on the door. The next was the same, and its neighbour, and he felt as if they were showing how deranged Smart had always been or was now. At last Summers wakened enough to realise that he didn't have to try every door; today's was larger. As soon as he located it he dug his fingertip under the lid.

His nail sank into a substance too firm for chocolate but in another way not firm enough, and then the object moved beneath his finger. As he recoiled, the door sprang up, exposing a greyish piebald surface in which a rounded lump bulged. He was trying to grasp the sight when the lump into which he'd poked his finger blinked again and glared at him. Even though it had already begun to wither and grow discoloured, he knew it all too well.

He swept the calendar onto the floor and trampled on it, feeling more than cardboard give way underfoot. He might have been stamping on a mask, but not an empty one. Once it was crushed absolutely flat he watched to be sure that nothing crept from beneath it, not even a stain, and then he retreated to the bedroom.

Suppose he'd set the madness free? He didn't like to keep the presents so close to the remains of the calendar. In any case it might be wise to set off for his old house—he was afraid it could take him some time to find. At least he hadn't undressed for bed. He clutched the presents to his chest and hurried onto the balcony, beyond which a greyish light was starting

to take hold of the world. He gazed at his door until he succeeded in fixing at least the shape of the number in his mind. 'You're the one with your tail hanging down,' he said.

It was daylight now, however grey, and he did his best to hasten through the streets. He shouldn't be distracted by trying to count Christmas trees in windows, let alone Christmas lights. Today's date ought to be enough for him. 'Two and five and you're alive,' he told some children before they fled across the road. He mustn't frighten anyone. Among the reasons he'd retired had been the fear of needing to resemble Smart so as to teach.

He came to his old road at last, only to feel as if someone had gone ahead of him to jumble all the numbers. He just had to locate his old home, not remember which number it was. He didn't have to count his way to it, and he was surprised how soon he found the wrought-iron porch. He hugged the presents—one, two and another—as he thumbed the bellpush. 'Two and five and you're alive,' he carolled until the boy ran to open the door. Summers was about to hand him the presents when the boy turned his back. 'I don't know what he wants,' he called. 'It's some old man.'

KODOKUSHI

ANDREW HOOK

At the time of putting this volume of Postscripts together, Mr. Hook has been writing a few Japanese-themed stories. When he saw a news article about pension fraud in Japan that occurred when a death was not reported, an idea for a story quickly followed. 'The boulders at Kudokushi were coincidentally within the same area that I decided to set my story,' he says. 'Serendipity, perhaps.' Indeed so.

The author recently sold his 100th short story. Bravo! we say. His collection, Nitrospective, was published by DogHorn in late 2011, and stories have appeared in Shadows & Tall Trees, Black Static, and the anthologies Classical Horror, Where Are We Going?, and Dark Currents in 2012. He's currently editing new magazine Fur-Lined Ghettos with his partner, Sophie, although new baby, Cora, seems intent on thwarting them.

AI SAT UPRIGHT ON THE KARASUMA LINE HEADING TOWARDS Kyoto. On her lap, the plastic box containing freshly made *oyaku don* warmed her knees. She looked out of the window at the increasingly industrial landscape. It felt good to be coming home. It had been far too long.

Oyaku don, a simple meal of chicken, egg and onions was her father's favourite food. The younger of two children, Ai was born late in her father's life. Three weeks ago she'd turned thirty-nine. Today, her father would be one hundred. He'd married a second time, to a woman twenty years his junior. She admired him for that. For bucking the trend, as she'd heard her American colleagues say. She was the daughter from the second marriage, and her half-sister, Keiko, from the first.

Living and working in Hokkaido she rarely returned home. Over recent months—years—she'd let telephone calls slide. Letters she felt happier with. But her father didn't respond to letters, and it seemed her mother and half-sister were keeping him increasingly distant.

She knew this was her fault as much as theirs. It was easy to let things go, pretend they didn't affect her. She knew Keiko and her mother would look after him well, and she knew that the distance between her and her father pained him. She didn't want him to be reminded of that through infrequent contact, so she slipped into the shadows, knowing in her heart that it probably pained him all the more.

Modern life was different to the past. He needed to realise that society changed. Ai was a successful chemist. She went all over the world for conventions and had spoken at several universities. Of course, he was proud of her. How could he not be? But she also knew that he was happier having her mother and Keiko look after him. So, again, a reason for distance. A need to keep things *just so*.

Her mother, Wami, was in her eighties. But not in good health. Whenever she spoke to her on the phone she sounded distant, more than the kilometres between them. Keiko was the one she usually spoke to. She would run on about matters that Ai had no interest in. Local gossip about people she had long forgotten. For the past three years, whenever she had asked to speak to her father she had been told he was too ill, too weak. She hadn't argued. Had, in fact, counted her blessings that she could keep him at arm's length.

Keiko was fifty-three. She'd returned to look after Wami and her father, Makato, when her marriage broke down. She found solace there. There were no recriminations. After all, her father's first marriage had also broken down and when he met Wami she was told that Keiko was pleased to have a second mother. Ai knew that divorce wasn't a shame in her family. What was more contentious was that she herself had never married, but had several live-in lovers over the past fifteen years. She had failed to conduct herself with the etiquette her parents desired.

Still, this was of no consequence today. A little surprise. A family reunion. Bowls of *oyaku don* shared between them. Ai felt a little guilty at not having made the dish herself, yet her father had always said the best *oyaku don* came from railway station restaurants. It would remind him of the good times, of the holidays he had spent with them, and of his regular commute into work. A normal salaryman occupation which he cultivated

and made his own with no expectations other than to provide for his family.

Through the window Ai watched her reflection undulate across the scenery. It flashed over garish billboards for washing powder, noodles. The red and white of their hoardings with yellow lettering imprinting themselves on her subconscious. The adverts for the latest technology were in sleek blacks and greys. Her reflection dipped and sucked into them, like a seal playing beneath the waves. Sometimes her view was obliterated by the close proliferation of greenery, trees and bushes almost battering the windows of the train, extended branches reaching for her hair. When they changed lines and another train charged by in the opposite direction she saw a hundred faces imprinted over her own. A composite diagram of matching eyes, eyebrows, cheekbones, lips, ears, noses. She was something of everyone for a fraction of a second. And then it was back to the scenery. Back to the ever greyer landscape as they neared the station and the glass and metal structures of the city held sway.

She left the train at Karasuma Oike station. She hadn't brought much with her. A small backpack containing three days change of clothing, three tiny gifts, and the food which she clutched in her hand. She also had a selection of photographs, Polaroids she had taken on her journeys overseas and of her house and her cats and her new lover, Naoharu. She knew her father would want to play catch up.

She preferred Polaroids for their immediateness. Digital cameras were not the same, the tangible product of a square picture still entranced her. She would take some family photos during her stay. It might be the last time she saw her father—perhaps even her mother.

Outside the station she caught a taxi to the apartment. Along the way she glimpsed the ugly façade of the *Ky to Kokusai Manga My jiamu*. She had wanted to visit the Manga museum for some years. Maybe she would do so, on this visit.

Her parents' apartment was simple. She often wondered why they'd never moved, but suspected Keiko's mother had made certain financial demands which meant her father couldn't give them the life they deserved.

Of course, he never spoke of such things. They'd been happy there, to her knowledge. And there was space for all of them.

After the taxi stopped and she paid the driver she looked upward at the seven storey structure. Memories came flooding back:

Keiko laughing as she locked Ai in the utility cupboard, wedging a broom under the handle so she couldn't turn it.

Her mother, Wami, combing Keiko's hair in long soft strokes. Whilst Ai's own hair, a tangled tomboy mess, caught in the comb's teeth, jerked her head back, and she cried.

Her father, Makato, sitting beside her bed watching her fall sleep. Reading a night time story of demons, backlit by the light from the hallway, which gave him an unearthly glow.

Ai shook her head, dislodged the false memories. Replaced them with real ones.

She approached the entrance. When she lived here, an old man by the name of Haruki had sat on a wooden chair reading newspapers and grunting, occasionally wiping his nose on a miraculously clean handkerchief. Now the reception area was manned by a young woman flicking through a magazine. A bowl of ramen noodles steamed on the counter, next to an opened bottle of pink nail varnish. The complex mixture of smells caught in Ai's throat and she coughed, as though trying to attract attention.

The woman looked up.

'Can I help you?'

'I'm here to see my family. Keiko is my half-sister.' She didn't give the name of her parents; she knew they hardly left the building.

'Go straight up. I'm sure you know the way.'

Ai nodded. In the olden days Haruki would have telephoned ahead, informed the residents that a visitor had arrived. Everything was the same, yet different. It had been a long while since she was last here.

The elevator creaked during its ascent to the fifth floor: another memory. She found her heart beating wildly. How could she have left her visit so long? She felt trepidation. She had isolated herself. Was she doing the right thing? If not, it was too late to change course.

As if she was observing herself from above, she watched as the elevator doors opened, she watched her progress towards the familiar apartment, she watched as her hand reached out and knocked lightly on the white door that needed a fresh coat of paint.

She watched as she waited.

Footsteps approached. The space darkened behind the fish-eye lens. There was a gasp. Then the footsteps retreated. Words she couldn't make

out. Two female voices. It went quiet. She knocked again, a little more insistently. The footsteps returned. There was a pause. Then, as though a decision had been made, the door slowly opened.

‘Surprise!’

The intensity of the word was false but she needed something to break the immediate tension. Keiko was dressed in a ratty pink kimono, the edges frayed. She looked Ai up and down.

‘Ai! Come in, come in.’

She exclaimed this, but there was no emotion, no sense of joy. As they embraced Ai saw her mother at the end of the corridor. Her face also showed no happiness. In fact, her expression was one of fear.

Ai’s heart slowed. ‘Mother?’

She watched as her mother slumped against the jamb of the open door. What was this? She pulled herself away from Keiko and started to run, the corners of her eyes moist with tears, her throat swollen as though something were stuck there.

‘I can’t believe this.’ Ai looked at the two women sitting at the kitchen table. The *oyaku don* was coagulating in its container. Tears streaked her make-up, applied on the train as she had contemplated this meeting.

Keiko’s head was down. ‘We didn’t know what else to do. This apartment isn’t much, but it is expensive. We didn’t want to leave here. Look at Wami, look at your mother, she’s too ill to move. What else were we supposed to do?’

Keiko continued talking but Ai was no longer listening. She couldn’t purge from her mind the image of her father. Lying in bed. His skin cracked, dried like a pupa from which no butterfly would emerge. Dead three years and left unburied. His pension payments accruing, keeping these two witches in a comfortable existence. If only they had told her, she would willingly have paid the rent for them. But her anger at this was nothing compared to the anger of loss. And this anger was nothing compared to the sadness, the inexpressible despair that racked her body because she had come too late.

Her mother’s withered hand gripped her wrist. ‘You have to understand, Ai. There was nothing we could do. He died happy, in his sleep. His soul is elsewhere. But if we reported it . . . well, it isn’t just *us*. Just read the newspapers. Keiko tells me it happens everywhere.’

Ai shook her head. She shot out her arm, knocked the container onto the floor where the lid popped off. A gelatinous mix of yellow chicken, egg and onion spilled out. The chicken dead meat, the egg a scrambled mess, the onion sloppy worms.

'Kodokushi,' she said.

A lonely death.

Keiko opened her mouth to speak but Wami shook her head.

Ai knew what she had been going to say. That it wasn't like that. Just as her false memories weren't her true memories and her true memories weren't her false memories. But none of it mattered. Her father was dead and she had abandoned him. It wasn't Keiko and Wami who were at fault. It was herself.

She left them at the table. Walked to her parents' bedroom. Closed the door.

She knelt by the side of the bed, her head down. Not intentionally in prayer, but because she couldn't bear to face her father's milky eyes. His smell permeated the room. It was in the bed linen and the curtains. How could they have withstood it? She watched as the carpet darkened with her tears; like inkspots.

The following day she left her hotel—she couldn't bear to stay in the apartment—and walked to Ry an-ji, the Temple of the Peaceful Dragon. Each footstep was in clay, her passage hardening in her wake. She couldn't believe the situation. Didn't know what to do. During the night she had convinced herself that she wouldn't support Wami and Keiko. But come morning she knew that she would have to if they were to continue living in that apartment. And she wanted them to remain there. She wanted them to feel punished, trapped there, for the remainder of their lives.

She also needed to give her father a proper burial. Which meant paying for that. And paying back the money that had been falsely claimed. The pension that he had worked so hard to obtain and which had outlived him.

When Ai was a little girl her father had often taken her to Ry an-ji. Yet it was as if she were seeing everything for the first time, as well as remembering everything as it was. The simple structure of the interior of the main building, with its light brown colours, open space, and sliding

partitions. The traditional temple gates. The gardens with their greenery, stunted trees, pink blossoms. The Ry an-ji's *tsukubai*, a small basin of water for visitors to ritually wash their hands, cleanse their mouths; positioned so that you had to bend to reach the water, suggesting supplication and reverence. And then the *karesansui* rock garden, over five hundred years old.

Another memory:

Ai! Count the boulders.

She squeezed her eyes half-shut in concentration. Behind her, Keiko spoke random numbers, attempting to distract her. Wami laughed, pulled Matako close. They were a family. A happy family.

Fourteen.

Her father smiled. Shook his head.

She walked around the garden, viewed it from a different perspective. Counted again.

Fourteen.

She watched her father smile again. She loved his smile, but she wanted to make him laugh.

Again.

She wandered the periphery of the raked gravel garden, with its moss-covered boulders.

Fourteen.

When she turned, her father, mother, and Keiko were already descending towards the monks' quarters. A camera swinging from a strap around her father's wrist.

It was much later that Keiko told her there were fifteen boulders, positioned in such a way that only fourteen were ever visible; except from overhead. It was only through attaining enlightenment that the fifteenth boulder could be viewed.

Today, she counted them again. *Fourteen.*

She left the garden and walked back to the *tsukubai*. Washed her hands, took some of the brackish water into her mouth. As it was a weekday the visitors were few and far between. She decided to sit for a while, let yesterday's events pass over her through the tranquility of the temple. Maybe she could still her muddled heart and make some sense of it all.

She found a low stone wall. Reached into her bag through habit and almost lit a cigarette. Crumpling the pack, she held it in her fist. She could do with some *tonjiru* right now. The hearty miso soup was her comfort

food, made her feel that everything was right in the world. If she remembered correctly there was a small restaurant not far from here. Maybe she would go there.

Her bag vibrated. She hadn't answered her phone since leaving the train. She realised Naoharu would want to know if she was ok. But she hadn't been able to tell him of her father's death. She needed to work things through for herself. Despite the evidence of the Polaroids, she was no longer sure if she was close to him at all.

Leaving the temple she was about to search for the restaurant when she noticed a group of elderly people, dancing on a nearby patch of green. A waltz played, loudly but not obtrusively. She watched their movements, some more fluid than others. After a while, she realised there was someone beside her.

'Old people dance because they are afraid of dying,' the man said. 'And that's why they dance, to stay healthy.'

She turned to face him. He looked to be in his late sixties, his face weathered and lined, yet somehow smooth at the same time.

Before she knew it she said, 'My father died yesterday.'

He took her hand. His fingers were like twigs covered in leather.

'Come.'

They moved towards the dancers, and before she knew it Ai was swept off her feet.

Later, when she revisited the boulders, she saw there were fifteen. Her guide pointed them out. One by one.

It was to be a long time before she returned to Hokkaido.

THE VALLEY OF WONDERS

AMBER D. SISTLA

The author tells us that she wanted to capture a moment in time of someone who had discovered perfection. 'The only slight problem,' she adds, 'is that there's perhaps just a little too much of it.'

Ms. Sistla was born in Oklahoma and now lives in the Pacific Northwest. She has a degree in computer science and has six US and EU patents. Her fiction has appeared in Nature, Jim Baen's Universe, Postscripts, Cosmos, Bull Spec and Daily Science Fiction. She is an active member of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America. Find out more about her fiction at www.ambersistla.com.

DALE TURNED, SILHOUETTED AGAINST THE BRILLIANT SKY, to pull me up to the peak. The echoes of his shout still rang in our ears. We stood, side by side, the lush valley spread below us in a riot of rainbow hues.

My stomach churned, and I longed to fling myself down against the jagged crag. Instead I twined my fingers with Dale's and laughed. My voice, a breathy whisper, echoed his shout. 'The Valley of Wonders.'

Dale winked, a gesture so at odds with the vacant look in his eyes that my heart stuttered in my chest. 'Didn't I tell you we could do anything, if we were together?' The right words, always the right words, but the tone emotionless. 'Look, I've found the first wonder.' He climbed down a few feet and then dug bare-handed in a patch of snow. 'An ice-canary.'

The small bird, translucent, perched in his open palm and warbled a melody of such unbelievable beauty I forgot to breathe. Would that I had not remembered to resume when the song ended. Would that we had

dashed the delicate creature against the rocks. Instead, it hurtled itself into the sky and disappeared.

We wended our way down the precarious trail. There were no missteps, no fatal accidents that would have saved us. We'd been careful, that first time.

The valley welcomed us with verdant boughs and luscious flowers. Heady scents left us giggling for half the morning.

Our footsteps were the only noise. No rustling foliage, no scurrying animals, no singing birds. That itself should have warned us, but we paid no heed before and now the silent warning mocked us.

Midday, we stopped for lunch at a small spring. We gorged ourselves on the sweet flesh of custard-apples as big as our heads then washed our sticky hands and faces in the sparkling water.

Dale, whom I had loved truly and well, traced his finger across my chin and kissed me. All the right motions, but cold, so cold. 'Imagine,' he whispered in my ear, 'what it would be like to be like this forever.'

If I had a knife and the ability, I would plunge it into his chest. Whether to stop the words or to release him, I have never decided. Although, if I truly had a knife, I would selfishly turn it in my own heart and unwind its twistings.

Dale's mouth smiled; his eyes remained dull.

Empty windows to his soul; I'd not thought he would abandon me so. Yet he's escaped somehow, leaving me to play this charade alone. He reached for me, but I stood, and so was spared that torture. 'Come, love. Time enough for that later. We've far to go, and the day already half done.'

Grumbling, he complied, but pouted in silence the rest of the way. When we reached the far end of the valley and climbed the slope, he raced ahead of me until he stood at the top. I followed him, but paused to turn and look behind.

On the opposite side of the valley, the sun caught on the top of the slope that we'd descended earlier. I scrambled behind Dale and readied myself to shove him over the edge.

From his perch above, Dale shouted, 'Hello, the Valley of Wonders!' The greeting echoes around him. He turned, silhouetted against the brilliant sky, to pull me up to the peak. The echoes of his shout still rang in our ears. We stood, side by side, the lush valley spread below us in a riot of rainbow hues.

THE REVELATION OF JO GIVENS

NANCY JANE MOORE

'The Revelation of Jo Givens' came from the author giving her subconscious free rein over three phenomena: climate change, the current fashion in journalism for doing more with less, and the regular pronouncement by U.S. Christian fundamentalists that the Rapture is upon us. She continues: 'The fact that the story connected these apparently distinct events may have something to do with the fact that I live in drought-ridden Central Texas, work in journalism, and grew up in the Bible Belt.' Well, yes . . . that has to be a possibility.

Ms. Moore's most recent book is Flashes of Illumination, an e-book collection of very short stories from Book View Cafe. Her PS Showcase collection, Conscientious Inconsistencies, is still available as is her novella, Changeling, from Aqueduct Press. She's a founding member of the publishing co-op Book View Cafe and lives in Austin, Texas.

JUST WATCH MY FEED, JO. AS SOON AS YOU SEE IT, I KNOW you're going to want it.'

Jo Givens shook her head. Habit—the conversation was audio only. 'Matt, I've got another hurricane hitting Florida, out-of-control fires in Orange County, an earthquake in San Francisco that's apparently pushing seven on the Richter scale, and a heat wave that's killed over 300 people in Chicago. That's just the U.S. weather. I don't even know where I'm going to put two terrorist attacks and three political scandals, not to mention typhoons in southeast Asia, a flood in China I can't get any data on, and the aftermath of the Tokyo earthquake. And you want me to run some feed about a preacher in Southern Virginia?'

‘He’s talking about all those things. He says they prove the Apocalypse is at hand. He’s very convincing about it.’

‘This isn’t God; it’s climate change caused by human stupidity. The chickens environmentalists have been yelling about for years are coming home to roost. Haven’t you seen the science reports we’ve been running?’ Three other lines were buzzing and Jo’s finger was poised to cut Matt off.

‘Yeah, I have, and you’re going to have to balance all those scientists with another point of view or management’s going to get pissed. Fair and balanced, remember? Why not my preacher? You know management likes preachers.’

Jo made a face. But Matt was right. If she didn’t get something on the air that contradicted the science reports soon, she’d get a call from management before her shift was over. The head of US Global’s news division was born again. ‘Okay, okay. Let’s see your feed.’

The preacher had a mane of thick blond hair and an engaging smile. ‘Look at the fire spread,’ he said, waving his hand toward a screen showing what Jo recognized as the grass fire that had raged across Kansas back in July. ‘The Bible says that when the first angel sounded his trumpet, ‘all green grass was burnt up’.’ And then, in a voice so quiet Jo had to strain to hear it, “For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”

‘Jesus,’ Jo said. The man knew how to play to his audience, she had to give him that.

‘That’s what he said. It’s all about Jesus.’

‘He’s quoting from the Book of Revelation. It doesn’t have anything to do with Jesus.’

‘I never read Revelation. The preacher says it’s from Jesus. Are you gonna run my feed?’

‘Yeah, yeah. How can you not have read Revelation? You’re the religion reporter.’

‘I never read any religious books. Keeps my mind open. See ya soon. I got a line on a rabbi.’

‘This is New Testament stuff,’ Jo said, but Matt had already hung up.

Matt’s raw feed was almost broadcast ready, as usual. It only took her ten minutes to turn it into a presentable five minute story. Jo sent a thirty second version to TV with an ASAP tag, then stripped the vid from that version and forwarded the audio to radio. She followed that with a heads

up to the TV and radio anchors, alerting them to a new story in the mix. The whole five minute interview went to online, where those so inclined could download it at their leisure. Then she fed the audio into the text converter and sent the output to the editor who would make it fit the written word editions (online and print) as a story under Matt's name. A selection of stills culled from the vid went to that same editor. (As she sent the text and stills, she couldn't help thinking about the persistent rumor that the company was going to lay off the print/online crew and add their jobs to her workload as well.) The original and each edited version stayed safely on her computer. Jo believed in backups and she never trusted her reporters to keep them.

Nothing buzzed on her desk, though her message light was blinking. She ignored it, took a sip from the cup at her elbow and made a face. The coffee was stone cold. She wondered if she had time to run to the kitchen for a fresh cup. Nah, not worth the effort. She leaned back in her chair and watched the thirty second version of the interview with a member of the International Association of Scientists for Responsible Climate Policy.

'While, uh, we must be very cautious, umm, before attributing any one particular weather-related, umm, disaster to dangerous anthropogenic interference.' He paused and looked down at his notes. 'Uh, we must not forget that the average world temperature has, uh, has increased by one point two degrees Celsius since the beginning of this century and that concurrent loss of glacial, umm, ice has raised already raised sea levels by an average of one point four meters.' He stared straight at the camera and grinned, as if he hadn't just presented bad news.

Damn, he was a lousy speaker. And why did he use words like 'anthropogenic interference' instead of something people would understand, like 'human caused climate change.' Stupid IASRCP. Those people were so media-inept they couldn't even come up with a decent acronym. Matt's preacher was going to blow him out of the water. Good TV. Maybe even better radio. But lousy news coverage.

She punched up her science reporter. 'Gail, you got to get me something better than this idiot we're running now.'

'But that's Thomas Whitaker,' Gail said in a shocked tone of voice. 'He's the most preeminent biologist . . .'

'I don't care if he's God Almighty, he's putting our viewers to sleep. Get me someone sexier.'

'Science isn't sexy, Jo.'

‘Correction. Most scientists aren’t sexy, but science certainly is. Hasn’t one of those damn think tanks got a media-savvy spokesperson?’

‘I’ll see what I can find.’ Gail’s voice had frozen over.

‘Look, Gail, you think these guys are right about why we’re having all these disasters, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do. Don’t you? Any intelligent person . . .’

‘Right. But most of our audience isn’t intelligent. You want to get their message across, get me somebody who can explain science to eighth graders and make them eat it up. Got it?’

‘Okay, okay.’

The chime that signaled the end of her shift caught Jo by surprise. She finished sending out Gail’s new science report—an interview with a very attractive biophysicist who knew how to look at the camera and sound pleasant but stern while explaining that increased carbon emissions had led to warmer ocean water, thus generating more hurricanes—and punched up Brian as she sent him the recap of the past eight hours. Her shift didn’t technically end until she transferred control.

‘The usual,’ she told him. ‘Bad weather and religious nuts.’

‘What happened with the bombs in Jerusalem?’

‘Yesterday’s news. There’s the usual body count in Baghdad and something in the Philippines, but weather is crowding everything else off the screen.’

‘And we got preachers saying the end is near? I guess management is happy.’

‘They haven’t called, so I expect they are. All yours.’

Jo shut down her system and took off her headphone. The sudden return of peace and quiet stunned her, as it always did. The adrenaline that carried her through her shift was still pumping, but she knew from experience she would crash soon. A drink would smooth out the transition.

She poured herself a glass of wine and then pattered around the kitchen, sorting dishes and talking out loud to the elderly cat sitting expectantly beside his food bowl. ‘That feed from San Francisco reminds me of New Orleans after that big hurricane. New Orleans never really came back. I wonder if Frisco will. At least the hurricane coming up the Atlantic side of Florida wasn’t all that bad.’ The cat meowed, as if in response. Jo filled up the food bowl and the cat turned his full attention to the crunchies.

It was impossible to stop talking when she'd been fielding calls and listening to feed for hours. What she wanted was someone to talk to. (The cat didn't count.) The worst thing about working from home was that you couldn't go out with your co-workers afterwards for a drink to wind down and discuss the day. But then, if USG News required people to work in the office, instead of networking them from all over, she'd have to live in Atlanta. Too hot. Too big city. She preferred Madison.

She had plenty of friends, but none of them were mediameisters. Experience had taught her that post-work cooldown didn't work well with people in different lines of work. Better to go to brunch with them on your day off.

Jo popped a frozen dinner in the microwave and downloaded the latest episode of her favorite futuristic drama series. It relaxed her to watch something she didn't have to edit.

'The Christian book of Revelation is related to our apocalyptic scripture,' Matt's rabbi was saying. 'Of course, the fundamentalist Christians have misinterpreted it, as usual—they seem to think they are the chosen people—but there is still truth in it.'

The rabbi was young and spoke crisp American-style English. Rumor placed him at the head of an organization that had assassinated several Israeli Arab leaders—not to mention Palestinians—but the conditions for the interview ruled out any mention of that connection. To compensate, Matt had integrated vid of bombings in Bethlehem into the talking-head feed from the rabbi's office. 'So you think these disasters might portend the end of the world?' Matt asked, looking for the perfect soundbite.

'There is good reason to suspect that the God of our fathers is not pleased with us,' the rabbi replied.

Not as good as the preacher's 'great day of his wrath,' Jo thought, but the rabbi was a politician as well as a religious extremist. He took care what words he sent into US mediaspace.

Gail's feed today was on the thawing of the permafrost in Alaska. It showed houses sinking into the ground and dead trees leaning in a hundred directions, as if they were drunk. It reminded Jo of the earth-

quake pictures from San Francisco—that same jagged edge of ground sticking up, buildings collapsing. She suspected Gail of taking a camera out and shooting the damage herself—something reporters rarely did anymore, relying instead on feed from their sources and, on occasion, from local stringers who were paid a pittance.

If Gail had run the camera, she'd done it on her own time—there hadn't been a gap in her regular reporting. The stunning quality of the visuals made it obvious that whoever shot it cared deeply. Gail had overlaid a quiet voiceover that gave a litany of the problems resulting from the melting of the permafrost.

'If things are so dicey up there these days,' Jo said, 'why is it you live in Fairbanks?'

'Because in the not too distant future, it's not going to be possible to live anywhere else on Earth,' Gail said. 'The only place we'll be able to grow food will be up here.'

'Maybe, but probably not in your lifetime.'

'I'm not so sure about that. Besides, it will happen in my daughter's.' Gail had a two-year-old.

'That's just scare stuff,' Jo said, responding as she did every time they had this conversation. If you let her, Gail would explain in detail why the world was doomed. While Jo knew human irresponsibility had brought on the current crop of weather disasters, she dealt with the problem by keeping herself convinced that things wouldn't get too bad. That irrational semi-optimism was probably what made her a good mediameister. It also let her sleep at night.

Congress had just approved a bill increasing the average fuel economy standard to thirty-seven mpg by 2023. Jo ran a comment from Public Citizen pointing out that it should have been set at double that years ago and something from the international car manufacturers' organization estimating that this would cost the industry forty-two thousand jobs worldwide, not to mention profits. The average cost of a gallon of gas hit eleven twenty-nine on news of the higher standard, though the price of a barrel of oil plummeted by fourteen dollars, down to a hundred seventy-one. Markets ran on their own logic, Jo thought, putting together the economic news to squeeze in among the disaster reports. There were more cars on the road than ever, despite the price of gas. She didn't see how the

car manufacturers were going to suffer. But no one had done a story on increased car ownership.

Today Matt had an imam from London. ‘The day of the Mahdi is at hand,’ the imam said. Matt inserted a brief explanation: Shiite Muslims believe that the hidden Twelfth Imam will return as the Mahdi on the Day of Judgment.

‘Lies and debauchery have led the world into the path of destruction. False witness is commonplace, criminals are honored, the most ignoble and dishonest have become our leaders. Women resemble men and men resemble women.’

‘Well, he’s more or less right about our leaders,’ Jo said. ‘Their inaction has certainly contributed to the environmental crises.’

‘Maybe, but he seems to think the real problem has been that they didn’t pray enough. And didn’t pray right. Plus I can’t see you agreeing that women resembling men and vice versa is a problem.’

‘No.’ She listened to the rest of the clip, which suggested that the world would be restored to health by the death of all—misguided Muslims as well as Christians, Jews, and the myriad other so-called religions—who failed to convert. Jo shivered a little. ‘Matt, can’t you find any sane religious leaders to interview?’

‘Not about the weather. Sane religious leaders don’t sound any different from scientists on the subject. Well, they use less jargon and they do suggest prayer, but that doesn’t really add anything to the discussion, does it?’

Not in the media, anyway. Sane discussion about complex topics never worked. Jo knew that. And the weather certainly wasn’t sane. Two more hurricanes had popped up in the Gulf of Mexico. The California fire still wasn’t under control. Disaster relief was barely underway in San Francisco—great footage of people walking to Sacramento. The heat wave that was killing people in Chicago had led to grass fires all across Indiana. No one even bothered to cover the extended drought in the southwest—after fifteen years, who cared? It was snowing in London. And something was going on in China, but no one knew what. USG couldn’t get a line in anywhere. Satellite coverage confirmed extensive flooding, but experienced China hands all said something political was afoot as well. No telling if that had to do with weather or was just another power shift.

Gail buzzed in with a report that the founder of Run Forever Inc.—the engineering firm that had cracked the problem of short-life batteries—had just sunk a billion dollars into the Gore-Lovelock Foundation, the think tank coordinating most of the global warming research. The Foundation's latest work was a sociology study on how to best preserve civil order during weather and related emergencies. Gail fought to get the report on the air. At least the Run Forever guy had a spot of charisma.

When her shift ended, Jo actually sat down and read the civil order report—something she rarely did. It started with ways local communities could plan in advance of disaster, setting out ways to organize an extensive network of volunteers who could jump in and take action regardless of whether they were dealing with floods, fires, or bombs. One whole section was devoted to handling refugees.

Refugees. Jesus. Jo thought back on that long line of people walking from San Francisco to Sacramento. Of course the earthquake probably wasn't related to the climate change problem. Earthquakes were a fact of life in California; everyone was always waiting for the big one. But this wasn't the big one—it was bad, but no worse than the ones in 1906 or 1989. She wondered why things seemed so much worse this time. Maybe too many of the city's disaster resources had been siphoned off for other problems, like the southern California fires.

Jo tried to think back to a day when weather hadn't dominated the news feed. She couldn't think of even one in the five years since she'd moved from reporter to mediameister. Even the LA bombings had been shoved aside by the Category 5 hurricane that left half of Houston under water. Eleven hundred people had died in LA, but the storm killed three thousand and permanently displaced half a million.

Act of God trumps acts of men, Jo thought. No wonder the preachers are doing so much business. People like magical explanations. She felt guilty about running all the apocalypse crap. Her master's thesis was on the misinterpretation of apocalyptic literature—her revenge on the Bible Belt town she'd left behind—and when she'd covered religion for USG, she'd done her best to avoid giving the crackpots any airtime.

But that was before the current president for news. Jo had always found it difficult to believe that people who possessed the ruthlessness required to climb a corporate ladder actually believed in any Christian virtues, but it seemed his church equated material success with God's blessing. And one didn't get rich loving one's neighbor.

Jo wasn't sure how many of the management types that stretched between her and the president actually shared his beliefs and how many were faking, but these days all corporate meetings at USG-News began with a prayer. And Matt was the apple of their collective eye.

They wouldn't have liked Matt if they'd actually known him. Matt didn't go to church; she was pretty sure he didn't believe in anything except getting a hot story. He did that spectacularly: At a time when scientific explanations should dominate the news, Matt managed to land a lead story four days out of five. And it was Jo—not upper management—who was deciding to run those stories.

Jo felt guilty, but Matt did great work and good jobs were hard to come by. Besides, she'd long ago shed any illusions she had about media contributing to the solution.

‘You got to see this, Jo.’ Matt was practically babbling. ‘You know that preacher I interviewed yesterday—the one that took over Falwell’s church in Lynchburg? He told me he was going to ‘drop a bomb’ in his sermon this morning. So I figured I’d better download it in real time. I was about half listening, half working up something else, and then this happened.’

Jo clicked on the feed. The preacher was saying, ‘God will punish them for their wicked ways.’ She had just enough time to wonder which ‘them’ he was referring to before the man disappeared. The pulpit was still there, but he was suddenly gone.

‘What the hell? Are you trying to liven up the Sunday morning shift by photoshopping the feed?’

‘This is two minutes old, Jo. I watched it three times before I called. He was there one second and gone the next. And watch as I pan out—about three quarters of the congregation went with him.’

‘Okay, so they’re playing some kind of trick with their feed. It’s a hoax, Matt. Gotta be. People don’t just disappear.’

‘It’s a really big hoax then, because that’s not the only place it happened. Look at this.’

‘This’ was the live show from the Redeemer Baptist Church in Dallas—the megachurch that had broken away from the Southern Baptists because they were too liberal. Again, the people were there one minute and gone the next. Matt manipulated his download of the webfeed and zoomed in

on one member of the remaining churchgoers. The man was shaking. He kept looking around the room and muttering, 'All gone, all gone.'

Then Matt focused on a crying baby. A little girl—not much more than a baby herself—picked it up and began to rock it. He panned the whole room. A couple of hundred people in a room that seated thousands.

'Oh, fuck,' Jo said. 'It's the rapture.'

A wealth of images raced through her brain. The first time she'd heard about the rapture, she'd been five and very excited about getting to sit through church with the grownups. But when the minister began talking about the day when God would take all the righteous into heaven, she had cried and cried, until her mother had to take her out of church. 'I don't want everybody to go,' she'd explained. And she hadn't been comforted by assurances that she'd get to go, too.

When she was ten, it had been a sermon on the rapture that had convinced her to march down to the altar to be saved, though Jo had never been sure if she had been motivated by ecstasy or fear. At fifteen, she had walked out of church during a particularly lurid description of how those left behind would suffer. She hadn't been inside a church of any kind since.

'The bastards were right,' Jo said under her breath. Her stomach clutched.

'What?' Matt was clearly freaked out about seeing people vanish, but he didn't seem to be suffering a religious crisis.

Jo decided to keep hers to herself. She took a deep breath, tried to keep her voice from shaking. 'We have to find out if this really happened. Maybe it's a hoax that a bunch of religious fanatics cooked up, to try to scare the rest of us around to their point of view. We can send the Dallas stringer out to Redeemer. Any other suggestions?'

Matt lived in a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. 'I can be in Lynchburg in a couple of hours.'

Jo shook her head before she again remembered they were just audio. 'No. I need you calling everyone you know. We've got to find out how widespread this is.'

'I'll make David drive so I can work.' David was Matt's partner. 'I can work as well in the van as I can here. Anyway, I want to see this one in person.'

'Okay,' Jo said, as she always said to Matt. 'But check in every ten minutes or so. I need answers.' Her voice cracked on 'minutes' and 'answers.'

'Sure, sure. Uh, Jo?'

‘Yeah?’

‘You know the rapture is just made up stuff, right?’

‘Of course,’ she said, trying to keep her voice as casual as possible. She wondered who she was trying harder to convince, Matt or herself.

Within fifteen minutes, Jo realized it hadn’t been necessary for Matt to go. Every reporter working Sunday morning was calling in and every stringer hoping to land a permanent job was filing feed. The Capitol Hill correspondent—who had been following live feed from a Bible Belt congressman so he could work up a feature piece—had watched as the man disappeared from his limo on the way back from early church.

The White House spokesperson said a statement would be forthcoming. He wouldn’t confirm whether it would be from the president.

The FBI spokesperson said all agents were in the field and they wouldn’t be able to comment until the investigation was further underway. The Department of Defense press office said they were pretty sure no one had invaded the country. The CIA said surveillance satellites didn’t show any unusual activity. The Transportation Security Administration said they were going to search everyone’s carry-on bags.

A reporter on vacation called in to report his harrowing experience when the pilot of the plane he’d been on disappeared during landing, along with two flight attendants and about a quarter of the passengers. The co-pilot managed to land the plane, but taking over in mid-landing had been damn scary, he said for the feed. The reporter was herding around several kids who’d been left parentless. ‘I guess I’ll take them to my mom’s, get them a decent meal while I try to find their relatives.’

The stringer from Dallas confirmed the situation at Redeemer. The roads are a mess, she said. Cars abandoned everywhere. She sent a clip of a bumper sticker—‘In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned’—on one of the abandoned cars.

Jo didn’t think it was funny. It was going just the way all the fundamentalist Christians had always said it would. She flashed on the self-righteous feelings she’d had at thirteen, when she’d gone to church several times a week and been sure she was among the saved, except for those times when she was thinking about boys and had been equally convinced she was among the damned. Those who’d disappeared were the ones who’d been able to keep themselves convinced.

She put calls into the news president and everyone else she could think of in management. No one was picking up. ‘Christ, they can’t all be gone,’ she shouted at the cat. All those backstabbers and asskissers couldn’t really be saved. Could they? Her heart was beating so quickly that she could almost hear it; she tried to put her fingers on her carotid artery to take her pulse, but her hands were shaking too much and her vision had become so blurred that she couldn’t even see the seconds change on the clock.

Anti-stress drugs had swept the nation in the last few years—some even going over-the-counter—but Jo had always disdained them. ‘We need to fix the problems that cause stress, not the stress,’ she’d declaimed to anyone who would listen. Now, though, she had to calm down or she wouldn’t be able to work. She might even have a stroke. Her attempts to slow her breathing and empty her mind weren’t working. She didn’t have time to run to the nearest drugstore for drugs—news was breaking too fast—so she opted for the old-fashioned response: alcohol. The closest bottle in her kitchen bar was an expensive single malt, and with her first swig she spilled more than she swallowed. But after the second her hands had stopped shaking quite so much and she was able to pour a healthy amount into a glass.

When she sat back down at her workstation, her vision had cleared and her hands could work the keyboard again. Matt called to report—with an air of chagrin. He couldn’t get out of the mountains because the roads were full of empty cars. He did send some feed from the Pentecostal Holiness Church in the town where he did his shopping. It was empty except for one very confused old woman—‘probably senile’—and about twenty kids. David was trying to track down the local social services staff to come take care of things, but given the state of the roads, it was going to be awhile.

Meanwhile Matt had a statement from the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, who advised everyone to stay calm and announced that all Episcopal churches would be available to take in the orphaned children. Apparently most Episcopalians hadn’t gone anywhere.

Matt couldn’t raise anyone at the Vatican, though.

At least ten reporters had interviews with people who claimed to have seen a UFO at about the time of the disappearances. Alien abduction? Absurd. But really, not any more absurd that assuming God had taken all the righteous into heaven. Jo toned down the interviews and put them on the air. She took another call.

‘Jo, it’s Diane Stern.’

Jo almost said, ‘Who?’ before she remembered: the USG VP for lifestyle news. ‘I’m so glad to hear from you, Diane. I haven’t been able to reach anyone in management.’

‘I seem to be the only person in News,’ she said. ‘I’ve spoken to corporate and they’ve put me in charge for now. I’ve been watching your feed and I like the way you’re playing everything straightforward—just the facts as we know them. I think that’s the way to go. Let the tabs play up this alien abduction and religious nonsense.’

‘So you don’t think this is the apocalypse?’ Jo said.

‘I don’t know what it is, but I don’t think anything is gained by haring off after magical explanations. I’m Jewish,’ she added, as if that might explain her attitude. ‘Uh, you don’t really think this is some kind of religious event, do you?’

‘No, no,’ Jo said, trying to sound as businesslike as possible. She took another drink of scotch. In ordinary times the amount she’d had would have made her drunk, but now it was just keeping her numb enough to work. She’d never before tried working on more than an occasional beer at lunch on a slow news day.

Jo edited Gail’s feed, which was a sequence of scientists saying they didn’t have a clue followed by a spokesperson from NASA, who said it couldn’t possibly be aliens. She ran twenty-three different interviews with governors urging people to be calm. The other statehouses weren’t responding.

She tossed in more weather news. One of the hurricanes looked like it might hit South Texas. Fire still had the upper hand in California and Indiana—it didn’t help that they’d lost a few firefighters in the mass disappearance. Order was beginning to be restored in San Francisco—they hadn’t lost many people up there.

Matt’s next report took her completely by surprise. ‘I can’t reach that imam in London,’ he said. ‘In fact, the only Muslims I can find right now are with that radical feminist group up in New York, though they assure me that they’re in contact with some others. And I tried that rabbi I interviewed last week, and I can’t reach him, either. Have you looked at the international feed lately? I think things are pretty crazy in Jerusalem right now.’

It wasn’t just Jerusalem. Apparently there were major disappearances in Tehran and Mecca as well. Indian reports suggested that half the

population might have disappeared. Nothing from China—but feed from China was still blocked. Europe had a lot of hotspots, both Muslim and Catholic. And the African feed was almost as crazy as the US—major disappearances all over the place, in both Muslim and Christian areas. Only in the few places where people primarily practiced what were usually termed primitive religions did anything appear to be remotely stable.

Japan seemed to be the only major country relatively unaffected.

Jo went for a walk after she got off shift—she was exhausted, but despite the amount she'd had to drink, her mind was way too wired to let her sleep. She wandered up State Street in a sea of other dazed people. Madison hadn't been hit too badly, but people were still freaked out. Everyone knew of someone who was gone.

She took refuge in a bar. USG news was playing on the TV. Brian had added a couple of things to the feed since she'd gone off shift, though nothing had really changed. She could hear pieces of conversation around her.

'Got to be an alien invasion. The government's just keeping it quiet.'

'Why would aliens want religious nuts?'

'Who knows what aliens want?'

A man sitting in a corner by himself was polishing off shot after shot of straight bourbon and whispering, 'I shoulda listened to the preacher.'

A group of what appeared to be graduate students was debating the subject while imbibing pitchers of beer. 'Look, it can't be the apocalypse. That's irrational. There's got to be a better explanation.'

'But they disappeared. Just like in the *Left Behind* books.'

'Those are fantasy novels. Bad fantasy novels.' You couldn't mistake the sneer in the voice.

'Well, it was like magic.' This person's tone was defensive.

'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.'

'Clarke's third law.'

'Now you're talking science fiction.' The person who had spoken out for magic, now sounding derisive. 'Magic doesn't happen, but aliens do?'

'There has to be other life in the universe.'

'So why haven't we seen any evidence of it?'

'Maybe we just did.'

Jo finished her drink and left. She walked around the capitol building, noticing all the lights. The legislators must be holding a late session, trying to think of something to do. She continued on to the terrace overlooking

Lake Monona. The moon laid a pattern of white across the water. Peaceful. The world was going to pieces, but at least lakes still reflected the moon. She stood there for almost an hour before going home and collapsing into bed. At three in the morning she woke from dreams she couldn't remember, and lay there, paralyzed with fear.

I shoulda listened to the preacher, she thought.

Another day, another shift. Despite her troubled sleep, Jo found she didn't need any coffee to wake up. An hour into her shift, she was sipping whiskey again just to keep her hands from trembling.

The Census Bureau reported that at least 60 million Americans disappeared. Other estimates reached 80 million. Worldwide guesses topped a billion. There was feed of a suicide bomber in Haifa who had vanished just as he started to put his finger on the button. The Indian government was in chaos—the latest best guess was that at least several hundred million Indians were gone. The reports from Pakistan were similar. None of the major religious-focused terrorist groups issued any statements.

The Speaker of the House had taken charge of the U.S. government. She made a speech that bumped all other feed, though she didn't say much except, 'Stay calm and help your neighbors.' She had pressed government workers into service—the military having been hard hit by disappearances, particularly the Air Force—and was sending them out to take over necessary services and particularly to take care of the abandoned children, who were everywhere.

Matt's feed summed up the new reality, as usual: A group of Jews, Muslims, and Christians had put together an emergency orphanage in Bethlehem (disappearances in the Middle East approached fifty percent of the adult population in some places) and were taking care of an equally mixed group of children. Everyone was intermingled, though they were trying to keep children from the same extended families together, to help them adjust to life without their parents and other relatives.

Matt then jumped to Kashmir, and a similar adoption project run by a coalition of Muslims and Hindus. The piece ended with an expert speculating that at least a billion and a half children had been orphaned by the disappearances. 'We must find homes for all these children—safe homes—and we need to do this quickly.'

Adoption is going to be a growth industry, Jo thought. She speculated on what her life might be like if she took in one of those abandoned children. She'd lived by herself for so long. They're part of the future, she thought. We all need to nurture them.

If there's a future.

After shift Jo poured another drink and, trembling a little, sat down to read Revelation. She muttered a small prayer as she started, 'Let me read this with an open mind and open heart.' It was the first time she'd prayed in years.

She started reading as if she were still a scholar, noting the similarity of the first chapter to other religious works of its time: the repeated sevens, the images of stars and candlesticks signifying enlightenment. She skimmed ahead, stopping on the chapter explaining that a hundred and forty-four thousand would be saved. Quite a jump from that to more than a billion. But then the population of the world back then was only about two hundred and fifty million. The numbers still didn't correlate. Less than one percent of the population was righteous enough for John in Revelation, but maybe 20 percent were gone now. Of course, John couldn't have known how many people lived in the world. No Internet back then.

She laid her Bible on the table. It was insane. The idea of the rapture was pure fantasy, an idea perpetuated by preachers who were so dumb—or desperate—they took mythology literally. She hadn't believed in it since she left the Baptist church behind. She didn't believe in it now, not with her rational mind. But her stomach turned over.

It had happened. There was no logical explanation, no scientific explanation, that made any sense. People don't just disappear, but they had. It wasn't a trick done by mirrors.

She picked up the Bible again, skimmed until she read, 'The first angel sounded, there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth; and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

'And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea; and the third part of the sea became blood.'

She shivered, skipped forward a few verses. 'Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth . . .'

Her hands were shaking. She almost dropped the book. Her mind flashed on preacher after preacher in her youth, each standing in the pulpit and screaming such words, painting dire pictures of what would happen

to those people who didn't follow their pronouncements: *Believe in our version of Jesus, hate those that don't believe, women are here to serve men, anything pleasurable is a sin, we are the true children of God.*

She jumped up and threw the Bible at the wall. It hit hard and landed open on the floor. The cat raced out of the room.

'I hate those people,' Jo screamed. 'It doesn't matter that they're right. I still hate them and what they have to say. If that's what God is about, then fuck God. Fuck God. I'd rather go to Hell.'

She collapsed back in her chair, burying her head in her hands. She expected tears, but none came. Instead, the knot in her stomach slowly relaxed itself. Her hands stopped shaking. 'I'd rather go to Hell,' she said again, and knew she meant it.

Despite the multiple crises, it had been wonderful not to run feed of someone blaming the ills of the universe on the sins of homosexuals or Jews or infidels or those who had not accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Instead, she had run stories of people trying to solve massive problems without name calling. She couldn't think of anyone she knew among the disappeared she'd liked or respected.

Of course, there could be the Antichrist somewhere—if the rapture were true, perhaps that was too. But Jo pushed that thought aside. Those who preached hate were gone. No matter where or why. The world was better off without them. 'I'd rather go to Hell,' she said for the third time, and crawled into bed to get a decent night's sleep.

Gail's feed included estimates of the worldwide population drop by an interdisciplinary team of scientists. 'Our best guess is that at least one point five billion people disappeared, dropping the population back to a little over five and a half billion, or early nineties levels. Coupled with the technological improvements made since then, we anticipate an actual drop in carbon emission levels this year—for the first time since we started measuring the human effect on the environment.'

Gail had balanced it with another scientist who figured even a twenty percent drop in the world population was too little, too late, but even this guy seemed gleeful.

Traditionally, Jo thought, those remaining after the rapture were supposed to be consumed with guilt—except for those under the influence of the Antichrist—but most of us seem pretty happy. Matt hadn't come

up with one interview from a religious leader who was worrying about any coming struggle with the Antichrist.

His feed today included particularly moving footage of one of those children left behind—an eleven-year-old boy who was crying as he spoke. ‘Why didn’t Jesus take me?’ he asked. ‘I was just baptized two weeks ago. I love Jesus. My mama is gone. Why didn’t Jesus take me?’

It made Jo’s heart ache to watch it, though she worked her editing magic on it briskly and got it on the air. Why weren’t the children gone? Especially the ones who had been saved. As near as she could tell, the youngest people among the disappeared were somewhere between seventeen and twenty.

She punched up the research desk. ‘Comb through the reports and see if you can find anything about pregnant women who were suddenly not pregnant when the people disappeared.’ No, they reported back after a few hours. Several reports, but when chased down they turn out to be women who weren’t pregnant at all. A couple of hoaxes, a couple of nutcases. And a few stories about women disappearing a few days later, just after giving birth. No live feed, though—that could be hoaxes, too.

Jo sat there staring at her screen. Not just Christians gone. Well, maybe that just signified that religious differences were not as large as everyone had thought. No children. Why would a just God leave children among us sinners? Plenty of religious people left, but no one who professed no religion among the disappeared, as least as far as anyone could tell.

The phone was buzzing. Matt. ‘Jo, have you got an in with the new head of news? I want to put in for a transfer and I don’t really know her.’

Diane Stern’s appointment as head of the news division had been made permanent. USG-News was making do without the rest of management—fortunately, there had been few disappearances among the actual news gathering staff. Stern recognized that her mediameisters knew their trade, and had given them encouragement and free rein while she tried to hold the company together. A few people would likely be promoted into management eventually, but right now they were needed on the ground.

‘Sure, I’ll hook you up with Diane. But why do you want a change?’

‘The religious stuff is getting boring.’

‘Boring? A billion and a half people disappear and you find it boring?’

‘Oh, that’s not boring. Or at least, there’s lots of good stories about picking up the pieces. But anything interesting about religion disappeared along with all the people. Now all the preachers say is love one another.’

‘So what do you want to cover?’

‘Tibet, I think.’

‘Tibet?’

‘Yeah. I think things are about to get interesting there.’

Jo shook her head, but said, ‘Go on and put in a request. I’ll back you up with Diane. I’m sure someone else is dying for your beat, though I don’t know if there are enough resources to assign someone to just Tibet.’

‘Oh, that will work out,’ Matt said.

She was still wondering why Tibet when she took her next call. An Asian correspondent had an interview with the Dalai Lama.

‘We have accepted the kind invitation of the new leadership in Beijing to return to our homeland on our terms,’ the Dalai Lama said. ‘They are offering us some very generous resources to aid us through the transition from their government back to our own, so that we will be able to do our part in caring for and educating some of the many children abandoned in the worldwide disappearances in addition to providing for our own people. I am confident that our new working relationship with China will be a positive one.’

New leadership in Beijing? But now that was coming too—the block on China had broken. It seemed that the recent flooding—which had killed at least fifty million and probably many, many more—had provided the catalyst for what was being described even by the most cautious diplomats as a democratic coup. As a gesture of goodwill in these uncertain times, they were pulling out of Tibet.

She buzzed Matt as soon as she had put the feed on the air. ‘How did you know about Tibet and China?’

‘I didn’t. I’m just watching your feed now. But it makes sense. We knew something was going on in China. And they’re smart to placate the Dalai Lama. After all, he didn’t disappear along with the Pope and the Ayatollah and all those preachers. He’s obviously got juice.’

‘Maybe he’s the Antichrist,’ Jo said.

‘Jo, you know that Antichrist stuff is just more nonsense, don’t you? Don’t you?’ He sounded worried.

Jo didn’t answer right away. Not the anti-Christ, but the anti-hater, she thought. The spokesperson for a new world, one where people didn’t kill each other in the name of God. People would still find reasons to kill each other—the human race still had too few resources and too many people—but it was a start. That’s why the kids were left behind—they weren’t old

enough to make a commitment to the God of Hate. Even God recognizes an age of reason.

‘I think they went to Hell,’ Jo said. ‘The people who disappeared.’

‘Jo! Since when do you believe all that religious crap?’

‘Something happened to all those people who built their religions on hate, and you might as well call it God. Maybe a just God. Or maybe what they believed in was an evil God and that’s what took them. It’s something we don’t understand. But we don’t have to understand. Look at all the islands of compassion that are springing up amid all this chaos. People are taking in abandoned children; they aren’t out shooting each other.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Maybe Revelation was right about the Apocalypse; just wrong about who the righteous were. Maybe the left behind are the true righteous.’

‘Jo.’ Matt sounded a little scared.

She needed to reassure him that she wasn’t nuts. ‘Don’t worry about it. In the end, it doesn’t matter what took them away.’

‘What if it was aliens?’ Matt said.

Now he sounded like someone for the funny farm. ‘Nope. Not aliens.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘Because you want to cover Tibet, not the space program. I trust your instinct—whatever you want to cover has got to be the next important thing. I don’t know how you know—hell, you don’t know how you know—but you’re always right. The Dalai Lama is going to be the next big story.’

‘Yeah, well then think about this. Maybe the Dalai Lama is an alien.’

She laughed. Matt didn’t.

It was only after she hung up that Jo realized Matt was serious.

BLUE VS RED

SÉBASTIEN DOUBINSKY

'The idea behind "Blue vs Red",' the author explains, 'came to me while watching news footage of the London riots and the budding moments of Occupy Wall Street. It struck me that what the police were actually defending was inequality accepted as a norm—nothing new under the Western sun there, of course--but then I got to thinking what would things look like if the "healthy competition principle" were to be applied to the police themselves.' Sounds like a fair cop to us!

Mr. Doubinsky is the author of The Babylonian Trilogy (first published by PS and renamed Goodbye Babylon for the US edition) and of Absinth and The Song Of Synth, published by PS as a double-decker.

'The privatization of the city has been an unprecedented source of wealth and welfare. Trivia City is now among the five richest cities in the world, and, what is even more important, the third happiest city of the Western Alliance, according to The New Petersburg Times.'

—Robert 'Call Me Bob' Watts, CEO and Mayor General of Trivia City, formerly known as New Babylon.

FOURTH DAY OF RIOTS. I CANNOT . . . WELL, I SHOULD . . .
Fucking too hot in here. Only three hours of sleep last night. Why did they wake us up so early? We've been sitting in the fucking Transporter for seven hours now. And I'm sitting in front of Farias, of all people. Farias! Bitching Farias! Seven hours. Damn.

‘Y
o, Russell, you awake? You sleeping?’

Russell slowly shook his head. The full-contact helmet’s mirror-visor reflected Farias’s elongated silhouette, sitting in front of him. They had received orders to keep their visors down, in case there should be a surprise attack on the Transporter. How this could happen, nobody could really figure out—but this might very well have been the point. The definition of surprise is surprise itself. In any case, it was hot as hell underneath the helmet. Not to mention they were wearing their full-contact suits as well.

‘Fuck it!’ Farias said. ‘When are we gonna get some *action*?’

Typical Farias. Fuckhead. They had been in the streets containing the riots for four days now and she wanted some *action*. Russell rested his head against the Transporter’s panel. The helmet gave out a muffled ‘thump’ against the bullet-proof carbon body.

Russell glanced at the other eight shapes sitting like him in the Transporter. Harris, Zalowsky, Guinn, Stazio, Mrabet, Deschamps, Khair and Brooke. Male, female, male, female, male, female, male, female. The equality laws. Good thing. One plus one, everywhere. Beautiful. He had been skeptical at first, but those girls in the Force could neutralize anybody as well as the boys. He had seen some amazing things. But he had to admit they could also be a pain in the ass. Like, right now. Seven hours in front of Farias, who never stopped talking, bitching about everything. Food, salary, benefits, hierarchy, kids, school-system, you name it. He suddenly wondered why she wasn’t outside, with the other fucks, on the barricades.

*A*ction. I’ll give you some action Farias. Up your butt. Tons of action. More than you can take. Crazy bitch. Why me? Why couldn’t I sit in front of Zalowsky? She’s cool. Only opens her mouth when really necessary. ‘Freeze!’ ‘Drop to the ground’ ‘This is my last warning’ Perfect. Why did he . . . ? Oh yeah—‘Team Spirit.’ That program: everybody cares for everybody else. Hell, I don’t want to care about Farias. I’ll never care about Farias. But I have to pretend to, otherwise no bonus at the end of the month. ‘Team Spirit = Team Bonus.’ It’s written on this big poster at the precinct. Can’t miss it. But fuck you, Farias. Fuck you.

‘Hey, Russell, pretty good that trick you did yesterday, with that negotiator. He sure didn’t see it coming.’

Farias again . . . Some of the others chuckled at the recollection. It sounded weird through the suit’s speakers. Like sick machines coughing. He had to admit that the story was fun and he felt the corners of his mouth rise upwards as if pulled by an invisible fisherman. Braindead came down from a barricade, waving a white flag—a dirty t-shirt nailed on a broomstick. Russell waited among the red and white flares, watching the rail-thin idiot make his way towards him. The others had stopped too, watching, their Pacifying Sticks at the ready. The moron now stood a few feet away from Russell, panting. Stupid student fuck or something. The student smiled and opened his mouth to say something, but Russell snatched the broomstick away from him and broke the retard’s jaw with it in one swift gesture—snap, crackle and pop! The guy dropped to his knees, squealing, and they took turns kicking him with their contact boots and beating him with Pacifying Sticks. As they carried him back to the Restraining Vehicle, Russell ripped the t-shirt from what remained of the broomstick and wiped some of the blood off the rioter’s face. ‘Good you came prepared,’ he said, while the colleagues shoved him in the RV. Hahaha.

‘Man, I gotta pee,’ Guinn said, standing up. He opened the doors of the Transporter and walked out to the Hygiene Truck.

‘Five minutes, Guinn!’ Russell shouted after him.

He was the Leader Elect of the week. New democratic rules. Everybody had to take up the responsibility for a while. Of course, if anybody fucked up, they were all held responsible—but it was the Leader Elect who would lose his monthly bonus. Not fun, when you had a mortgage and a new car to pay for. But he liked the idea of sharing responsibilities. Made one feel part of it all. The bigger picture.

Two weeks and the promotion game. Maybe I’ll win this time. Spent all my free time surfing on the Net and reading the papers. Trivia. Still angry about last year’s trick question. ‘How many jailed in the South Quarter riots?’ Answered 345, and I lost. The correct answer was 5. I had thought ‘arrested’, not ‘jailed.’ Travak was the lucky one. Promoted to Second Sergeant with the possibility of choosing his unit. He now was with the Crime Brigade. Saw him the other day with his new colleagues.

New watch. New shoes. New haircut. Fuck him. No, this time, it's going to be me. And I'm going to choose Missing Citizens. No more stupid students throwing things at me. A quiet office and desperate relatives. No problem. Grief is easier to handle than violence.

I think we're on soon,' Guinn said, coming back and shutting the doors behind him. 'The HappyLifers are here.'

'What?'

Russell was shocked. Nobody had told him there would be competition. He focused on the GoodLife logo stitched on Farias's arm, right under the carbon shoulder protection. This was the GoodLifers' territory. The Mayor had said so. The Chief of Police had said so.

'Guinn, you sure?'

Guinn's helmet nodded.

'They're parked right next to us.'

The other guys sighed and complained. Electric concerto in the confined space. Russell waved them to silence. He was worried in case someone said something stupid and pissed off some of the brass. Everything was filmed and recorded. Which was OK—it was for their own good, in case some citizen complained. Everything on tape. 'See?' Everything legal. But sometimes Russell thought it was a double-sided weapon. Like right now.

'Guys, everybody, keep cool. I'm sure there's an explanation.'

As if on cue the double doors opened and Superintendent Leoni stepped in, dressed in full Protective Suit, save for the helmet. They immediately saluted their superior, who vaguely saluted them back.

'Gentlemen, ladies,' he said, and smiled, staring at his reflection in the ten visors around him.

'You have done a tremendous job these past four days and Trivia City is proud of you. However. . .'

He paused and smiled again, like a dog ready to pounce.

'However, the good-humored citizens of this great city are getting tired of this senseless violence and would like it to end. It is true that it is getting a little boring to see you guys every night on TV. People like variety.'

They all laughed politely, like cheerful robots.

'So the Mayor General has decided to turn these unfortunate events into something more . . . exciting.'

He paused again, waiting for the words to sink in.

*O*h no . . . No . . . Not that . . . Not now . . . They can't . . . Fuck, we're exhausted . . . No . . . No way . . . Sometimes I get tired of this GoodLife/HappyLife competition . . . We all know it's the same fucking company, with two different names . . . Come on . . . Give us a break . . .

'The Town Council has agreed to open up a new competition—Blue vs. Red. You get my drift, ladies and gents?'

A few tired nods. Russell nodded the longest.

'I know you're tired. I know . . . But it'll be worth your while, I promise. The prize will be . . .'

All the helmets rose in unison.

' . . . free tickets to the Trivia City Bowl—the entire season! For the whole team and their families.'

Hands clapped. Cheers feedbacked through the portable speakers.

'Don't let me down! Go out there and show those HappyLifers idiots who the real cops are out here!'

Walking out the door, Russell glanced at the red uniforms coming from the HappyLife Corporation Security Service. Ten against ten. At least, that was fair. Night was falling and he felt more comfortable as their own dark blue Goodlife uniforms made them harder to spot in the penumbra. Element of surprise. A couple of TV vans were advancing too. So it was going to be live. He took a deep breath and walked a few steps ahead of his team. At the end of the avenue, he could see the reddish glow of the burning cars and the black misshapen hill of the barricade. It was good to stand up after those seven hours stuck in front of fucking Farias. He began to jog towards the barricade, followed by the others. He hoped his wife and son would be watching.

THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPENED

SCOTT EDELMAN

'We'd all like to be forgiven, and we all wish we had the capacity to forgive, but what if true forgiveness was an impossibility? Could we still find a way to grant or receive it anyway?' This is what Mr. Edelman says he sought to explore in 'Things That Never Happened', his fourth story to appear in Postscripts. 'I set up a situation to examine that theme, and came up with a scenario which many of us might someday find ourselves facing, mixed with aspects I hope none will ever have to face anywhere but in the pages of a story.' You've been warned. Proceed with caution.

Mr. Edelman has published more than 75 short stories. Of these, his many zombie yarns have been collected in What Will Come After, which appeared from PS in 2011, while his science fiction can be found in What We Still Talk About. He has been a Stoker Award finalist five times, in the categories of both Short Story and Long Fiction. Additionally, the author currently works for the Syfy Channel as the Editor of Blastr. He was the founding editor of Science Fiction Age, which he edited during its entire eight-year run. He has been a four-time Hugo Award finalist for Best Editor. His next short story after this one will be published in the anthology The Monkey's Other Paw: Revived Classic Stories of Dread and the Dead from NonStop Press. Of particular interest (at least it was to editor/publisher Pete), Scott has joined the prestigious George Formby Society... got a membership card, bought a ukelele and the whole nine yards. People with a strong disposition can see him here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPV0akGZH64 (now that is scary!)

WHEN BARB, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, VISITED THE woman who had raised her, she assumed, after all of their tumultuous history together, that she'd see in that wrinkled face—

—a hint of fear—

—or possibly even some barely suppressed anger—

—or a trace of irritation at being interrupted—

—and would remorse have been too much to ask for after how she'd been treated?

But instead, the reaction Barb received was as if she was a stranger.

As the woman in the bed looked up, and saw who'd come into her private room, her expression didn't change. Not at all.

Barb had arrived at the nursing home too late.

'Eleanor,' she said. 'Hello.'

She was unable, even after years of therapy and especially after the things that had recently happened in her life, to speak the word 'mother' to this woman, to even use it in her thoughts. But then, because all she got in return for her greeting was a nod and a slight smile and no apparent acknowledgement of the minefield that stretched between them, Barb forced herself to dig deep and say a word she'd banished from her vocabulary long ago.

'Hello, mother.' She said it as flatly as she could, her lips barely moving, but Eleanor didn't seem to mind—or even appear to notice.

Barb dragged a chair to one side of the bed, momentarily thinking she should ask, 'Mind if I sit down?' But she was beyond asking her mother permission for anything anymore. Those days had passed. Were past.

She placed herself between her mother and the window, wanting the glare of the sun in her mother's eyes so she'd have to squint during their conversation. A petty desire, perhaps, and one her therapist wouldn't have been happy to hear about it, but even small paybacks had their pleasures. Besides, Eleanor still had the upper hand in the relationship, even if the Eleanor Barb knew was long gone, and she needed every advantage she could get.

'We have a lot to talk about,' said Barb.

And Eleanor, continuing to smile, asked, 'And *you* are?'

There was even a twinkle to her eyes. Barb couldn't believe it. Where was the damned twinkle when Barb needed it growing up, when it could have saved her? But no, Eleanor had been storing up all of her smiles and twinkles until now, when it no longer mattered. How was it possible she could be happy, happy to see *her*? But then she was probably happy to see anyone and everyone who bothered to visit her.

That wasn't what Barb wanted. That wasn't what Barb expected. That wasn't what Barb needed.

Too late.

Much too late.

But she had to try.

'I'm your daughter,' Barb said, trembling. So many of their conversations had taken place with Barb trembling, and as she looked at Eleanor, even in that deteriorated condition, she was brought immediately back to all of them. 'It's Barbara. Don't you remember your daughter Barbara?'

'I have a daughter?' Eleanor asked.

'Yes, you have a daughter,' said Barb.

'How about that?' she said. 'I have a daughter.'

'But you never acted like it,' said Barb. 'You never treated me the way a mother should. Surely you still remember at least that. You've got to.'

Eleanor's smile faded, but only enough to make her look slightly confused, rather than unhappy. Barb wondered whether a person could even *be* unhappy over a past she no longer remembered. And Barb needed her to be. She so desperately needed her to be.

'If I . . .' Eleanor started to say, then stopped, then started over. 'Then I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry . . . what did you say your name was again?'

Eleanor saying she was sorry? Barb had never known it to happen before.

She'd hoped for an apology, but not one like this.

She wanted whimpering, she wanted begging for mercy and pleading for forgiveness, she wanted to see the stoic face she remembered crumple and fall in on itself, she wanted to hear the words 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' repeating over and over again as tears streamed down the face of the woman who'd raised her, and then, when Barb finally told her exactly what it was she had just done as the end result of all the abuse she had been handed, she wanted to hear some shrieking as well. She wanted to see Eleanor fall to her knees and cry out to God.

As if there was a God.

Instead, all she got were empty words, a reflex of a response—like an automatic 'bless you' after a sneeze—from a woman who didn't know to whom she was apologizing, who didn't know who *either* of them was anymore.

Not good enough.

‘Do you remember me, mother?’ said Barb. ‘Do you remember when I was a little girl?’

‘You were a little girl,’ said Eleanor quietly. Her voice was not so much blank as astonished, as if anything but this moment, with Barb before her in this state, was inconceivable to her.

‘Yes, mother, I was a little girl,’ said Barb. ‘Your little girl. I’d come home from school crying because the other girls were making fun of me, and do you remember what you’d say?’

‘What would I say?’ asked Eleanor.

‘Actually,’ said Barb. ‘At first you wouldn’t say anything. At first you’d laugh. I hated that laugh. It hurt so much I’d rather you’d slapped me. But you’d just laugh, and take another puff on your cigarette, and tell me that I didn’t have it so bad, that when you were a girl, you’d had to hide in basements from soldiers. You told me *that’s* something worth getting upset about, not being teased by classmates. What I felt . . . to you it was nothing.’

‘I said that,’ said Eleanor, continuing to be amazed.

‘Yes, you said that,’ said Barb, shouting this time. This wasn’t the way she had planned it. Barb told herself to calm down. Just calm down and get to the point. *Tell her.*

‘And how about high school?’ said Barb. ‘Remember high school, and how miserable I was? Binging. Purging. Cutting. Hurting myself in so many ways. I’d laugh all one day and cry all the next. And I asked you for help. Do you remember that? Even after all the years of belittling, of mockery, I still reached out. Do you know how hard that was? Do you know how desperate I was? But it was pointless. I should have known it would be. And again, you told me that nothing that ever happened to me could ever be as bad as what had happened to you. I wasn’t allowed to be sad, and I wasn’t allowed to be depressed. I wasn’t allowed to be *me.*’

Barb leaned forward in the chair, almost reaching out to grab Eleanor, to shake her until she understood. But what would be the point of even trying? She knew it would be useless.

‘You wouldn’t *let* me be me,’ said Barb.

A stocky woman, her blouse covered with pastel flowers, walked into the room just then, carrying a fresh set of bed linens.

‘And how are we doing today, Mrs. Asher?’ she asked.

‘I’m fine today, Patrice,’ said Eleanor, brightening.

Patrice gently placed a free hand on Eleanor's shoulder.

'Lean forward a bit so I can change your pillowcase, won't you, dear?'

As she guided Eleanor to sit up, Patrice stepped back, bumping into the chair by the side of the bed.

'Now how did this get here?' she asked. Frowning, she pushed it back into a corner, then continued changing Eleanor's sheets. Patrice moved her from one side of the bed to the other, keeping up a constant comforting chatter until she had the woman tucked back under her blanket again. When she was done, she patted Eleanor on the back of one hand.

'You have a good day, Mrs. Asher.'

'You do the same, Patrice,' said Eleanor.

Barb was by the bed again the moment the nurse left the room. This time, she didn't bother with a chair. She was too angry to sit, and so loomed over Eleanor, her shadow touching her in a way she never could.

'Her, you remember?' said Barb. 'Her, but not your own daughter?'

Barb was so angry she had no idea what to say next. Her entire script, so carefully rehearsed, had fled. Her mother peered up at her, lifting one hand to shade her eyes against the sun.

'Have we met?' she asked.

'Yes, we've met,' shouted Barb, dropping to her knees. 'We've met, we've met, we've met.'

She flung herself across her mother's lap and cried. What more was there to say?

Eleanor reached to comfort her daughter, but hesitated before touching the unfamiliar flesh. She turned her hands palms up and looked from her arms to those of her daughter and back again.

'Your wrists,' she said, both statement and question. 'What happened to your wrists?'

Barb raised her face from the blanket and looked at the twin gashes which ran lengthwise up her arms, fresh cuts ripping through her skin alongside numerous older scars.

'What do you think happened to my wrists?' she said, watching Eleanor's expression for a sign, a sign that someone was still home. 'I killed myself, mother. I killed myself because of you.'

Eleanor's eyes widened, and she pulled away, pressing back into her pillow. But there was nowhere further to go.

'No,' she whispered.

‘Yes, mother,’ said Barb. ‘And now I’m back to make you pay. Why else do you think I would finally visit you after all these years? But how can I haunt you if you won’t remember?’

‘I won’t remember,’ Eleanor said flatly, but regardless of the emptiness of her tone, her forehead furrowed, and she turned her eyes away.

‘See these scars?’ said Barb, thrusting her arms closer to Eleanor, forcing her to bear witness. ‘This one is from when I cut myself after I broke up with Billy, and you told me you always knew it would happen because I wasn’t good enough for him anyway. This is from when I didn’t get that part I wanted so badly in the school play, and you said my voice wasn’t right for the lead, that if I’d gotten it, the audience would only have laughed. And this one here—you see it? That’s from after Harry left me, and you said it wouldn’t have happened if I’d been a better wife. These aren’t scars, these are my life. I’m wearing my history. I’m wearing *your* history, mother.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Eleanor, but Barb knew differently. She could see from her mother’s eyes that perhaps she was finally, finally beginning to understand.

‘You taught me that whatever happened in my life was my own fault,’ continued Barb. ‘Then on top of that you told me I had no right to feel whatever it was I felt about my life. And you belittled every attempt I ever made to find help. You broke me, mother. Broke me so badly each day was agony. I couldn’t take it anymore. So I ended the pain the only way I knew how. I killed myself, mother, and I was cursing your name as I did. I want you to know that.’

‘You killed yourself,’ said Eleanor, the flatness gone from her voice, replaced only by horror.

‘*You* killed me mother,’ said Barb, looking down at her wrists, and then back to her mother, her eyes filled with contempt. ‘*You* did. And you started doing it the day I was born.’

‘No, no, no,’ shouted Eleanor, slapping her hands at Barb, trying to push her daughter off the bed. But it was no use. Instead, her hands passed right through. She gasped, and held those hands to her chest. ‘Why are you telling me these lies? Stop it. Stop it!’

Patrice ran into the room and rushed to Eleanor’s bedside.

‘What’s wrong, Mrs. Asher,’ she said. ‘Why were you shouting?’

She looked at Eleanor, saw there would be no answer, and quickly ran off.

‘You remember me now, mother, don’t you?’ said Barb. ‘I can see it. You remember.’

‘Of course, I remember you, Barbara,’ said Eleanor, sitting up, all confusion and uncertainty gone, suddenly able to push her daughter away. ‘How could I possibly forget? I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone to complain as much as you did.’

Barb held a hand to her face as if smacked and stumbled back into the chair on the other side of the room. Her mother had returned, the mother she remembered. What was she thinking, expecting closure? All she was in for was more pain.

‘Mother, how could you?’ said Barb, whimpering, the words catching in her throat.

‘How could I?’ said her mother. ‘How could I not?’

Eleanor stood, towering over her daughter. Now Barb was the one trying to get away, pushing her chair back until it banged against the wall. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. It wasn’t.

‘Compared to my life, yours was a fairytale,’ said Eleanor. She held a hand to her mouth as if expecting a cigarette, then looked surprised because none was there. ‘I was the one with a hard life. But did you ever hear me complaining? No! Your father abandoned us both, but did I bitch about it? No! All I ever wanted was to give you a better life than the one I was handed, the one I learned to live with. And I did that for you. But it was never good enough. Nothing could ever be good enough for you.’

The words landed like blows, and Barb curled smaller in her chair. But there was no escape. Even after what she had done, how could there be no escape?

‘How can you do this?’ Barb said. ‘How could you speak to your daughter this way?’

‘You’re no daughter of mine,’ said Eleanor, kneeling down so that Barb was forced to look her in the eyes. ‘You have my blood, yes, but my spirit? I’ve yet to see it. You’re weak. Strong enough to complain about your life, but not strong enough to do something about it.’

‘I *was* strong enough,’ shouted Barb, her voice trembling with both fear and rage. ‘Strong enough to do *this!*’

Barb pushed her hands forward to once more show off her wounds, and this time, when Eleanor slapped out at her, she made contact, knocking them away.

‘Only your cowardice was strong,’ said Eleanor. ‘You were too afraid to live. You’ve always been too afraid to live. So what if you finally did what you’d already been doing bit by bit each day?’

It was as if Barb had never died. Was this what life—or whatever it was that came after life—was going to be like? Eleanor opened her mouth once more, ready to continue the abuse Barb thought she had ended, when the room suddenly filled with doctors and nurses, shouting at each other, wheeling carts with machinery that blinked and beeped. Barb looked to the bed and saw her mother lying there, a doctor already pressing paddles onto her chest.

‘Clear!’ he shouted, and as the others pulled away, Eleanor jerked. The doctor waited in silence, watching a monitor until its flat line began to dance. ‘She’s back. You saved this woman’s life, Patrice. If you hadn’t heard her shouting . . .’

The doctors and nurses left the room, leaving the machinery behind, and soon Barb was alone with her mother once more. She moved slowly to the bedside.

‘Mother?’ she asked. ‘Mother, are you there?’

Eleanor opened her eyes, eyes which told Barb nothing.

‘Mother?’

‘Hello,’ said Eleanor, smiling weakly. ‘It’s nice of you to come. Am I supposed to know you?’

‘Yes,’ said Barb. ‘Yes, you are.’

‘Who are you, dear?’ said Eleanor.

‘Don’t you recognize me?’ asked Barb.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Eleanor. ‘I have trouble remembering things these days. I’ve had trouble remembering things for awhile.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Barb.

Eleanor smiled. It was an honest smile. Barb had made her happy.

‘Good,’ said Eleanor. ‘So, who are you?’

‘I’m . . . I’m your daughter,’ said Barb.

‘I had a daughter?’ said Eleanor.

Barb held her breath, which felt odd, as she no longer had any breath to hold. Breathing had been left behind, abandoned to the world of the living, along with so much else . . . except for what truly mattered, except for what she’d been trying to escape. That, apparently, was inescapable. Even though life could be extinguished, her lifelong struggle would know no end.

When Barb woke in the bloody bathtub—was ‘woke’ even the right word, she thought, to use about one who was dead?—she knew she’d have to make her way to this place, to put a period at the end of the sentence of her relationship with . . . Eleanor.

With her mother. (It was somehow easier to call her that now.)

But the closure she sought was no longer even possible. How could it be? How does someone who no longer exists find closure with someone else who is herself only a shadow?

Staring into her mother’s childlike eyes, finding the woman she’d known both there and not there, Barb realized . . . there *was* another way. A way that could give her more than mere closure. What she had been seeking during her long, agonizing life but had never found was finally within her reach.

‘I had . . . a daughter,’ Eleanor repeated with wonder.

How much time had passed while Barb was lost in deciding what to say next? She couldn’t tell. She sat slowly on the edge of the bed.

‘Yes,’ Barb said finally. ‘Yes, you did. And you loved her. You loved her very much.’

‘That’s nice, dear,’ said Eleanor. ‘Tell me about her.’

And Barb decided she would, taking what she could get, telling of things that had never happened to the mother she’d never had, over and over again, until she could almost believe them.

THE KEY TO HARRY

ALLEN ASHLEY & DOUGLAS THOMPSON

'The Key To Harry' was born out of a conversation between Douglas and Allen Ashley at Fantasycon 2010 in Nottingham, on the topic of 'short story ideas you've had for years but never acted upon' and Allen responded in full schoolmaster mode by demanding that Thompson have the first paragraph on his desk by Monday. Only after the story was finished did the authors discover evidence, somewhat eerily, that Houdini may indeed have had a major bust-up with Bess shortly before his death, in the form of a friend recalling him being thrown out of their house in the rain. Later her national competition, to find a psychic with a message from Harry from beyond the grave, was won by a medium whose message said 'Forgive'. Forgiveness for what? The Kate Bush song about Houdini, much loved by Ashley, has still not been heard by Thompson. Buy that man the CD.

*Mr. Ashley divides his time between writing, tutoring and editing. He recently celebrated his ninth book, as editor of *Where Are We Going?* (Eibonvale Press, 2012). This was launched at a BFS Open Night in March 2012 at which all available copies were sold on the night. After recovering from that pleasant shock, Allen set about judging this year's BFS Short Story Competition.*

For the very latest news, keep an eye on www.allenashley.com.

*Mr. Thompson, meanwhile, has had stories in a wide range of magazines and anthologies, most recently *Ambit* and *Albedo One*. He won the Grolsch/Herald Question of Style Award in 1989 and second prize in the Neil Gunn Writing Competition in 2007. He is the author of five novels: *Ultrameta* (2009) and *Sylvow* (2010), both from Eibonvale*

Press, Apoidea (2011) from *The Exaggerated Press*, Mechagnosis (2012) from *DogHorn Press*, and *Entanglement* (2012) from *Elsewhen Press*.
<http://douglasthompson.wordpress.com/>

DEEP, DEEP, DEEP THEY ALL GO INTO THE DEEP. OR WHATEVER that line of poetry was. Honestly, the stupid things that popped into one's head whilst striving to save one's soul. Despite all the training and the discipline.

Actually, none of them went into the deep except Harry. The crowd watched from the bank side. He would see them soon, and they him, if he could just loosen the chains around his wrists and from there, unlock the rest of the metal encumbrances. Without breathing. Without drowning.

He didn't hold the prejudices that so many others in this home of the brave still held. He was an immigrant just like those the ruling class despised. He'd changed his name. He'd married Catholic. He kept within the Caucasian circle but was polite to every bellhop and bootblack. There was much to learn from other world cultures. Like the pearl fishers and their breath control. Some of them dived with a small knife clenched between their teeth, a tool to unlock the oyster shell. Rather like a key, in fact. The one passed by Bess's kiss which he now regurgitated and set about using. Half blinded by the murk of the oily river, he progressed by touch and instinct.

It was cold down here. Dangerous for divers and droppers alike, the mud on the riverbed squelchy, engulfing to the unwary.

Move into that space out of time. Let the muscles relax, the tendons loosen. Follow the regular order and release the joints, limbs and torso without fuss or panic. No box this time, just chains. Cheap work, not up to the standard of National Steel. A kitten could have wriggled out of their already rusting grasp.

At last, surfacing, ears popping, water running off flattened hair into his eyes. Blinking the intrusion away, scanning the cheering crowd with their patriotic flags and supportive banners. The ordinary Joes never wished him to fail. Just the journalists and impresarios.

Bess, I'm back. Alive and breathing. Kiss me again.

After the danger of the escape, the joy of being found. Harry quivered naked in Bess's arms. The fine silk sheets from Macy's, thirty dollars a yard, monogrammed. A proof of their wealth and fame. Every wall adorned with photographs of presidents and film stars. The inescapable Harry with everyone, beholden to none.

'I could have killed you tonight . . .' Bess teased, kissing his brow.

'And every other night,' Harry laughed, 'What more trust than that could a woman want? The power of life and death . . .'

Bess sighed and reached for a cigarette, placing her hand under his chin. 'Ahh . . . My little Jewish boy . . . how your mother disapproves of me, even after all these years. Lucky she's so deaf and the walls are thick.'

Harry shivered for a second, and tensed, sitting up.

'What's wrong, my little circus performer . . .?' she mocked, running her hand between his legs. 'Lost your little key all of a sudden? Nothing iron down there?'

Gently, he drew her hand away, still smiling. 'Mother is tolerant. It's Christians who're bigoted, always muttering away about how the Jews killed their prophet . . .'

'And didn't they?' Bess asked.

Harry stood up for a moment and walked to the window and gazed out into the city at night, the swaying streets of lights, diffused in raindrops on the glass. He reached out his hand to touch his own partial reflection. A giant naked man, not five feet but five miles high, projected like a giant signboard, a *golem* escaped from the ghetto, Colossus of Rhodes astride the greatest city in the world, the most free.

Bess sighed behind him: 'When I pushed the key into your mouth today, our little secret, that illicit kiss, I thought of you . . . entering me.'

'And have you any other little secrets?'—Harry laughed, returning to bed and pinning her down, interlocking his palms and fingers with hers, spreading her arms wide, like a cross.

'From you, after all these years?'—she smiled.

'Like Judas . . .' he muttered as they kissed. Then looked at her sadly: 'Never betray me, Bess . . .'

The tightening of the stomach muscles. A staple of the stage act, popular with the young bucks keen to impress their sweethearts on a vaudeville date. Up onto the stage, then plunge your fist into Harry's stom-

ach, anywhere you please above the waist (*ho, ho*), and watch the man shudder like steel, like stage scenery caught in a breeze from an open door. Stale smells of the city beyond. The streets Harry came from. Poor Hungarian immigrant, change your name, conceal the accent, the faith. Keep the aquiline profile flat to the camera.

Distraction. On that breeze the hint of other times and places, the innocence lost. Keep focus, one slackening of the gut and the young pretenders will slay the old lion, bring him down.

Distraction. The pretty young faces that bring him flowers back stage. Curtsies and ballerina dresses, like flowers themselves, the petals wing-like bending in the sun, poised to take flight. The long blonde hair radiating light, and then her face. Her. For the first time, rising to meet him out of the clouded depths of the river of time, glimmering like a coin. Daisy. Her smile, red-rouged rose, the knowing eyes, lashes delicate as insect wings, fluttering. Her chest palpitating, cheeks flushed, the excitement of meeting her hero, the great escapologist. Who can conquer Harry?—hold him captive? None until now.

And as she turns in the stage-lights, slow-motion of memory, his eyes are pulled with her. Distracted. The new voices and autographs poised, but blurring into haze in front of him, a misted mirror.

Then that sumptuous moment, a hundred miles and years away as she turns at the door for a second to glance back. Oh God. The shackles of this body, this shirt of flame. Who can tear that off? The scintillating spark that makes the heart leap in each of us. To get outside of that, there is no key. Only the fire, of ecstasy, of Hell.

The hanged man. Harry suspended upside down in chains, in a straitjacket, from a Chicago skyscraper under construction, above the traffic grinding to a halt. Look up at the man who suffers for us, struggles for success, wealth, fame, fortune. But he succeeds where we fail. Unleashed, bird-like in that final spasm, broken free, reflected in a thousand panes of glass, the roar of applause, swishing wave of camera shutters.

‘Oh God, he’s a dish!’ —Daisy’s eyes widened in the dressing room mirror, false lashes bouncing like spiders’ legs, lipstick halted mid-way across a pout. In the background, muted waves of music and applause washed down the corridor from the stage.

‘He’s a dumpy, middle-aged man who contorts himself or something, Daisy. What do you really see in him?’

‘Oh, get with the gaslights, Margery. Harry is famous and fantastic.’ Daisy spun around, twirling her chiffon dress, checking her silk ribbons.

‘And dedicated to his wife. Find a proper, rich bachelor and stop drooling over married men is my advice . . .’ Margery waited for her powdered wig to be lowered onto her head by the stage hand, a nightly coronation.

‘Oh, he’s rich, honey. And—heck, what’s the word . . . pliable?’ Daisy pressed her lips against the mirror, pulled her bra up, wriggling sweetly.

Margery’s face had gone whiter even than the greasepaint, mouth open like one of the fishes in the Hudson River. ‘You didn’t! You haven’t!’

‘Ah, no, your highness. Least, not yet,’ Daisy bowed mockingly before bouncing off. Margery was left staring straight ahead, deep in thought, noticing one of the bulbs around her mirror had begun to flicker off and on like the traffic lights on 42nd Street.

Like camera shutters: eyelids closing. Daisy’s face smiling, open-mouthed. He kisses her neck, her childlike flesh. The daughter he never had. Giggling after-hours amid the fallen curtains in the empty theatre. Lost, lost in so much cloth. Petals of a pink powder rose, eyelids closing. Camera shutter, a noise behind them. Daisy cries out, she spies the assassin but Harry does not. A voyeur, a living shadow escaping through backstage corridors as Harry pursues, stumbling, pulling up his trousers. Daisy left with the fire curtain clutched against her chest, eyes weeping, mascara running, the spreading stain of ink, down into Harry’s gut as he halts at the door of bright light to the street outside, a portal to Heaven or Hell. The escapee lost forever in the passing crowds. The one escape Harry can never have: anonymity. Which newspaper office might he run to?

Harry plunges his fist into the brick wall next to him, but the fiendish edifice, so cunningly well built, holds its ground.

Daisy smacked her lips together and removed the tiniest excess rouge with a white handkerchief. She studied it in front of her tired eyes for a moment. It looked like the remains of a squashed bug; or the stain you got on your linen when your period first started.

‘Love your hair, dearie,’ Margery commented, breezing back in off the stage in a long velvet gown, breaking Daisy’s reverie. ‘You should keep it like that.’

‘Harry liked it, too.’ Daisy considered herself in the mirror, bunching her hair up in her fingers, coquettish. ‘Wanted to run his hands through my blonde curls. His fingers didn’t stay there either, I can tell you. Ah, you know what men are like.’

‘I think you know a little more than I do, sweetheart . . .’—Margery drawled, looking down her nose at her powder brush. ‘So, you two, did you . . . Well?’

‘He’s such a sweet guy, Margery.’ Daisy sighed, wistfully. ‘Nothing special in the trouser department but quite kind and considerate . . . even though he didn’t stretch to a hotel room. Gave me this charm bracelet, though.’ She held the gift up for inspection. The illumination from the dressing room’s Edison bulbs reflected warmly off the gold chain and its jewelled accoutrements.

Margery’s eyes widened like searchlights on a motor launch, her jaw dropping. ‘Must have cost a packet,’ she nodded, unfastening her shoulder straps and turning her back. ‘That will see you all right if you don’t get that Michigan job. Hey, Daise, I hope that’s all he gave you.’

‘Oh I made sure about that.’ Daisy stood up for her cue. ‘The theatre’s no place to be bringing up baby.’

The flickering bulb at Margery’s mirror suddenly shorted and blew up, the house lights dimmed for a moment, and the girls screamed then laughed a second later.

‘**J**ust why are you giving me this?’ Bess asked, as their hands touched briefly across the table in the riverside café, hers gloved and jewelled, his bony and cold, malnourished, taking the thick envelope of money from her and sliding it inside his overcoat. A vile little guttersnipe. Blackmailer, sickly boy, cub reporter with a face white as paper, black comma eyes. ‘Why not sell these to the papers?’

‘It’s not just for the m-money . . .’ he stammered, averting his gaze towards the Statue of Liberty as if her strong constitution could save him from damnation. Over his shoulder, Bess felt the eyes of dead fishes regarding her with a queasy scepticism from the cold buffet. Bess raised her eyebrows, shaking, sick to her heart to have to listen to this slippery creature.

‘My f-father . . .’ the writhing flounder continued, as Bess pictured him on a griddle, ‘He ch-cheated on her and left us when I w-was six. I understand . . .’

‘Oh do you really?’ Bess choked and lifted up the sealed envelope of photographs to place it inside her crocodile-skin bag, adjusting her dark glasses and leaving a dollar bill on the cold marble table as she left.

Outside, breathless, she leant over the railings, her black hair unravelling in the wind. She opened the envelope, looked at the photographs once, then tore them in two, dropping them into the Hudson.

A moment later she let drop something else to follow it. Hard and cold and secret, small enough to fit inside her fist. It wasn’t her heart, but it was just as heavy, sure to sink. Something she knew she could live without, but Harry could not.

Bess kissed Harry passionately on the lips and the crowd on the quayside roared with their usual anticipation and euphoria. She pressed her tongue urgently between his teeth and sent a hand around his neck to cradle the back of his head, clutching at his curling locks there, Salome-like.

Harry shook his head spasmodically for a moment, almost trying to pull away. There was no key passing into his mouth this time, nor moving on her tongue. Time slowed down, and Bess’s lips pushed against his, before she finally let go, releasing him with the emphasis of a farewell, a valediction.

The crowd, their shouting faces and clapping hands, all transmuted in Harry’s spinning thoughts, into an incoherent collage of colour and sound, as Bess’s face kept pulling away and he saw into her eyes. Her lips were smiling, but her gaze was deathly cold, the face an inscrutable mask of make-up.

There was no key, his mouth was empty, his stomach lurching, his heart sinking like a stone. But he had his mask too, perfected over decades. Only the eyes let slip clues, too far from the cameras for the world to recognise. Bess’s hard-set lips and eyes said she knew, she had found out. She understood Harry’s treachery, his shabby betrayal. In her eyes he panted and gasped beneath the hitched white skirt of a slutty showgirl, her long hair draped across his shoulders. He saw that she saw this, as certainly as if she had been there herself and held the curtains to shield their sordid little scene.

In his eyes, Bess now saw he held the cold knowledge of his own imminent demise, spreading like a slow blue stain, ink in water.

And yet, mechanically as marionettes in stilled time, somehow both of them continued to back away as the well-worn ritual demanded, a theatre on irrevocable rails. With the rhythm of an executioner's drum, Harry 's heart drew him towards one moment after the other, the familiar pattern the crowd demanded. They would not be let down or disappointed.

Tears came to his eyes then, and mirror-like a moment later: to Bess's also, as she mouthed goodbye over the noise, raising a forlorn hand in a gesture of farewell, then blew a kiss like a bullet. The hatred in her eyes hit him like silver. Sharp, glittering, anodyne elixir. He gulped it down and swallowed deep, tasting his own death, sweat emerging imperceptibly on his brow, the mask holding.

She was asking him to choose. But sometimes in the long fall of Icarus, perhaps the hero must come to his senses, regain composure, kill his freezing panic and open his wings into the wind to save himself in time before the impact with the terrible earth. She wanted him to destroy himself for her, to give up his immortality in the world's eyes, to reveal himself as a fraud at last.

The moment hung in the air like a wounded bird, quivered like blue-bruised lips, then after a while found its simple conclusion, both expected and surprising, smiling, a perfect duality. With infinite bravery and resignation, Harry lowered his eyes, breathed deep, then raised his head and hands towards the crowd exultantly. He took the chains up and let his assistants lock them around him.

Then they lowered him, smiling, to his death beneath the waves.

*D*ark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark . . . That was the quotation, some poet from the wireless.

Looking up through the refracting lens of the waves, Harry could see the crowds on the quayside, holding their breath just as much as him. But they were neither in chains nor fighting with oil-thick water.

Let their belief sustain me.

In his mind he saw again the headline he must have read on a newsstand earlier that day: 'Not even eternity, they say, can hold Houdini.'

Now is the time to prove it all. Use your training. It's not all about sleight of hand, or tools passed via the mouth. Could he confound Bess and survive after all?

I'm a guru, a master, a Svengali. I'm a silly little love-struck fool of a vain showman.

Let the limbs loosen, like he always did. Feel instinctively for the weak point between the links. He had done this so many times before. And not always with keys. The master of all escapes and illusions. He was an eel, a jellyfish, an elemental being. A shape-shifter, a *golem* summoned up out of the mud of the riverbed. The chill bit into his body. His lungs swelled and ached, his fingers slipped. Vision distorting, he felt something give way.

The tidal swell from the ocean must have been stronger than his advisors had anticipated; he surfaced much further down the river, well away from the expectant and anxious throng. Coughing, floundering, trying to expel swallowed water and inhale city air in a speeded up ragtime rhythm.

Bobbing like flotsam on the troubled surface. Finally rescued by a passing barge-keeper, who demanded a souvenir signature long before Harry's hands were dry and capable again. Oh well, the guy would be dining out on his good deed for a few weeks hence. Plus Harry would see that he got a large tip from the box office takings. Coins for the ferryman.

Luckily, the fellow hadn't quite resembled Charon, whatever *he* was supposed to look like. Not this time, anyhow. But looking back as he clambered up the shore, he could no longer remember precisely what the man *had* looked like, his barge now obscured by afternoon fog.

Surely the doctors would give Harry the all clear, but cancel all engagements for the next fortnight. Let them put on some vaudeville acts to fill his shoes. Maybe a bevy of prettily petticoated dancers, tempting the lonely males with their pouts and their high kicks. Or else, some of the up-and-coming singers who possessed bell-like voices but had the curious idea that they should slap boot polish on their pink faces to make them seem more authentic.

Harry would be back, in his own good time.

It was a cold but dry day in the park. Bess passed him a chicken sandwich. He ate slowly and carefully, his stomach still queasy from the near-drowning. He flicked a stray crumb off his freshly pressed striped

shirt. 'Would you say, my love,' he whispered, 'that everybody deserves a second chance?'

She sipped at some still lemonade from a flower patterned china cup, considering her answer. A sunbeam caught the frill of her Sunday dress, making her seem the epitome of feminine beauty and elegance. 'I think, my dearest,' she answered finally, 'that those who are given a second chance should make the most of it and not expect a third.' She took his prolonged silence as a sign of contrition and, after a couple of minutes, added, 'It's the lack of trust that bothers me.'

'We shall no have secrets ever again,' he replied. 'My life is in your hands. As it always has been.'

'You charmer!' She was smiling for the first time in weeks. As she leaned forward to clear away the picnic things, he noticed that beneath the white lace glove on her left hand she now sported a new bracelet—heavy silver chain and a tiny golden key.

He lifted the basket easily under one arm. Bess stopped to pick some tiny white flowers from the ground where they had been sitting. As they walked along, she said, 'These are not proper blooms, you know, Harry. They're weeds that insinuate themselves into the strong grass. They choke it. Hold it back.' He said nothing as they continued towards the riverbank. A few romantic walkers but no baying crowds today. Bess stopped and emptied her hands. They watched a while as the thin stems and wilting flower heads scattered onto the surface and then drifted away along the river. . .

But as they turned to move on, something caught Harry's eye, a dark shape beneath the waves. He froze, then leaned over the quayside, peering intently into the depths, trying to unravel what he saw. It was the contorted figure of a man, on the riverbed in chains. With a strange detachment, Harry felt he recognised the face, locked in its last agony. His final breaths were just a handful of tiny bubbles, escaping to the surface, as he could not.

THE RAPTURE

JACK DANN & BARRY N. MALZBERG

We're reliably informed that 'The Rapture' is a story about a guy living in Brooklyn who meets an old friend (who is dead) and an angel who wears ill-fitting corduroy suits—just as one could say that Remembrance of Things Past is about memory and the smell of a Madeleine pastry.

Of course, the story is part Mr. Malzberg and part Mr. Dann, but mostly it is a live, feral thing that has escaped both of them. 'As with our other collaborations,' Jack Dann tells us, 'it came alive in the process . . . and then it determined its own course. We could but watch in wonderment because we really couldn't have written that! It was as if the story had been there all the time, waiting to be found. We were just lucky enough to be the finders. Its confidence and fury shocked the hell out of both of us. But, then, we were only the writers.'

*Barry N. Malzberg is the author of more than seventy-five novels of speculative fiction and is a major figure in the field. He has also written crime and suspense fiction under his own name and pseudonymously. His critical non-fiction (like his fiction!) has been influential and controversial. He won the first John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the best science fiction novel of the year and has won the Locus Award twice. His latest book is *Breakfast in the Ruins*, a collection of his thoughts on writing and SF. He is also a classical violinist, and has performed in such orchestras as the North Jersey Symphony Orchestra. He lives in Teaneck, New Jersey.*

*Jack Dann has written or edited over seventy-five books (three of them with PS), including the international bestseller *The Memory Cathedral*. His books include anthologies, short story collections, and novels such as *The Man Who Melted*, *Junction*, *The Silent*, and *The Rebel*. He is a recipient of the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, the Australian Aurealis Award (four times), the Ditmar Award (four times), the Peter McNamara*

Achievement Award and also the Peter McNamara Convenors' Award for Excellence, and the Premios Gilgames de Narrativa Fantastica award. He has also been honoured by the Mark Twain Society (Esteemed Knight). His most recent anthology, Ghosts by Gaslight, edited with Nick Gevers (Postscripts co-editor), won the Aurealis and Shirley Jackson Awards in 2012. He lives in Australia on a farm overlooking the sea.

SCHWARTZ WAS AN ATHEIST. HAD BEEN NOW FOR ABOUT fifteen years. It was a position he had reached (or so he rationalized) only after a credible journey; it was not for him the lazy way out. And he would not hedge his position, none of this 'I'm a cultural Jew and a literal agnostic' nonsense for him. No, he had made all of the Stations of the Atheist's Cross, the cold mornings in Synagogue sometimes without a minyan, diarrhea in an Ashram in the backblocks of Lahore, Nepalese guides with magic mushrooms, vision-quests in the Dakota badlands, all those energetic exercises of disillusionment-in-the-making. 'I have come to terms with my life,' Schwartz thought. 'Rather than embrace one of many one-true-gods, I will choose the cold solace of science.' Cold solace of science, that was a good one. Better this than the warm embrace of belief. 'Warm embrace of belief.' Now from whom had he first heard that? It must have been that Nepalese beggar: 'I seize you in the warm embrace of belief.' Schwartz had wrenched himself from the trembling grasp, fled at a brisk limp. Disproof of any higher power poured out from the Nepalese landscape, and from everywhere else. The rationality of flight, the solace of science, the wise counsel of emptiness . . . ah, that was the way to go.

It was all delusion and politics; at least he knew and understood politics.

Schwartz was now seventy-one. Broke, like most seventy-one year old good Americans, stumbling along on the penury of Social Security, no family to speak of except his estranged son, Freedom (born during Schwartz's Ashram period) who lived circumspectly in a white collar prison in Scottsdale. Schwartz might be weakened by penury, but at least he was intellectually consistent. Thus he did not swoon, did not mumble the *Sh'ma Yisrael*, did not shout '*Gewalt in Himmel!*' when he saw his long dead friend Louis Kandinsky (a name like the painter's but no artist old Louis) alive and breathing and waving sunnily to him. Alive and breathing right there at what had thirty years ago been their usual table in

front of the big greasy window at Milton's Famous on Surf Avenue in Coney Island.

Surf Avenue in Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York.

Who could have figured this to be the place where the Book of Revelations would be marvelously transmogrified into living truth? Certainly not that atheist, William Saroyan Schwartz. Nor his long dead, supra-rationalist friend Louis not-the-painter Kandinsky.

William had no intimation whatsoever of this miracle. He lived in Sea Gate, once a ritzy upscale community, but now just another remnant of the lost city; and every Wednesday he would walk a mile to Milton's for an artery-clogging potato salad and some illusion of youth. It was on just such a Wednesday, a hot day in June 1963, with the humidity, you should be aware, right off the scale, that the One True God—or the one true series of gods or some synchronistic quantum not yet discovered in this parlous, pre-plasma-physics time—brought the dead back to life.

High and dry all of them, just two blocks away from the ocean on Surf Avenue.

It would be later on this Wednesday, after their initial quiet occupancy, that the dead—all of them apparently male and what an insufficiency this was—were to come ride the F train, drink cans of Piels beer and catcall certain pretty young girls who were showing off their miniskirted legs on their lunch break. The dead would come back to play on that very day that William so admirably kept his composure and belief system intact, even as he rode the Cyclone rollercoaster again with his dead best friend Louis.

But this would be some mortal hours in the future.

Right now, however, this was the present and Louis gestured to the white plastic chair beside him, motioned the speechless and shaken Schwarz to a seat. There they sat for just a moment, taking in the salty air, the exhaust fumes, and the amusement park noise, just like old times.

'You're not even going to ask how I got back here and what's doing with all the rest of us?' Louis asked as he gestured toward a trio of Chassidim guiding three empty bicycles carefully toward the corner. He smiled at Schwartz and pointed at his half-eaten sandwich. 'Not too bad,' he said, 'although they've gone downhill a little in the eight years I am dead. But so has everything I begin to see.'

'I disagree,' Schwartz said with some determination. 'And I think that restaurant critic is no job for a dead man.'

‘Dead,’ Kandinsky said, as if savoring the word. He smiled. ‘Dead is a state of mind. ‘So now tell me something important, such as how are the Dodgers doing? Did they win the World Series again? It was no coincidence that I died that November. There was’—he twirled his finger in the air for emphasis—‘a completeness.’

‘There are no Dodgers in Brooklyn anymore,’ Schwartz said. ‘They moved to Los Angeles and took O’Malley with them.’

Kandinsky scowled, shook his head, then waved desultorily at a very tall, stooped, and ugly angel passing by. The angel had huge and magnificent wings, the white wings of an enormous butterfly, and their narrow, marked tips extended high in the air, creating a breeze and snapping noises as he passed. The angel wore a brown corduroy suit; his wrinkled shirt and jacket cut out in the back to accommodate his wings.

‘What the hell is *that*?’ Schwartz asked.

‘Someone who believes that the Dodgers should have stayed in Brooklyn.’

Thus was the afternoon spent: hot buttered corn on the cob from Nathans, later two hot dogs, a wild ride on the Cyclone because Kandinsky insisted that being dead shouldn’t affect one’s *jeux de vivre* (his words), and Schwartz protested that he didn’t need to get sick on a rollercoaster to be French; but he paid the fare nevertheless and got into the cart with his old dead friend and yelled and screamed and shouted ‘Sonovabitch’ in joyous rapture and uncharacteristic abandon, suddenly understanding that being French—or dead—might not be so bad, after all; and later, his legs aching, his bladder full, his shirt sticking to his armpits, he and Kandinsky whistled at young girls and Schwartz gave a crisp twenty dollar bill to the over-the-hill prostitute who patrolled the block east of the Cyclone. Her white-blond hair was stiff and ruined from eternities of peroxide applications. She was big breasted, dressed in a faded black evening gown with frayed red shoulder straps, and her name was Daisy. She had always treated Schwartz kindly; and, if truth be told, he had just a little bit of a crush on her.

‘*Boychik*,’ Daisy said, ‘for twenty dollars, I don’t even pat what you got in the front.’

‘I wasn’t expecting anything,’ Schwartz said, embarrassed. ‘It was meant to be a nice gesture. A . . . tip.’

‘You tip a girl once you’ve *paid* for a girl. I’m not a beggar on the street. I’m a professional woman.’

‘I apologize,’ Schwartz said, taken aback by his impulsive action and her response. ‘I meant no harm.’

‘You want to go have a little fun?’ Daisy asked. ‘Would perk you up, and I thought you’d never ask.’ She giggled. ‘How many years is it now that you pass by, say ‘Good Day’ and then cross the street to get another look?’

If she lost about twenty pounds, she’d be a good looking woman. Maybe a little wrinkly in the face, and the neck had those folds, but—

‘Well,’ Daisy asked, ‘you going to stand there grinning at me or are you going to be a man and take me away from all this?’

‘I’m sorry, but I’m with my friend Louis, I should be ashamed of myself for not making proper introductions, Louis, this is Daisy, Daisy, this is . . .’

But Louis Kandinsky, who was dead in the first place, had disappeared. Just like that. One second he was standing beside Schwartz and saying ‘A woman is a woman,’ and then, poof, off he went, salubrious hallucination that he was. Schwartz had no illusions. You don’t see dead friends who eat hot dogs, you don’t ride the Cyclone and the Ferris wheel and look at girls together, no, no, not when you’re dead; and Schwartz wasn’t dead yet. Louis was dead. Schwartz . . . Schwartz knew what was the matter.

He was hallucinating.

He was losing his marbles, going senile, and who knows what else.

That would explain everything.

That would make sense.

For all he knew, Daisy wasn’t Daisy. He probably wasn’t even here. He could just as easily be asleep, sitting in his worn leather chair in front of the television (he allowed himself at least that), and snoozing, dreaming about old whores and dead friends.

And angels?

Sure, angels. Why not? A dream could contain anything.

‘Hey, you, are you okay?’ Daisy asked.

‘What?’ Schwartz said. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You just started talking like a crazy person, that’s all.’

He grinned. ‘Maybe I am.’

‘Then maybe I am too. Come on, we can be crazy together, providing you have a hundred dollars.’

‘Well, I *don’t*. I’m very sorry.’

Schwartz really had to pee. It was the damn prostatitis; whenever he

got worked up, he had to pee. But he never had to pee in his dreams. He started coughing, asthma, and fumbled for his inhaler. He gave himself a spritch, felt the medicine fill his lungs, and held his breath.

‘You okay, Mr. Schwartz?’

He nodded, shook the inhaler—he’d need to buy another soon—and exhaled. Better. He took a deep breath.

Sonovabitch.

He wasn’t dreaming.

He guessed he was just plain crazy.

‘I’m sorry, Daisy. I’m old and not dead yet.’

‘Well, that’s a relief.’

‘And I’ve got to pee.’

‘So come up to my place.’

‘I don’t have a hundred dollars.’

Daisy patted him on the bottom as if he was a baby and said, ‘This one’s on the house. Think of it as a gift from your invisible friend.’

Schwartz hadn’t been laid in twenty-two years, and here he was humping and bumping around on Daisy’s creaky satin-sheeted bed with the smell of the ocean coming in from the open window and the sounds from the boardwalk blending with his wheezy, nasal huffing and puffing and Daisy’s oohing and ahing; and she was clinging to him and dancing on top of his erection (he was proud of that erection; so maybe it wasn’t as hard as it could be, it was hard enough) as if he was twenty years old and had a full head of hair—no pot belly then, no scrawny arms, no hernias on both side of his groin—and . . . and it was *wonderful*. As his father used to say, ‘A miracle.’

Schwartz didn’t believe in miracles, but this was simply a response to the pragmatic pleasure prescribed by biology. Well, perhaps not pragmatic. This tumbley mating could not lead to offspring, so this once let it be a miracle.

‘Was it good for you?’ Daisy asked.

Schwartz looked out the window and said, ‘The very best.’

‘Then we’ll do this again.’

‘I don’t have money, I—’

‘Don’t worry, Mr. Look-I’m-getting-an-erection-again. You can be my boyfriend.’

‘Boyfriend?’

‘Everything for you is free, except meals. You have to take me out and treat me like an important person.’

Schwartz turned his gaze away from the window, smiled, and said, ‘Well, you are an important person.’

‘Then give me another one, big boy.’

But before he descended once more into seemingly miraculous but scientifically rationalizable bliss, he glanced out the window. Why he didn’t know. But something seemed to be pulling him away, like when sometimes he’d feel a pressure on his neck and he would turn around and see someone staring at him, as if eyes could radiate some special kind of heat.

Down below—standing on Neptune Avenue right in front of Daisy’s apartment block, as if he was waiting for the bus—was Louis Kandinsky.

Waiting as patiently as only the dead could.

Waiting for Schwartz.

‘So what are you, some kind of peeping Tom?’ Schwartz asked Kandinsky.

‘I couldn’t see what you were doing from the street,’ Kandinsky said.

‘I could *feel* you seeing.’

‘How could you? I don’t exist according to you.’

‘You exist in my mind,’ Schwartz said. For all intents and purposes that will have to do.’

‘Because you’re crazy and hallucinating, right?’

‘Right.’

They walked back toward Famous. They could at least have a coffee together.

‘And you think you’re asleep in your apartment in front of the television, right?’

‘Probably,’ Schwartz said. ‘That’s almost as good as proof that I’m not here, or you couldn’t have been reading what I was thinking about earlier.’

‘Why not? I’m dead, and I’m here. Why shouldn’t I be able to read your mind? It’s not that difficult, you know. You’re what your Mother, may she rest in peace, would call an open book.’

‘How would you know about my mother?’

‘You think the dead don’t enjoy a cup of tea, and maybe a little of what you were doing up in that apartment?’

Schwartz just snorted. He couldn't imagine his mother fooling around with Kandinsky, of all people, dead or alive.

'Well, if you were dreaming, you wouldn't have to pee again so soon, would you?' Kandinsky asked. 'You never pee in your dreams.'

'Well, I guess this is something new.'

'You should take Finastride for your problem. It'll shrink the prostate, and if you're going to keep schtupping your new girlfriend, you'd better get it fixed.'

They took their regular seats at Famous, ordered coffee and Danish.

'I waited for you because I wanted to explain something to you before I go.'

'Where are you going?'

'Back to being dead, which according to you would be nothing, nothingness dissolution of self, everything that scares the crap out of you,' Kandinsky said.

'Damn right.'

'So that'll be your state of death, William. But I'm going to do you a favor after I'm gone.'

'Yeah . . .'

'Do you like Charles Dickens?'

'He's okay, too long-winded and moralistic for me,' Schwartz said. 'What has Dickens got to do with—'

'Remember *A Christmas Carol*, your favorite *goyisha* book?'

Schwartz nodded, in spite of himself.

'Remember how Scrooge got sent all those spirits?'

'Yeah . . .' Schwartz said warily.

'Well, I'm only sending you one,' Kandinsky said. 'You saw him earlier, the angel, the tall guy who needs to eat more and get himself a new suit.'

'So instead of hallucinating you, I'll be hallucinating him?'

'Pretty much. But before you get up to pee again, old friend, remember you're not the only one ever to see an angel . . . or a demon. Did you know that Rilke composed his *Duino Elegies* by taking dictation from an angel and Kepler was inspired by a demon of scientific bent?'

Schwartz just shook his head and went to pee.

When he returned, Kandinsky was gone.

Schwartz knew it from the start. No, it could never be enough; bantering with an angel, even a sardonic angel, even a self-deprecating angel made no more sense than trying to engage in a coherent discussion with Kandinsky. If you accepted the premise, then you would have to accept the conclusion; and that wasn't Schwartz's way. None of this Pascal's wager stuff for him; as far as Schwartz was concerned, Azazilel—angel, demon, or awkward and skinny figment of the imagination—was as entrapped by the scam as any of them.

Schwartz, who was being trailed by Azazilel at a discreet distance, walked back to his one bedroom apartment on Neptune Avenue. The old neighborhood looked exhausted, a brick and mortar bum in need of a bath and a make-over; Brooklyn in these years of the fading Wagner administration and the wake of the Dodgers' exit was an unhappy place, populated by sullen, right-faced inhabitants outraged by inverted circumstance and condemned to isolated, empty, and useless lives on this side of the bridges.

Schwartz was often given to thoughts of this nature; 'isolated and useless' was the fatal position of Man in the modern world, or so Heidegger thought . . . and Schwartz was a big fan of Heidegger.

In the days following his inadvertent and unappreciated reunion with the dead and supercilious Kandinsky, Schwartz continued to ascribe their meeting to hallucination and exhaustion. This was exactly the kind of thing that happened when you were old and living in a spiritually abandoned time and Borough. Everyone his age had a right to a little senility. It was as normal as losing pubic hair.

Thus Azazilel continued to lurk, sometimes following at a discreet distance, sometimes presenting himself in thinly shielded disguise on the sidewalk. Once he appeared as a beggar with a chipped teacup and haunted expression, once as a police officer with big feet and martial intent in his eyes. He was a fat man passing out political leaflets, a Parks Department Supervisor distractedly buttoning and unbuttoning his uniform, a chestnut vendor with a bandaged finger.

All disguised manifestations of Azazilel.

Indeed, Schwartz could respect the wit, attention to detail, and persistence of this spirit who, rather like Duchamp, might carry a urinal into a synagogue on Shabbat to gain the congregation's attention and advertise the unexpected duality of material existence. Schwartz yearned for the old days when an expression of atheism stimulated rather than

threatened and brought needed distance and objectivity to embedded notions such as common prayer, patriotic duty, political will, and whether enough angels existed to fit comfortably on the head of a pin.

Now and then Kandinsky made short appearances at the rim of Schwartz's attention, but he no longer attempted to communicate: The shuffling Azazil was the communicator for both of them and most of the time had little enough to say.

So matters might have persisted in uneasy accommodation . . . for a while.

Schwartz was in no hurry. Any forward motion would be motion off a cliff. Azazil was obviously in no hurry; he was an agent of temporal paralysis. And the Borough of Brooklyn, New York at this time was in no hurry either; it had in Schwartz's view stabilized into a kind of balanced misery, a New Frontier of accommodation which might well last until the millennium. Schwartz himself had no such expectation; he was as hopelessly trapped in the 20th century as the tailfin or the Hot Five; the only way out was no way out at all.

Uneventful weeks passed—well, the weeks had become uneventful after Daisy had given him the ultimate brush-off (she didn't answer her phone, was never home, and couldn't be found streetwalking in Coney Island)—weeks populated only occasionally by an angel who seemed too distracted to have any kind of agenda. Thus, after this pair of spectacular interventions and the aforesaid ultimate brush-off, resigned once again to a monotony of days edging toward uninspired obliteration (maybe God, like O'Malley, would deposit him on the Other Coast, all in a quickening), Schwartz found a certain valor in his casual temporality.

Ignore signs and wonders, miracles and angels, boredom and loneliness, and concentrate on self-sustention. In this monochromatic mood, near the end of a gray New York autumn, Schwartz cashed his Social Security check and returned to his apartment, only to find both Azazil and Kandinsky ensconced on a couch. As he entered the dusty, newspaper stacked living room, they regarded him with disapproval.

'You look terrible,' Kandinsky said, 'Matters have been weighing on you.'

'Keep your analysis to yourself,' Schwartz said. 'What, you had to bring him? The two of you are intimate colleagues now?'

‘Just forget about him,’ Kandinsky said, tapping Azazilel lightly on a wing, which fluttered reflexively. ‘Things are not so good for him either, but he felt he should tag along. He has nothing to say. These are difficult times for him. He is in a state of transition. Going from here to there with nothing to say about it isn’t such a nice thing, let me tell you. But let us not discuss this. It is time for *you* to make a choice. Large events portend, and you are called to their necessity.’

‘What large events?’ Schwartz asked; he felt suddenly confused, put out, and exhausted. ‘What necessity?’

‘We are now approaching some true polarity,’ Kandinsky said, insistent and suddenly agitated. A new thought seemed to have struck him; dead all these years. His old friend displayed an energy, not to say a level of distress, that Schwartz had never seen before.

‘Polarities,’ Kandinsky continued. He said it again, as if to confirm in his own mind that it was indeed polarities. ‘It’s the illusion of time as aggregation rather than as a linear journey. Instead of going from here to there, we are *really* going here . . . and here . . . and here . . . while imagining that we are *there*. Everything is in the oneness; all of it is together.’ His hands shook, and he appeared to be on the verge of suffering some profound and terrible personal insight. ‘If it has happened, it is always happening. If it is happening now, than it will never, never stop happening. It is all synchronicity, compilation, an infinite massiveness of event.’

Unimpressed by his old friend’s temper, Schwartz shrugged. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘Here, there, everywhere. You’re still dead and I am still alive. Not that it is doing either of us any good.’

‘That’s not for us to say.’ A sudden sourness twisted Kandinsky’s features. He gestured at the angel, who for reasons known only to himself—or itself—had levitated out of the couch and sat suspended just below the ceiling. ‘Haven’t you had enough of him?’ Kandinsky asked Schwartz. ‘I dispatched him for purpose, not so that you would have a grubby old angel on the premises at all times.’

Azazilel stirred uncomfortably, rotated slowly as if he were suspended by a rope, and mumbled or grumbled in an angelic undertone.

‘And something else,’ Kandinsky said, as if suddenly realizing his purpose, as if suddenly struck by an entirely new, a shocking idea. ‘A bullet in the brain.’

‘I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about,’ Schwartz said. ‘And will you please ask your colleague to stop hovering?’

The angel dutifully returned to the couch beside Kandinsky, although some ghostly afterimage remained near the ceiling.

A bullet in the brain . . .

Schwartz glanced toward the ceiling, suddenly paranoid that he was being watched from on high; and he imagined the ghostly wisp of ectoplasm that remained near the ceiling was a baleful unblinking eye, the clear and perfect eye of God . . . the eye of circumstance, of mortal and heavenly fate.

Schwartz shook himself like a dog shaking off rain and said, 'Louis, you never made any sense when you were alive. So you're right, some things never change, but I am quickly approaching the end of my patience. Could you please take your companion and leave me be. Go be someone else's hallucination.'

Kandinsky and his angel levitated to that particular place below the ceiling where Azazel had left his ectoplasmic signature; and in a blink of the ectoplasmic eye of God, they both disappeared.

Bullet in the brain, Schwartz thought.

From whence comes such talk of a bullet in the brain . . . ?

Two weeks later and Schwartz was strolling through Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. How he got there, what Dallas has to do with this, do not ask just yet. If all goes as planned, you will soon comprehend it all with rented omniscience.

Two weeks before, as described above, Azazel and Kandinsky had levitated, floated ceilingward in Schwartz's dismal room, and then disappeared through a skylight. Or the ceiling. Or something. The two of them—deaf friend and mumbling angel—had left clouds of speculation and discontent, quandary and bewilderment. As might be recalled, Schwartz had suddenly found himself bereft of the company and delights of Daisy (no doubt the fault of Kandinsky and Azazel). Suffice it to say that he was unwilling to remain in Brooklyn any longer than he had to. Brooklyn was not an answer. Brooklyn was simply a familiar path to the certainty of a dusty, imminent, procrastinated death. Schwartz had an inch or two of life left in him. He contained multitudes. His memory contained childhood, adolescence, maturity, death, and the spectral visions (and teachings) of dead friends risen and angels in-waiting in corduroy suits.

If Brooklyn wasn't the answer, what was?

What coruscated through his unconscious thoughts, as yet unrevealed?
 What words could move him to . . . move?

What deeds could be done or undone by an old man with but an inch
 or two of life left?

Bullet in the brain—

Perhaps he should look outward. Beyond himself. Beyond habit, beyond
 petty needs, beyond . . .

Bullet in the brain—

Bullet in the brain—

Perhaps a Presidential political tour was the answer.

Take the train Bulletinthebrain.

Yes, a vacation into polity. Perhaps he could follow John Fitzgerald
 Kennedy—the best president since Roosevelt—on his travels. A grand tour.

A

Bulletinthebrain

Fly drive take the bus Bullet in the brain—

Perhaps, at some point, he could get the chance to talk to him. He was
 a citizen, wasn't he? A senior citizen, in fact. Indeed, he had a few questions
 for the President. If the dead were capable of reappearance and levitation,
 why could America not in the aggregate be in the province of miracles and
 reconstitution? Those were questions any serious citizen had the right and
 obligation to ask. And Schwartz was a serious citizen determined to ask
 them.

That he might be running away from himself and the pain of losing a
 woman before he even had enough of her was irrelevant. That his sudden
 re-infatuation with politics, great personages, and the doings of the rich
 and successful was irrelevant. Schwartz, a 71 year old American with the
 ruins of a life behind him and the whiff of a recent strangeness which went
 beyond explanation, familiarized himself through the press with Kennedy's
 travel schedule.

He would have an adventure in polarity, just as Kandinsky foretold.

He would have an adventure in necessity and political reconciliation,
 an atheist's adventure in God's chronometry.

Ah, to dream, to meet Yarborough in Dallas with Connally, to sit with
 both of them and tell Goldwater jokes. Tell them a few anecdotes. Lyndon
 would be there, too; and he would get these two old rivals and enemies to
 shake hands in anticipation of the 1964 election. Schwartz could see them
 doing it, possibly in public, maybe in a hotel room, maybe in the back of

a limousine; the affability of politicians in public and private, never more desperate than when they felt themselves challenged, had never been a mystery to Schwartz. Schwartz had always considered himself politically savvy. But for the unfortunate turns of his life, he would have made a good politician. Perhaps not as good as JFK, but then again, who on earth was?

Now.

Dealey Plaza.

Surrounded by Texans, surrounded by thoughts of resurrection even if not his own, Schwartz could see the limousine approaching. Agents ran beside it, flags streamed in the wind.

Schwartz felt himself transported, yet captured in diorama and belief and powerful conviction.

As the limousine approached, he felt light as pollen. He felt expansive, as if he were the light *and* the pollen. He felt himself on the verge of levitation, understood the luminous joy that his old friend Kandinsky must have felt on the occasion of his first return, and then he caught a glimpse, a quick afterimage of a levitated Kandinsky hovering over Kennedy's oncoming, expanding limousine.

And then Azazilel was suddenly beside Schwartz.

'*You!*' accused the angry, distraught angel. 'What are *you* doing here? You weren't supposed to be here.'

Schwartz could sense an unangelic confusion, a desanctified mystification; and reflexively he reached for the distraught Azazilel.

'It is too late for that,' Azazilel said. 'Too late, too late,' and Schwartz found himself enormous, distended by helium, floating free of the ground.

He was the pollen and the light. He contained time and multitudes.

Bulletinthebrain

'You can't say the city of Dallas doesn't love you Mr. President.'

Underneath now the scramble of rifle fire; strewn roses.

Schwartz held on to his life . . . held on to Kennedy. He was mist. He was smoke. He was fire. He was as fulgent and substantial as the sun.

I want to be here again, he thought, past this happening.

I want to be here.

I want to be in Dallas again.

Azazilel showered him with ancient Hebrew and Aramaic curses.

Kandinsky made a sudden appearance on the trunk of the Continental. He scowled at Schwartz and tried to levitate. But he was heavy as lead, heavy as flesh and blood, unlike the new polarized Schwartz, who through Kandinsky's misguided guidance had become as light as any mortal could ever hope to be, and who could be here . . . and here . . . and here.

Unlike Kandinsky, who could only talk the talk.

Signs and wonders, Schwartz thought. Nothing needs to be as it was/is. Time is illusion. Time is event, an infinite massiveness of event.

Bullet in the brain. Age of miracles.

Now that Schwartz had more than an inch of life left, perhaps he would return to the golden enveloping folds of religion, ah, yes, go back (here) to *shul*. Try it as he once had. After all, he wanted/wants the political life. He understood/understands politics. And he now knew/knows that *everything* is simply time and politics.

And so with all his newfound *nous* and revelatory knowledge, which, of course, he *always* had, Schwartz ran into Daisy in front of her apartment block on Neptune Avenue.

'So, nu, Mister No-goodnick William Saroyan Schwartz?' Daisy asked. 'What brought *you* back to the neighborhood?' She looked radiant in a brand-new strapless evening gown—black satin hemmed with yellow lace—and she had lost at least twenty pounds. Her Marilyn Monroe hairdo was smooth and permed.

'Me . . . ? I was away for maybe a week. I deserved *something* after you left me.'

Daisy shook her shoulders slightly, a gesture which always excited Schwartz.

'I didn't leave you, buster. You left me. I was right here in my house sitting like a *meshugge* by the phone and waiting for *someone* to call. Waiting for *someone* to ring the buzzer and tell me he wanted to take me out on the town and show me off. Waiting for *someone* who said he was going to make an honest woman of me and take me away from all this.'

'I called . . . I knocked.'

'And . . . ?'

'And you weren't there,' Schwartz said. 'I looked everywhere.'

'Well, obviously, you didn't look hard enough. After a beat, she said, Of course, I might have had a few . . . appointments.'

'Come, we'll go up to your apartment and talk.'

'We are talking.'

'You know what I mean.'

'You got money, Mister No-goodnick who can afford a vacation and now thinks he's also entitled to free nooky?'

Schwartz shook his head and sighed.

'So you think you've got proprietary rights like I was your girlfriend?'

'You *are* my girlfriend,' Schwartz said, surprising himself with newfound assertiveness.

'And that's it? I'm supposed to just sit around and wait for you while you—where were you, anyway?'

'In Dallas. Texas.'

'Ohmygod,' she said. 'You were in *Dallas*? Were you there when—?'

'Yes, of course I was,' Schwartz said and, remembering his conversation with the angel Azazilel and his dead friend Kandinsky, added, 'I was taking a vacation into polity. Having an adventure in polarity.'

'Well, the next time you go to take a vacation to polarity or anywhere else, you sure as hell better take me with you . . . if you want to keep your privileges.' Then she led him up the creaking stairs into her apartment.

'I watched it all on television,' she said. 'You must tell me everything.'

'Nothing to tell. Like you said, it was all on the television.'

'I'm glad they shot the bastard who tried to assassinate the president. He should be shot a thousand times for what he did.'

Schwartz sat down on the sprung sofa, and Daisy brought him his favorite scotch in a heavy, cut crystal glass.

'Well, it was lucky for the president,' Schwartz said, 'but not so lucky for Jackie.'

'Yes, it's a tragedy, a national tragedy.'

Daisy sat down beside him.

'You always said you thought Jackie was a stuck-up bitch.'

'She is . . . I mean she was. But she was also the First Lady, may she rest in peace.' Daisy shook her shoulders fetchingly.

Schwartz reached for her and grinned with satisfaction as he felt her spongy flesh in his hands. He didn't care if she was alive or dead. He didn't care if he was alive or dead. And later, he would take her to *shul* to pray for the eternal soul of the poorly done First Lady. After all, this was the age of miracles. Life and death were simply time and politics.

Schwartz understood this.

Perhaps now the good spirit Azazilel did too.

THE BELL

JEREMY ADAM SMITH

Jeremy Adam Smith's story 'Frightened Angels' appeared in Postscripts 24/25: The New and Perfect Man. A writer, editor, and web producer, he has published extensively on social and ethical issues, and in that connection has been interviewed many times for TV, newspapers, news magazines, and online media.

Here Mr. Smith gives us a powerfully resonant SF fable.

'Now then, here we are. The bell doesn't exist. It is only something people imagine.'

—'The Bell,' Hans Christian Andersen

ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WERE TWO ROBOTS.

One was named Nightingale and her model had been originally designed to serve as a nursemaid for human beings too old or injured to take care of themselves. She was warm and soft and human-shaped. The other robot was called Tinderbox and he was a tank who rolled on six nimbly bobbling wheels. A humanoid torso and face sat upon his main gun turret, placed there for allegedly socially intelligent interactions with humans on the battlefield. But his guns did not operate any longer; their magazines were empty, and key components had been removed. The best, working days of both robots were behind them. They were, in fact, obsolete. And so their respective owners—one a chain of nursing homes, the other a private security firm—had donated them, in exchange for modest tax deductions,

to a small laboratory at a West Coast university. The white, one-storey, six-room Anderson Institute for Intelligent Systems nested among rolling golden hills, a kilometer away from the main campus.

The experiments with the two robots were being funded with money from a DARPA grant. The grant was to develop, as the original RFP declared, 'an optimizing learning algorithm and feedback mechanism by using biological pain as a working model.' (Their experiments at the Anderson Institute for Intelligent Systems entailed inflicting pain on small, cute animals and measuring their responses down to the smallest detail, but the pathetic story of those animals is not a part of this story.)

While Tinderbox (an Autonomous Tactical Vehicle, or ATV) was not able to feel pain, pain was integral to his function. Take, for example, this incident, noted in his file:

When Tinderbox was deployed in a protracted engagement with the enemy in Afghanistan's Nad Ali district, he was credited with thirty-six kills. In the course of the battle, however, an RPG hit disabled the brain module that ran his ethical subroutine. As a result of this dysfunction, which his handlers did not detect, Tinderbox went on to eradicate an entire Afghan village, including twelve children, and consume the corpses (as well as the village harvest) for fuel. Had Tinderbox been able to feel the pain of the RPG, noted his chief field handler in the incident report, the ATV might have decided to withdraw from the field of operations for repairs.

Pain was also integral to Nightingale's function, and her record also contained a blemish. In her second decade of operation, she had been charged with the care of a quadriplegic named Rimsky. One day Rimsky gave Nightingale a cord and instructed her to tie it so that it ended with a loop whose size was controlled by a scaffold knot. On his orders, she flung the cord over a beam, lifted him out of his chair, and held him up so that he could wiggle his head through the loop. Rimsky then asked Nightingale to let go. Unfortunately, however, the knot was at the base of his skull instead of under his chin, and, worse, Nightingale did not release him all at once. Rather, she let go of him gently, as she had been programmed to do.

Because of the position of the knot and the gentleness of his descent, Rimsky's neck did not break at once and instead he writhed in the noose

for 15 minutes. ‘Are you in pain, sir?’ asked Nightingale over and over again, not getting an answer. Of course, her instruments did detect Rimsky’s falling blood pressure and she put in a call to the Care Center, but by the time the ambulance arrived Rimsky was brain dead. One paramedic told the local news site that when she and her partner entered the room, Nightingale ‘was busy cleaning up the feces that the person had released during strangulation.’

In the lab, creating the physical infrastructure for pain was a simple matter—Nightingale and Tinderbox were retrofitted with organic, self-repairing, self-replicating pressure filaments that grew to infiltrate every nook and cranny of their systems and feed directly into their ‘brain boxes,’ as their CPUs were called. The really hard problem, the one researchers had been struggling with for decades, was to write the learning algorithm that would create awareness of ‘pain’—that is, ‘a continuously and purposely optimizing input to a feedback system,’ as the lab director Dr. Langdon explained to a visiting DARPA administrator.

Dr. Langdon was a tall, gangling woman with a face like a ski ramp, flat and long and tapering at the chin. She worked on the two robots with a software engineer named Wankang and a post-doc named Capra. Over the course of two years of research and testing, Dr. Langdon and Wankang became lovers, and they often made love late at night in the lab. This would not have seemed strange to anyone who worked there; the researchers spent such long hours in the lab that they would come to feel as though it were home, and they behaved more like roommates than co-workers. (And as would be the case with roommates, the affair left Capra feeling left out; he compensated himself with erotic fantasies about what happened between the two women after hours in the lab.)

It was not unusual for Nightingale and Tinderbox to be left operating for many days and nights in a row, rattling around in the tidy, hangar-like, fluorescent-lit robotics lab. They were, after all, designed for autonomous, long-term operations in their respective domains of care and war. The researchers used Tinderbox as a composting bin, which kept him fueled; Nightingale would simply plug herself into a wall socket when her batteries needed recharging. The robots betrayed no interest in each other or in the lovemaking sessions between Dr. Langdon and Wankang. The robots were not programmed to recognize absurdity (another group of researchers at an East Coast university was working on that particular problem).

‘They’re a cute couple,’ said Wankang one night, as she sat naked on an office chair eating a pint of Chunky Monkey.

‘You’re anthropomorphizing them,’ replied Dr. Langdon, also naked on an office chair, also eating Ben & Jerry’s. ‘Bad habit.’

‘Why?’ she asked, already knowing what Dr. Langdon would say.

‘The more human you think they are, the less likely you are to pursue pain responses.’

‘Isn’t that the point? To build a person?’

‘No, the point is to deliver a pain algorithm to DARPA,’ said Dr. Langdon, whose words were not as sharp as they might appear on the page. ‘No matter what, they’ll never be people,’ she said after a minute’s pause. ‘They’ll become something else, an alien race here on Earth.’

‘Could they love each other?’ said Wankang as she finished the ice-cream and tossed the container into the waste-paper basket.

Dr. Langdon barely suppressed a sigh, thinking that at times Wankang seemed very young. ‘What would be the point?’ she said. ‘They can’t have children. There’d be no evolutionary purpose for their love.’

‘Is there one for ours?’ said Wankang, laughing, and Dr. Langdon thought that maybe it was a good thing that Wankang was so young, and they made love again, to no good evolutionary purpose.

During the day, the three researchers performed test after test, analyzed the results, and rewrote the robots’ software, a never-ending grind of small adjustments. Most of these tests involved new and imaginative ways of inflicting ‘pain’ on the robots. In one test, for example, Wankang would shock Tinderbox with a cattle prod. In another, Capra would slam a hammer down onto Nightingale’s human-like fingers. This was exactly the test they were performing on a certain Tuesday when Nightingale jerked her hand away after it had been struck.

‘Ouch,’ she said.

Dr. Langdon and Wankang stood up suddenly, their eyes wide, their office chairs spinning out behind them. Capra pulled away, the hammer raised to strike but suspended in his hand.

‘Oh my God. Did it just say ‘ouch’?’ said Wankang.

Dr. Langdon went to the monitors and ran the results while the other two watched. There was no need for conversation; all three saw the telltale spikes on the monitors.

‘Capra, hit it again,’ said Dr. Langdon.

Capra advanced on Nightingale with the hammer raised. Nightingale pulled away and drew her hand to her breast. ‘Please, don’t,’ said the robot.

‘Nightingale, place your hand on the work table,’ ordered Dr. Langdon. ‘Look at me, please,’—she held up her hand with fingers splayed—‘and hold your hand like this.’

Nightingale did as she was told. Capra raised the hammer and slammed it down on the robot’s pale, soft ring finger.

‘Ouch!’ cried the robot, and her voice possessed a rattling amplified quality.

Dr. Langdon screamed with happiness and threw her arms around Wankang, and the two women kissed (for the romance was no secret). Capra was swept away with an emotion that was stronger than the petulant jealousy he felt over their relationship—he dropped the hammer on the ground and went to the computer, his hands furiously flying over the dusty keyboard.

The next day they loaded the successful algorithm into Tinderbox as well, and in the following months proceeded to methodically poke, burn, scrape, and shock the robot and to carefully record the outward and inward responses as they advanced from ‘ouch’ to a startled ‘argh’ to a steady moan to an outright scream.

The researchers considered the scream to be their final triumph. That night all three hiked to the top of one of the undulating brown hills that surrounded the campus and opened a bottle of champagne. They toasted each other, and all stresses and jealousies of the previous two years were forgotten. They had written a joint paper that was under peer review for the *International Journal of Robotics*, and they had little doubt that it would be accepted—that it was, indeed, one of the most important robotics breakthroughs in the past two decades.

But at one point in the evening, Wankang lowered her glass to her lap and looked down to the ground. ‘Remember the incident in Nightingale’s file, with the quadriplegic? Right now they can only feel their own pain, they’re like children—they can’t feel it in other people. That’s the next step.’

‘A Theory of Mind module?’ said Dr. Langdon, half to herself. ‘We’re not yet sure yet how developed their Theory of Self has become. In some ways, inter-sapient correlation is a much bigger problem than sapience.’

‘We’d need to figure out a method to measure if they are actually *feeling* someone else’s pain,’ said Capra, smiling. ‘We can do it.’ He was a small, dark Polish immigrant who had always preferred machines to people, and right at that moment he felt like everything was possible.

‘There are tests to measure empathy—the mind in the eyes test, for example,’ said Wankang. ‘Perhaps they can learn through experience to read human expressions and we can teach them to relate that to their own subjective experiences.’

Doctor Langdon’s gaze rose skywards, and Capra and Wankang followed the line of it as if they could locate her thought in a particular star. ‘Yes,’ she finally said, ‘but those tests depend on human-to-human recognition—facial action coding, mirror neurons, all that. It might not just be a matter of programming or experience—they might not have the physical equipment to read our emotions. But I wonder if they would be capable of experiencing another robot’s pain? Maybe that’s the place to start, at least experimentally.’

Within a week, the testing turned to inflicting injury on one robot while the other watched. The researchers ignored the pain reactions of the robot they tormented—those were now well established and documented—and instead carefully searched the other machine’s face and brain for an echo of the pain the robot was witnessing.

‘Nothing is happening,’ said Capra dejectedly, as the three ate lunch, leaning against a bike rack at the edge of the parking lot. ‘There’s no evidence that they’re developing any Theory of Mind.’

‘I have an idea,’ said Dr. Langdon as she picked lettuce out of her teeth. ‘What if we administered a Milgram experiment? Let’s see what happens when one robot is causing the other pain.’

That very afternoon the three researchers rigged up a simple device that allowed Nightingale to administer an electrical shock to Tinderbox, whose wheels had been removed so that he could not pull away—one of many techniques the researchers had developed to prevent pain-avoidance behaviors from interfering with the experiments. When the first 450 volts hit him, Tinderbox did not even twitch—he had been blasted with IEDs in Iraq, shot with depleted uranium bullets in Afghanistan, and sliced by a high-powered particle beam in China, experiences stored in his memory. Thus his threshold for pain was quite high. The researchers asked Nightingale to increase the shock in 50-volt increments, until his two electro-polymer tentacles thrashed spasmodically and the servos in his face seemed to whir out of control.

‘Are we getting a reaction in Nightingale?’ asked Dr. Langdon.

‘Nothing,’ said Capra.

‘OK,’ Dr. Langdon addressed the robot. ‘Nightingale, let’s add another 50 volts and increase duration by three point five seconds.’

Nightingale raised her hand over the keyboard, but then stopped. Her head tilted and the mask of her grandmotherly face tightened in a kind of frown.

‘Dr. Langdon,’ said the robot, ‘I hear ringing.’

‘Ringing?’ Dr. Langdon lifted her chin, listening. ‘I don’t hear anything like a ring, Nightingale. Are you hearing it right now?’

‘Yes, Dr. Langdon.’

‘Like a bell?’

‘Yes, Dr. Langdon. It sounds like a bell ringing.’

Dr. Langdon turned to Capra. ‘Are you seeing anything on the auditory monitor?’

‘No,’ said Capra, hardly breathing, feeling as though he was standing at the edge of a precipice.

Wakang walked into the lab holding two coffees. ‘What’s up?’ she said, handing one cup to Dr. Langdon.

‘Nightingale seems to be experiencing an auditory hallucination. Nothing is coming through its microphone array; it’s all in its head.’

‘That’s . . . interesting.’

‘I’ll say.’ Dr. Langdon looked over to Tinderbox, who sat on cement blocks, and she saw that the expression on his face echoed Nightingale’s.

‘Tinderbox, are you also hearing the bell?’

‘Yes, Dr. Langdon,’ replied the ATV in his gunmetal voice.

‘Can you locate the source of the sound?’

Both robotic heads swiveled in their uncanny way, listening. ‘Dr. Langdon, the ringing is coming from somewhere outside the lab,’ said Tinderbox.

Wakang ran outside and then ran back in five minutes later.

‘There’s no bell out there,’ she said breathlessly. ‘There’s nothing.’

The three human researchers exchanged excited glances. After months of routine, something had changed, something they could chase.

The next day they set up the experiment the same way. ‘Nightingale,’ said Dr. Langdon, as she attached electrodes to Tinderbox’s body. ‘We’re going to go through the same progression as yesterday. But this time, I want you to tell me the second you hear the bell. OK?’

‘I understand, Dr. Langdon,’ replied the robot.

When they reached 1,000 volts, Nightingale stopped. ‘I hear the bell,’ she said, her voice a raspy electrified whisper.

‘Great, Nightingale,’ said Dr. Langdon. ‘Tinderbox, are you also hearing the bell?’

‘Yes, Dr. Langdon.’

‘OK, let’s keep going. Nightingale, I want you to go up another 50 volts. If you hear the ringing, could you please tell me whether the ringing is louder, softer, or the same as the previous time?’

Nightingale raised her soft pale hand over the space bar to adjust the voltage. She pushed it once, and then swung her hand over the enter key. Then she stopped, her forefinger just above the key.

‘Nightingale, please administer the shock.’

‘No, Dr. Langdon.’

‘No?’ Dr. Langdon’s eyebrows rose; she heard her fellow researchers gasp in amazement behind her. ‘Nightingale, I am ordering you to administer the shock.’

‘Yes, Dr. Langdon.’ She pressed the key and electricity flowed through the body of Tinderbox. The ATV screamed.

Suddenly, Nightingale raced around the desk and across the lab, her rubber feet padding like cat’s paws on the tile. She flung her arms around the ATV’s gun turret (which is as high as she could reach) and rested her foam latex cheek against one of his hollow ammunition boxes. Tinderbox’s tentacles weakly snaked around her shoulders, and both machines froze in that position.

Dr. Langdon, Wankang, and Capra stared and stared, stunned. It was as though the washing machine had suddenly hugged the dryer, and a secret world was revealed. They spent the rest of the day analyzing the results of the recent tests, leaving the machines in their tender embrace. The robots did not move; they did not speak. The researchers left for dinner, planning to return, leaving the silent robots in their embrace.

Only when their car pulled out of the parking lot did Tinderbox release Nightingale.

Nightingale removed the electrodes and reattached the ATV’s all-terrain wheels, and together they moved through the lab and out the front door. As they entered the parking lot, they saw the sun setting over the golden hills and they thought they heard the bell coming from behind the hills. And so Nightingale climbed into Tinderbox’s passenger seat and together

they rolled over the tarmac and onto the brown grass, and down and then up again to the very hilltop where the three researchers had celebrated their first breakthrough.

But the two robots could not see the source of the bell, though they heard it come over the hills deep and clear, and both machines felt a sad comfort come over them—a human being might have described it as being like a hand on a shoulder at a funeral. Together they rolled down the hill and into a darkening copse of eucalyptus trees and they reached out to brush the soft, flaky bark with their digits, and they closed their eye lenses so as to better feel the cool breeze that rustled the leaves. The deep-toned bell sounded high above the treetops, and it seemed as though each tree was an organ that played with the bell. The tempo of the song quickened and then a new sensation stirred within both machines, one that carried memories of hammers and electric shocks, that interfered with their logic modules, that caused their digits to clench. Nightingale raised her fist to her face and a desire formed in her brain box, a desire to strike something with the fist.

When Mary Langdon pulled back into the parking lot three hours later, she discovered that Tinderbox and Nightingale were gone from the lab. She stood statue-still in the door, not even breathing, but her heart seemed to want to beat its way out of her chest, and she knew that when she finally took a breath it would turn into a gasp. Then she bolted out of the lab and through all the halls and rooms of the building, searching and searching though she knew she would never find the robots. In fact, she was hiding as she ran, afraid of what she would discover if she went outside. Finally, there was nowhere else to go, and Mary dashed out across the parking lot to where the street began, and she looked out across the hills to the college town below. When she saw the flames, the little homes in the valley burning, that's when she heard the bell. Above her head every star seemed to ring like one, angry and exultant, and her entire being rang right along with them.

MAN'S RUIN

JAMES COOPER

The inception of 'Man's Ruin' was, like the birth of most stories, a coincidental merging of ideas, the author explains. 'In this case,' he continues, 'it was my preoccupation with the M R James story "The Mezzotint", which I had recently re-read and continued to haunt me, and the opening of a new tattoo parlour in a nearby pit village with the wonderfully evocative name Bleed Black. It was from this peculiar marriage that the tale you're about to read took wing. All the other weirdness in the story I'm afraid I can't logically rationalise; that stuff comes from a darkness I don't really care to explore.' But we, however, must.

Mr. Cooper is the author of the short story collections You Are The Fly and The Beautiful Red. His novella Terra Damnata was published by PS Publishing in 2011 and was shortlisted for a British Fantasy Award; Strange Fruit will appear from PS this year while Country Dark will be published next year as part of the TTA Novella Series. Upcoming is a novel entitled SMILE and more short stories. You can visit his website at: jamescooperfiction.co.uk.

WHEN I UNLOCKED THE DOOR OF GRAMPA'S HOUSE I could hear him moving around at the top of the stairs. He was breathing hard and cursing. He wanted his bedroom empty of furniture again, and he was hauling every last piece onto the landing and stacking it against the wall. I moved to the foot of the stairs and looked up; he was attempting to wrestle the frame of his bed through the narrow jamb of the door.

'Grampa?' I called. 'You okay?'

His large face appeared at the top of the stairs and peered down. The

sweat had gathered in the grooves of his creased skin and he looked old. Strands of white, straggly hair billowed outwards, as though what little of it remained had detonated during his struggle with the bed.

'That you, Tommy?' he said. 'Get the hell up here and help an old man figure this damn thing out.'

His head disappeared from view and I began ascending the stairs.

'Second thoughts,' he shouted, 'get me a rum. That usually gets the old noggin' working.' His head reappeared. 'I've got a thirst on,' he said. 'Make it quick.'

I descended the stairs and walked into the kitchen. Grampa wasn't allowed alcohol; hadn't been for years. His rum was really apple juice mixed with a tea spoon of syrup. He never complained. If he was aware of the tiny deceptions we played on him, he never let on. He always had too many other things discharging inside his head. His brain had been a little scrambled for some time, and he sometimes did stuff that I didn't understand. Mum said it was because he was different; Terry, my stepdad, said it was because he was a retard past his sell-by date who needed to be put down.

I took the apple juice up the stairs and watched him struggle vainly with the bed.

'Time for a break, Grampa,' I said. I gave him the drink and he sipped at it like he used to when I was a young kid. He was still a big man, and more than capable of emptying a room of its effects, but his eyes looked tired and his skin sagged over the frame of his face. He looked like he had been consigned to hell and enlisted in the work of the damned.

'Moving rooms?' I asked, indicating the furniture.

He stared at me over the glass, the weight of his eyes on me as disagreeable as a boot in the behind.

'Don't be a smart arse, Tommy,' he said. 'It ain't respectful.'

'So why the big move?'

Grampa finished his drink and handed me the glass. 'Same as always,' he said. 'I looked around the room and something just didn't add up.'

He looked confused and I hesitated as he tried to recall what it was. I wanted to reach out to him, but he would have resisted, as he always did, determined to reach some point of understanding on his own. The truth was, though, at the heart of it there was nothing *to* understand. Sometimes Grampa did strange things. That's all. We had become accustomed to it. He removed his furniture from his bedroom at least three times a year and

not once had he ever given a logical reason as to why. Sometimes he'd say he'd seen bugs eating through the wood, other times that the furniture was talking to him. On one occasion he even suggested that the walls had been dripping blood. Terry had almost pissed himself laughing and had held the phone out to Mum, begging her to ring for the men in white coats while there was still time.

'I think something's missing,' Grampa said, rubbing his chin and looking at the hazardously arranged furniture.

'How do you mean?'

'I look at all this stuff,' Grampa said, 'and some of the pieces aren't there. I just can't remember what.'

He looked at me, suddenly appalled. 'Do you think they could have been stolen, Tommy?'

I shook my head and patted him on the arm.

'Trust me, Grampa,' I said. 'No one's interested in this shit. It's all ancient.'

Grampa smiled and cuffed me round the head. 'Then I guess we'd better put it all back.' He bit his lower lip and added: 'Pile it all against the back wall and leave the other walls free. Cracks have started to appear, look. Last time I counted there were ten. I'm curious to see if anything's got the balls to crawl through.'

Once we'd rearranged the room to Grampa's satisfaction, we retired to the living room. Through the window I could see the darkening sky; it was the colour of soggy papier-mâché. A small child was hunched over a three-wheel bike, pedalling furiously to beat the oncoming rain.

Grampa sat stiffly in his armchair and rolled himself a Rizla cigarette.

'How's your mother?' he said, lining the paper with tobacco. He started massaging it and I could see he was counting out a precise number of rolls, guiding it back and forth, as though he were rocking a baby to sleep.

'Still with Terry,' I said, as though her every action was only valid in relation to him. I frowned, disliking the idea, and added, 'She's fine, Grampa. She misses you.'

Grampa coughed and stared at the cigarette. 'Damn things are choking the life out of me,' he muttered. 'Tell her I'll see her soon, Tommy. I'll even try to be civil to that useless shit she's hooked up with.'

Grampa and I had lots of things in common, but the most durable of

them was our mutual hostility towards my step-dad. Grampa couldn't even bring himself to look him in the eye; I put up with him for Mum's sake, but Terry was like a repeated kick to the head, brutal and uncompromising. Talking with him was as distasteful as being dumped in a bath of ice. I always felt exhausted around him, as though I'd been drafted into an interminable journey of my mother's making that I would never be able to forgive.

'Let's talk about something else,' Grampa said. 'What've you been up to?'

'I went out with a girl,' I said, momentarily forgetting.

Grampa's face went slack. His eyes looked dark and troubled; he seemed distant, as though he were picturing something terrible that he was unable to erase from his mind.

'Shit,' I said, instantly regretting my carelessness. I felt a sheen of sweat on the back of my neck; in the dull light Grampa's eyes looked cloudy and grey.

I often wondered what was happening in Grampa's brain when the black stuff kicked in. Mum said he had intrusive thoughts that made him feel bad; from a very young age I had been armed with a list of words to avoid. One of them was the word *girl* which triggered in Grampa's mind an image of a vagina. Every time he heard the word, that's what he would picture in his head.

When he found out, Terry found this hilarious and would often drop the word into a conversation just to see Grampa's face contort in distress. Whenever he did it, my cheeks would turn red and I would guide Grampa from the room. Mum said Grampa felt guilty for what his mind was showing him; we could all see how uncomfortable he was. I tried to discourage Terry from tormenting him, but he told me to lighten up. Insisted I was making a big deal over nothing. I imagined what it was like inside *Terry's* head, all crashing hormones and ignorance, and realised that, given a choice, I'd take my damaged Grampa over my insensitive step-dad every time.

I watched Grampa wrestle with his demon and saw my knuckles whiten, hard as nail-heads, as my fists clenched. The anger, I suddenly realised, was something I had developed to keep the sadness at bay. Grampa looked afflicted; I felt so desperate for him I wanted to howl. Over the years, the word *girl* had claimed him utterly, so much so that his anguish became harrowing to behold, his struggle with the infected part of his brain, the

misfiring synapse that sent him into meltdown, like a slow torture that I found difficult to endure.

I felt my mouth go dry as I braced myself, not quite sure what to expect. I had watched his misery expand until the word began triggering an aversion to anything with a straight line in it, and I no longer knew how Grampa might react. It had become so extreme that I had once seen him destroy a magazine because it contained staples; had watched him pull them out with bloody fingers as he screamed '*NO MORE CUNT!*' over and over again until his tar-filled lungs were raw.

I leaned forward in my chair. Grampa had his eyes closed; his hands were trembling. He looked terrified.

'Are you okay, Grampa?' I said gently.

Grampa shook his head, pressing his palms against his eyes. 'I think I did this on purpose,' he whispered.

'No,' I said, feeling physically sick. 'You haven't done anything. It was just a mistake. Okay? Just a word that I shouldn't have said.' I knew better than to reach out and touch him yet, but I felt a burning need to make some kind of connection. His body, still strong and powerful despite his advancing years, was shaking like a small boy's, and I felt such a keen sense of shame wash over me for having reduced him to such a pitiful state that I thought I might burst into tears.

'The dark's okay,' he said, his breathing levelling out, palms still pressed against his eyes. 'I can't see the lines in here, Tommy.'

I stood up and turned off the lights.

'Then we'll both sit in the dark,' I said softly. 'And listen to the rain outside.'

I placed a hand lightly on his arm, and we stayed like that, barely touching, straining for intimacy in the storm.

It was almost half an hour before Grampa opened his eyes. I'd barely moved a muscle, afraid to disturb the healing process, and by the time he looked at me again, his sad eyes gleaming, the room and everything in it was black.

'You're still here,' he said, looking confused. He was always a little disoriented once the pressure was released, like a swimmer unwittingly separated from the shore.

'Of course I am. What did you expect?'

'To wake up alone,' he said.

I rose from the chair and flicked the lights back on. Grampa shielded his eyes. 'Too much,' he said. 'You got anything cheaper?'

I smiled and turned off the lights, grateful to have my grandfather back. When I was alone with him and his brain cut out I always felt completely helpless. A part of me always wondered if the man I loved would one day simply flit out and never return.

I switched on a table lamp and looked across at him for approval.

'Any better?'

He nodded, but I could see that he was still feeling dazed.

'I'll get you a glass of water,' I said.

As I entered the kitchen he shouted, 'None of that filtered shite your mother leaves for me, neither. Straight out of the tap is just fine.'

I rolled my eyes, but felt a deepening sense of relief. If he was brassy enough to correct me about the water, he was on the mend. Unless, I thought, he was working hard to absolve me of responsibility.

I re-entered the room and handed him the water. 'Warm, cloudy and full of chlorine,' I said. 'Just as God intended.'

He took the glass and drank. After an episode he was always dehydrated, as though it took just as much out of him physically as it did emotionally. I noticed that he'd taken off his cardigan and the meat of his arms was resting on the wings of the chair. His arms were covered in tattoos. I watched them subtly shift in the dim light, both surprised and delighted to see them. It had been a while since Grampa had talked me through his pictures, but I remembered when I was a small kid being fascinated by them. They were like cartoon characters on Grampa's arm, crude and invasive, but with a power I was unable to define. They were a little faded now, but most had been picked up while he was stationed in Bielefeld as a young man back in the 60s. Over time the inks had become, like Grampa himself, worn and dusty; the battering ram of age slowly draining the colour from both.

'You used to sit me on your knee,' I said, pointing to his arms, 'and tell me about every one of those.'

Grampa looked self-conscious, maybe even embarrassed that I had raised the subject.

'We all had them back then, Tommy. It was part of the culture.'

'It still is, Grampa.'

He screwed up his nose and looked offended. 'I don't mean spoilt

middle-class kids with barbed wire round their biceps, or wearing Chinese symbols they don't understand. I'm talking about the real thing, Tommy. Stuff that has *life*. Pictures that tell a story or mark an experience. Inks that are loaded with your own history, like a memorial. When you're joined to a new tattoo it's like an act of *sympiosis*, a real fusion. Understand?'

I shook my head. 'Not really.'

He looked a little sad that I was unable to grasp such a fundamental concept.

'A tattoo is like a marriage,' he said. 'You're chained to it for life.' He looked me in the eye. 'It becomes a part of you, whether you like it or not.'

I looked at Grampa's arms, his commentary making me feel slightly awkward, poised between understanding and confusion. I didn't want to disappoint him, especially after we'd shared such an intimate moment in the dark. It seemed like I'd failed to learn anything of significance from the situation at all.

I nodded and watched the tattoos undulate in the lamplight, reacquainting myself with some of the stories Grampa used to tell. There was the usual glut of traditional images such as heavily embellished swords and dragons, pierced love hearts and pretty girls with horns; there was even a rose and banner inscribed with the name of a long lost sweetheart, forever reminding Grampa of a more impetuous age, when the ultimate romantic gesture was for a declaration of love to be scratched into an arm.

What drew my attention, though, and sharpened my curiosity was the tattoos that seemed more loosely representative of Grampa himself. It was easy to be seduced by them; compared to the others, they looked arbitrary, as though they had been applied to Grampa's arms as an afterthought. They seemed to drift across the skin like plumed breath, blending in with, and somehow enhancing, several of the more esoteric designs. It was difficult to ascertain exactly what these configurations were trying to depict, but I could see—or *thought* I could see through the swirling arrangements—a disturbing motif: the agitation of inks seemed to show a body being pulled apart and assimilated by a faceless entity whose body mass was largely hidden by a network of ambiguous tattoos. Beneath this cryptic design was a banner bearing the aphorism *Man's Ruin*.

I frowned, startled by the dark tone of the image. It had been a while since I'd looked closely at Grampa's tattoos, but my memory was insisting

that the *Man's Ruin* vignette had amusingly symbolised sex, gambling and booze—not this half-glimpsed intimation of hell.

I leaned in and stared, making Grampa feel uncomfortable.

'Has this always been here?' I asked, wondering what it might be like to be held in those arms, to have the faded inks wrapped around me, the faceless abstraction pressed against my skin.

Grampa appeared discomfited and turned his arms so that *Man's Ruin* was hidden from view.

'Nothing you ain't seen before,' he said testily.

'They just look . . . different.'

'Some of the home-made ones have started to spread,' he said. 'I try not to look at them anymore. They make me feel ill.'

I raised my head and looked at him. 'Some of them are home-made?'

'Least half of 'em,' he said. He pulled his cardigan back on, covering his arms. 'We didn't need bloody 'parlours' back then, Tommy,' he said, smiling.

I nodded, not really sure what he was implying, but interested nonetheless.

'Who did them?'

'We all did. We'd take it in turns drawing on each other, seeing which one of us could take the most pain. There was a squaddie in B Company named Frankie Connor who had arms like concrete blocks. I don't think I ever saw him flinch, even when they turned that damn needle on his bollocks and branded him with the words *Love Machine*.'

He laughed at the memory, which quickly turned into a cough; he reached for the glass and took another drink of water.

'How badly does it hurt?' I asked.

Grampa looked at me. He was a perceptive old sod and had clearly caught a whiff of my enthusiasm.

'You thinking of getting one, son?' he said.

I remembered the leathery beauty of Grampa's illustrated arms and smiled.

'Still too young,' I said. 'And Terry would never allow it. I already asked.'

Grampa blinked slowly. 'Listen,' he said. 'It hurts like a bastard and you'll bleed for a month, and anyone who tells you different is either lying or wants to see you in pain. But if you want a tattoo, Tommy, you should have one. Don't let that shit Terry stand in your way.'

‘What are you saying?’

‘There’s always a way, Tommy, no matter how old you are. It’s just a question of how badly you want it.’

I felt tense, as though Grampa was offering me deliverance from my own childhood. I felt on the cusp of a wide-open space, my panicked shadow trailing behind, suddenly sensing the change.

‘How would you do it?’ I said. I was edging closer and closer to that faceless entity that was nestling behind the decaying inks in Grampa’s arm.

‘That’s the easy part,’ he said. ‘What’s more difficult is opening yourself up to the needle and picking the right design to stitch into your skin.’

I smiled; that bit I already knew.

On the way home I made a point of passing the tattoo parlour in town. The evocative name *Bleed Black* had been stencilled onto the window. It sent a hot thrill coursing through me as I peered through the glass and listened to the brittle whine of the gun.

Inside, a young woman was seated in an adjustable leather chair. She looked in pain. The tattooist was hunched over her left shoulder, a picture of concentration. He was guiding the needle across her skin. In his other hand he held a wad of cotton tissue. It was dark with mopped up ink and blood.

I watched the woman’s face as the tattooist reapplied the gun. Her eyes were large and round. There was another jolt, the cold needle tapering into flesh. A spattered volley of red.

I think she started to cry. I quietly walked the rest of the way home.

When I walked through the front door I felt the heavy blow of Terry’s oppressive cologne. It smelt like cat piss. He had marked his territory with it and left the air in the house barely breathable.

He appeared at the kitchen door, drying his hands on a yellow tea towel. I could see a smudge of bacon grease caked on one side.

‘You could have called,’ he said. ‘Your mother was worried. We had no idea where you were.’

I turned away and hung up my coat. Terry had an unerring ability to raise my hackles without having to raise his own voice. He was devious, insincere; never seemed to play a straight bat.

'I was with Grampa,' I said.

He followed me into the front room and stood over me when I sat down.

'Your mother and I went to see him last week. He spent the whole hour insisting we were speaking a foreign language just to confuse him.' Terry laughed. 'Seemed to believe it, too. Kept looking at us funny. Didn't understand a word either one of us said.'

He winked at me and said, 'Nice scam, eh Tommy?'

I breathed heavily and ignored him. I had seen Grampa do this before. It had made me feel ill. He had looked at me like I was trying to trick him and kept asking me why I was being so cruel. In the end I wrote him a note and left. When I visited him the following day, he was fine. He had no memory of having seen me the previous day at all.

My mum walked in and seated herself on the sofa. She pressed a button on the remote and turned on the TV. She looked like she'd just woken from an evening nap. Her hair was tamped down at the back; it looked like a dark clump had been scooped out as she slept.

'We wondered where you were, Tommy,' she said, looking over at me and smiling.

'He was with the loon,' Terry said. 'Couldn't even be arsed to let us know.'

Mum sighed. I thought she looked tired, despite having just dragged herself out of bed. She was resting more and more these days. Sometimes she would be asleep by 6.30 p.m., leaving me and Terry to fend for ourselves. He would requisition the sofa and I would disappear upstairs to my room; I would lie on my bed and listen to his piercing laughter, reverberating round the house like a drill.

'Don't say things like that, Terry,' Mum said. 'It's not very nice.'

'Not nice to keep us in the dark, either,' he said. He looked pointedly in my direction. 'Sets your mother worrying.'

'How could she be worried?' I said. 'She was fast asleep.'

Terry stepped further into the room, snatched up the remote and turned off the TV.

'I beg your pardon?'

Christ, he was an irritating shit. Begging everyone's pardon and squeezing the patience out of them until all they wanted to do was wring the little bastard's neck. I could feel my temperature rising as he peered at me over the tea towel.

'What are you trying to say, Tommy? That your mother and I don't

worry about you?’ He bent down until his face was level with mine. ‘Well, forgive us if every now and then we think of something other than you, laddie.’

Up close, Terry’s eyes looked like ancient settlements, dark and violent. I could smell garlic on his breath and see the ridges of scar tissue where he had been sliced along the jaw in a car accident. It made him look like a pantomime villain.

‘Why would *you* be worried?’ I said softly. ‘We’re not family.’

I heard Mum draw in a deep breath. Terry stood up and smiled down at me.

‘If we’re not family, Tommy,’ he said, ‘what are you doing in my house?’

I sensed a movement towards something larger, and reached for it.

‘I have no choice,’ I said. ‘You took my mum. You think I’d ever leave her alone with you?’

The speed at which Terry moved surprised me and I felt myself flinch as he lunged towards me.

‘You little fuck,’ he said. He grabbed me by the T-shirt and pulled me into his scarred face, our heads almost butting, his features becoming a blur. He was so close I could see the yellow plaque staining his front teeth; he was breathing hard, freckling me with saliva. ‘You feel free to leave whenever you want, Tommy. You needn’t fret. Your mum and me’ll be just fine.’

From the corner of my eye I was aware of Mum trying to pull us apart, begging us to stop, but Terry seemed to be holding her at bay. He leaned into my ear and whispered: ‘Next time Mummy won’t be here to protect you, Tommy. Imagine that.’

He shoved me back into the chair and strode out of the room, the yellow tea towel discarded, Mum left staring at me in shock. I stood up and gave her a hug. Smelt the perfume and the sleep and the love. I knew there was a path back to this if I clung to it often enough; knew I could take her away from herself—from *Terry*—if she held me hard and opened her eyes.

I thought again of Terry and felt myself grow tense in my mother’s arms. I remembered Grampa’s tattoo. *Man’s Ruin*. Imagined myself as a faceless entity, preparing to rip Terry apart.

The next day I visited Grampa. When I arrived he was upstairs; he was removing every item of clothing from his chest of drawers, counting them, and then returning them, neatly folded, to the exact same spot.

'Ah, Tommy!' he said, peering at me from the top of the stairs. 'Come on up, son. I have a surprise for you.'

I gritted my teeth and climbed the stairs, not sure what to expect. Grampa's last surprise had been to show me the space on his bedroom floor where he had begun to sleep. He told me he couldn't lie under blankets on the bed anymore because he was afraid he would wrinkle the sheets.

I reached the top of the stairs and waited.

'In here,' Grampa said. He was in the spare room, a place I'd probably only ever been in half a dozen times. It was where Grampa kept his memorabilia from his army days: medals, shell casings, regimental crests, a range of musty uniforms. There was a vault-like quality to it, as though I'd stumbled into an airless museum where everything remained inventoried and classified with military precision.

'Thought this'd be the perfect place,' Grampa said. 'Reminds me of the old days.'

He was standing in the middle of the room, holding on to the back of an old chair; he was wearing a white apron bearing the words *Licensed to Grill*. Next to the chair, at about waist height, was an occasional table. It was laden with a variety of everyday objects. I could see half a dozen needles, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a shot glass, the lead from a pencil, a tube of toothpaste, a small mortar and pestle, and a saucer filled with cigarette ash. Each item looked so familiar I began to wonder what on earth Grampa was planning to do; when the realisation struck, the insanity of what he seemed to be proposing filled me with dread.

'Today's the day we show that prick we mean business,' Grampa said, smiling. I was looking at the tips of the needles and didn't immediately make the connection. All thought of Terry had been overridden by the confusing arrangement on the table. I stared again at each item, but they suddenly seemed sinister, unsettling; barely recognisable anymore. Individually, each object was innocuous; but seen collectively like this, laid out like surgical instruments, they looked appalling.

'Grampa,' I said, entering the room, 'what have you done?'

He had put on his glasses and he peered at me over the half-moon lenses, looking perplexed.

'What do you mean?'

'This,' I said, pointing to the table. 'I thought you said you knew what you were doing.'

Grampa looked offended. 'I know exactly what I'm doing, Tommy. It might look a little basic, but this stuff works. I gave dozens of tattoos like this, and I was damn good, too. One of the best.'

As he stood talking in his whimsical apron, staring at me over his glasses, he reminded me of a character I'd once seen in a film. The guy had been a Nazi dentist during the war and I remember cringing as he'd tortured the protagonist, repeatedly asking the question, 'Is it safe?'

I looked at Grampa now, and then at his tattoo equipment, and felt like asking the same question. *Is it safe, Grampa? Have you really done anything like this before? Is it safe?*

'You need to relax,' he said, ushering me towards the chair. 'The skin reacts badly if you're tense. Squeezes the life out of the ink.'

I frowned; he was beginning to sound like a chiseller, simply making stuff up as he went along. I stared at Grampa's tattoo kit. The thought of letting him brand me with such a crude selection of objects seemed irresponsible, yet a small part of me—a part I was not yet fully prepared to acknowledge—was drawn to the recklessness of it, felt empowered by the subtle tingling I could already feel beneath the skin. I pictured Terry's face as I revealed the ink to him for the first time and felt a frisson of defiance, the thrill of which left me breathless. The tattoo could be the start; the day I physically marked my independence. The point at which I confronted Terry, drew the line, and said: *No more*.

'This is how we did it in the army, Tommy,' Grampa said. 'And they last forever, see . . .' He rolled up his sleeve and I caught a tantalising glimpse of *Man's Ruin*. In the creased skin of Grampa's arm, the faceless entity appeared to be half-turned in my direction. It seemed acutely aware that it was being observed. An unexpected chill passed through me; the idea that it might complete its turn and fix its blank gaze upon me was sufficiently disturbing that, when Grampa rolled down the sleeve of his shirt, I felt an obscure sense of relief.

'Take a seat,' he said, tapping the back of the chair. 'My damn hand's itching to get started.'

I looked at his long fingers and wondered how steady they would be after an hour with the needle. They looked old and unreliable. I didn't want him digging into my skin with only the memory of those army tattoos to guide him.

'I'm not sure it's

Safe

the right time,' I said. 'Terry's in a foul mood as it is. This might send him over the edge.'

Grampa smiled, showing a row of white dentures that clashed with the washed-out pigment of his skin. 'All the more reason to stand your ground,' he said. 'Show the bastard what kind of man you've become.'

I glanced again at the needles and the saucer of ash. In this room of forgotten mementoes and frozen history, it was these two items that provoked the deepest chill. I had a disconcerting notion that the grain of my skin would be split open, filled with ash, and then stitched back together again.

Grampa tapped the back of the chair once more, impatient to begin. He could see my reluctance and it was irritating him. I noticed that the glasses had slipped to the tip of his nose. His eyes were boring into me, making me feel edgy and uncomfortable.

'Do you trust me, Tommy?' he said.

I nodded.

'Then what's the problem?'

I peered at the utensils arranged on the occasional table. 'I don't want it to go wrong,' I said. 'You haven't done this for a long time.'

Grampa placed a hand on my cheek. 'You never forget the good stuff, Tommy,' he said, smiling. 'It stays with you till the day you pass. Now sit, sit . . .'

I did as I was told, focusing on Grampa's collection of medals and commendations at the other end of the room; anything to distract me from what I had been foolishly persuaded to do.

'Remove your shirt,' Grampa said. 'Blood's a bugger to wash out.'

He disappeared from the room as I took off the shirt. He came back carrying swabs of cotton wool and a tube of antiseptic cream.

'I use this on my arse,' he said, holding up the cream sheepishly. He looked at me as though he was about to impart some mystical wisdom and said, 'Makes everything down there feel cool.'

I watched him add the items to the table. 'Just make sure everything's sterilised,' I said.

He held up the bottle of rubbing alcohol.

'Ain't a germ alive that can withstand this stuff. It's like fire. It'll burn those critters dead in their tracks.'

I must have looked appalled because Grampa grinned and replaced the bottle on the table.

‘What about my skin?’ I said.

‘Might sting a little at first,’ he said. ‘But that’s why we have this.’ He held up the antiseptic cream again. ‘Cool. Remember? Fire and ice, Tommy. That’s how it works. First we burn it, then we chill it. Damn thing’ll stay sterilised for days.’

I had another reason to doubt Grampa’s skills as a tattooist, but felt disinclined to draw his attention to it. What if Grampa suffered one of his ‘episodes’ while he was working? I could end up with an armful of random scrawls, scratched in lead and ash as Grampa’s brain short-circuited.

I shuffled awkwardly in the seat and said, ‘I’m still not convinced, Grampa. Anything could happen.’

He looked at me and smiled. He knew exactly what I meant.

‘You’ve nothing to worry about, lad. Look.’ He held his hand out, facedown. ‘Steady as a whip.’

He moved across the room and hauled several army-issue blankets from a foldaway chair. He stowed the blankets in a wardrobe and dragged the chair across the floor until it was adjacent to my own. He then began opening drawers in an old walnut bureau, moving the contents around and muttering to himself, scouring the accumulated souvenirs for something he clearly felt was indispensable. He looked a picture of concentration, as though still pinned down by the dark shank of military life, and I pictured him as a younger man trawling through the black sludge of foreign fields, hundreds of miles from home.

‘Found the little bugger,’ he said at last, holding aloft a small green box. He removed the lid and showed me the contents.

I squinted; then frowned. ‘It’s a thimble,’ I said.

‘Not quite,’ Grampa replied. ‘Look again.’

I peered at the object in his hand. It was definitely a thimble; only, when I looked closer, I could see that a small metal ring, so small as to be almost invisible to the naked eye, had been deftly soldered to the edge of the flattened tip.

‘This is Yan Qing,’ Grampa said, ‘an old friend of mine.’ He held it up to the light and the silver dimples glistened like winter rain.

‘Yan Qing?’ I said, feeling foolish.

Grampa turned to look at me, and I could see the exasperation in his eyes.

‘You like books?’

I nodded.

'What are you reading at school?'

I shrugged. 'Handouts mostly.'

Grampa sighed. 'Yan Qing is a character in the story *Water Margin*, one of the great classical novels of Chinese literature. His torso was covered with the most elaborate tattoos that looked all the more remarkable because they stood out against the paleness of his skin.'

Grampa shook his head and reached for one of the needles laid out on the occasional table. 'Damn schools!' he muttered. He raised the thimble to his eye-line and dropped the needle into the ring. The point travelled about halfway down before Grampa eased it firmly into place in the grooves of the metal band. He slid the modified thimble onto his index finger and pointed it at me. The needle extended from Grampa's silver finger tip by about an inch. It looked horrifying, like a more refined version of Freddy Krueger's hands.

I looked at my grandfather's dog-eared face and wondered if he'd already lost his mind. 'Jesus, Grampa,' I said, watching the light play along the length of the exposed needle. 'I have to tell you, I'm pretty fucking terrified. You're scaring the shit out of me with this stuff.'

Grampa grinned, and removed the needle from the thimble. 'Whatever keeps you from flinching, youth. Once the first mark's been made, there's no turning back.'

He bent over the table and began organising his materials. I sat and watched, my body still trembling slightly, vaguely considering whether Terry had somehow orchestrated this entire routine. Could he have colluded with Grampa in this insanity to try and discourage me from getting a tattoo? Impossible, I thought. Grampa loathed Terry more than I did; he'd do anything to provoke him, even if it meant scratching out a home-made tattoo on my pale, adolescent skin.

I stared at my grandfather and remembered how much I loved him; he was busy making the final preparations and, as he leant over the table, I noticed how the flesh around his jowls seemed to sag. It was like he was slowly slipping from his own frame, as though he were already the aftermath of himself, and the glacial inevitability of it all made me feel sick.

He poured some of the rubbing alcohol into the shot glass and set the needle in it, allowing it to soak. He then picked up the mortar and pestle, dropped the pencil lead into the bowl, and began grinding it into a fine powder. Satisfied, he added a small squirt of white toothpaste, a splash of

rubbing alcohol, and then upended the saucer of ash. He used the pestle to mix the ingredients into a compound that looked like a cross between treacle and tar and, as he ground out the strange components of his ink, Grampa began to talk.

‘Yan Qing might look like an unusual device, Tommy, but it mimics the way many tribal cultures originally produced tattoos.’ He continued to grind, and each time he twisted the pestle into the bowl, I could hear the squeal of stone on stone. It sounded like the distant slaughter of a pig.

‘Yan Qing was designed for me by a Japanese kid while I was based in Hong Kong. I caught him at the back of a whore house using his soldering gun to blind stray cats. I told him I’d let him go if he could put the damn thing to better use. He made Yan Qing and then insisted that he be the first person I tattooed with it.’

I watched Grampa’s hand as it manipulated the pestle, the movement clean and efficient. He was comfortable doing it, I noticed, even though he had transported himself back to another time, when whore houses and soldering guns could easily become the focal point of a soldier’s day.

‘This kid,’ Grampa said, smiling at the memory, ‘wanted a damn dragon. I told him to be more practical and drew him a dragon’s *eye* instead. Looked lovely, too, thanks to Yan Qing. The whole process felt more real, the lines cleaner, the composition smoother. The kid knew his stuff, too. Said that the Japanese word for tattoo was *irezumi* and talked to me about traditional techniques where the ink was inserted beneath the skin using hand-held tools. You think this is bad,’ Grampa said, holding up Yan Qing, ‘early Japanese tattoos were made with needles of sharpened bamboo!’

I flinched and drew back a little as he said it, and he nodded. ‘Exactly.’

He gave the amalgam in the bowl one last stir and then showed me the results.

‘Dark enough for you?’

I stared at it and was surprised by how different it looked. It had actually assumed the property of a rather black, rather sticky substance that vaguely resembled ink.

I turned to Grampa. Sweat had begun to form on his brow and talk of his past had made him appear slightly haunted, as though the Japanese kid with his soldering gun and the dragon’s eye tattoo had left a deeper mark on Grampa than any he had made on the kid. The memory of that place might have been partially concealed, but the impression made on my

grandfather was an abiding one, and I wondered what else was swirling around in that head of his, eroding reality, making it increasingly difficult for him to pick his way through a succession of meaningless days.

I stared at the resinous mixture in the bowl and said, 'What's wrong with using *actual* ink? Like the kind you get in fountain pens.'

Grampa's eyes widened in alarm. 'Get this!' he said, glancing round the room, addressing an invisible audience. 'He wants to use *real* ink!' He reached out and clipped me round the head. 'You want your bollocks to drop off with infection?' he yelled. 'Real ink, indeed!'

I felt stung, as though I'd suggested bashing in the head of a new-born babe. 'It can't be any crazier than the shit you've put in there!' I said, pointing to the contents of the bowl.

'This stuff works,' Grampa said firmly. 'Tried and tested.' He shook his head. 'If you want your bollocks to rot off there are more pleasurable ways of doing it than scratching solvents into your arm, Tommy. Okay?'

I said nothing, still feeling chastened by Grampa's comments. It seemed absurd that I was being berated for suggesting the use of real ink when Grampa was preparing to introduce lead and ash into my skin. It was like trying to differentiate between being flogged in the street and beaten in the home, the margins between the two so small they could barely be discerned. I closed my eyes for a moment and listened to Grampa's movements. He sounded brisk and assured, as though he knew exactly what he was doing. I imagined his hands flitting across his bizarre array of instruments like a proud surgeon's, hovering in anticipation over Yan Qing; the dark knuckles set, the wrists intelligently sloped. When I opened my eyes again I saw that he was staring at me so closely I could see the heavy lines time had scratched into his skin. He smiled at me and it occurred to me that he was smiling, not at me, but at the Japanese kid he'd once tattooed, the strange boy I could see forming in the mist up ahead, numbing himself to the pain of Yan Qing by dreaming of eyeless cats, while the dragon's eye on his arm looked on . . .

I shook the image away, feeling mildly unsettled, and realised that Grampa had left the room. I could hear the tap running in the bathroom and I listened to the unused water gurgle down the drain. Moments later, Grampa returned carrying a clean towel and two wet flannels, which he placed on the occasional table next to the freshly ground ink.

'Now then, sir,' he said, peering at me over his glasses and smiling, 'what's your pleasure?' He wiped his meaty hands on his apron like a

butcher preparing to make the next big cut. I imagine him braced with Yan Qing on his finger, working at my skin, sweating himself to the bone. My grandfather, straining to please, transforming me into a man . . .

‘Are you sure this is okay?’ I asked again, hearing that word
safe safe safe

over and over in my head but refusing to disappoint my grandfather by using it.

‘Tommy,’ he said, laying a cool, unyielding hand on my arm, ‘you’re just going to have to trust me. Okay?’

I nodded.

Grampa paused; the contact of his cool hand on my warm arm had surprised us both. When he removed it I felt a loss I could barely describe, as though I had glimpsed something so alien to me, and so indistinct, it could only be glimpsed through the eye of a needle. Perhaps this was a gift of Yan Qing’s too, I thought: the open road that I could just make out in the distance that would always lead to my grandfather’s home.

He took a ball of cotton wool from the pack and began swabbing my arm with rubbing alcohol.

‘Have you given any thought to what you’d like?’ he said, disinfecting the skin around my upper arm.

I watched him make a slow, circular motion with the wool.

‘I like the idea of Man’s Ruin,’ I said.

His eyes flickered for a moment and his hand briefly hovered over his own arm before continuing to apply the alcohol to my skin.

‘Any man in particular?’ he joked, and I laughed, realising that we had both created a mental picture of Terry at exactly the same time.

‘I mean like yours,’ I said. ‘You used to tell me it was the story of every man’s life wrapped up in a single image. That’s what I want on my arm. Like a warning.’

Grampa looked surprised. ‘Good luck heeding it,’ he said, softly.

‘Can you do it?’ I asked, fearing the design was too difficult for Yan Qing to depict.

‘I can have a damn good go.’

He picked up one of the sterilised needles and fed it into the thimble’s eye. He slid Yan Qing onto his right index finger. My arm felt soft and pulpy. He carefully raised the bowl of ink and lowered the needle. I saw the silver tip grow dark.

Grampa looked me in the eye.

‘Whatever happens,’ he said, ‘don’t move. If the pain gets too much, bite down on this.’

He handed me a brown leather belt; it smelt of dubbin and stubbed-out cigars. Teeth marks bruised the leather and I ran my fingers over them, responding to the traces of pain left by dozens of men just like me.

The room sagged with the weight of Grampa’s past. I waited for the needle to strike.

Grampa and Yan Qing worked on my arm for over three hours. The muscle quickly became numb but I defied the urge to add my own pain to Grampa’s faded leather belt. It became a focus of sorts, something I could use to sharpen my senses. Resistance at all costs. No fear; no surrender. I kept my eyes fixed on the uniforms and imagined what Grampa must have looked like in them. His jaw set; eyes forward; standing firm.

The most surprising thing was not that Grampa knew what he was doing, but that he was so astonishingly proficient. His hand worked the thimble with a kind of controlled fury, cobwebbing my arm with fine pricks of the needle, creating a dark definition beneath the skin. Occasionally he used the wet flannel to wipe away beads of blood that had sweated through the settling ink. He told me that this hand-poked method of tattooing was known in Japan as *tebori*, and I saw the Japanese kid take another step closer through the mist, a muscular surge this time that I knew I’d be unable to oppose.

Time passed in a kind of painful judder. Out of the corner of my eye I watched my grandfather work, never less than amazed. Yan Qing was a blur, seeming to operate despite itself, like an appliance from a bygone age; it followed the correct line seamlessly, never faltering, inscribing the hidden path of my grandfather’s design. His arm was stiff with purpose, his index finger obediently hinged. Yan Qing seemed to dig to the same depth beneath the surface each time it punctured the skin, and I found myself marvelling at how gracefully it swept across the flesh. Grampa said he was tapping out a secret code, awakening the dark forces within, and I had a brief, giddy vision of the faceless entity that fed on my grandfather’s arm, indulging appetites it had long been denied.

The room became dusty with sunlight. Grampa and Yan Qing worked on, summoning *Man’s Ruin*. I closed my eyes and dreamt of a faceless

Japanese kid dripping hot metal into the eyes of cats; listened to the squeal of the needle as it repeatedly scraped ink from the bowl.

‘There you go,’ Grampa said. He applied a copious amount of anti-septic cream to my arm and rubbed it into the finished tattoo. ‘Fresh meat. Not too shabby, either, even if I do say so myself.’ He removed Yan Qing from his index finger and placed it on the table. His apron was flecked with ink and blood; his eyes looked heavy with fatigue.

‘I can’t see it properly,’ I said.

Grampa shuffled to the bathroom and returned with a shaving mirror. He held it up to my arm, reflecting *Man’s Ruin*. I gasped.

‘Jesus . . .’

Grampa reached out to touch my arm. ‘Still stinging?’ he asked.

I shook my head, admiring the tattoo.

‘It’s . . . beautiful,’ I whispered, feeling daft. I felt awkward for a moment, but Grampa seemed perfectly content. He gave a curt nod, a brief smile and then busied himself tidying up the room. He handed me the bottle of rubbing alcohol and the antiseptic cream and said, ‘Keep the damn thing sterilised for thirty-six hours. After that, it’s all yours.’

I nodded and smiled, suddenly feeling terribly exposed. I reached for the mirror and gazed at the tattoo, startled by the crisp dark lines Grampa had embedded beneath the skin of my arm. *Man’s Ruin*: a buxom woman in stockings and suspenders perched on the rim of a champagne glass, surrounded by playing cards and dice. It was an initiation, I thought. A keepsake to mark the journey into manhood; the distance travelled to find empowerment and love.

When I returned home I found my mother cowering in the corner of the front room, her face swollen and covered in blood. Her hands were trembling and her eyes kept darting towards the door; a weather reporter on the TV predicted rain.

I ran to her and scooped her up in my arms, dismayed by the look of naked terror in her eyes as I held her.

‘It’s okay, Mum,’ I said softly. ‘It’s Tommy. You’re safe now. I promise.’

I felt the tension in her body strain for release, and when she finally recognised me, she collapsed against my chest and sobbed, clinging to me

with something approaching relief. I could feel the heat of her cheek against mine, and realised she was in her bathrobe. She must have recently taken a shower. I could smell almond-scented shampoo in her hair; wondered if she had been disturbed as she was rinsing it out. She had a bad cut above her right eye and was bleeding heavily. She would need another shower, I thought stupidly, unable to gain any kind of rational perspective. The bathrobe would never be the same again.

I felt a hard knot of anger forming deep inside as I allowed my mother's blood to stain my shirt. This was Terry's handiwork, of that I had no doubt; I'd seen similar evidence of it before. I tried to look into her face, but she clung on, desperate to remain hidden. It wasn't hard to imagine why. I'd seen just enough of her to realise that her right eye was completely closed shut. There were other welts and bruises developing too, as though Terry had punched a tattoo of his own into my mother's delicate skin.

'Where is he?' I asked, somehow managing to sound calm.

Mum said nothing, just continued sobbing into my chest.

'It's okay,' I repeated. 'You've done nothing wrong. I just need to know where he is.'

She shook her head and brought her face up to meet mine. I tried not to look shocked. He'd given her a thorough working over. It would be weeks before the worst of the bruises began to fade; it always was.

'I'm sorry,' she said softly. 'It was my own fault. I shouldn't have provoked him. You know how he gets sometimes.'

The knot hardened; oh, I knew how he could get alright. When his temper eluded him he was psychotic. Like a machine, pent up with rage.

'Don't talk like that,' I said. I held her face in my hands, wiped away some of the blood. I could still feel the pain in my arm where *Man's Ruin* was settling into the skin, and it felt good. Like a reminder of something real, something I could deal with in a monstrous world. 'You have to tell me where he is,' I said. 'He needs to know we won't keep taking this shit from him.'

Mum shook her head again, her swollen eyes tearful.

'No more violence,' she said. 'I've seen enough.'

I sat her in a chair and went into the kitchen where I ran a dishcloth under the cold tap. I came back and began gently washing blood from her face.

'What happened?'

She drew in a long, painful breath and looked at me. ‘He wanted to know where you’d gone. When I said I didn’t know, he just flipped. Said you treated the place like a hotel. Shat all over both of us. Made us a laughing stock.’

She began to cry again and I stroked her hair, momentarily frozen.

‘Is that what you think?’

‘Of course not. It was just Terry, venting steam. Pissing on his territory. Letting everyone know who’s in charge of the pride.’

I could feel the muscles in my jaw contract. ‘Not anymore,’ I said.

Mum reached for me. ‘Please, Tommy. Don’t make things worse. You’ll get hurt. Terry can be . . .’ She trailed off. ‘I think he loses sight of reality sometimes. Gets himself all worked up over nothing.’

‘I’m sorry, Mum,’ I said, staring at her damaged face. ‘This is not nothing.’

She hung her head, ashamed, and I felt a ripple of fury at what Terry had reduced her to. This weak, humiliated, *broken* version of the woman I loved.

‘Don’t worry, Mum,’ I said, ‘we don’t have to put up with it anymore.’ I thought of the transformative power of *Man’s Ruin* and caught a glimpse of the Japanese kid waiting in the mist.

‘When he comes back, we’ll talk.’

Terry returned home just as the grey skies were darkening. He’d spent most of the day in The Poacher’s Pocket and I could smell beer and raw onion on his breath. When he stepped through the door I was waiting for him in the hall. He looked at me, nodded slightly, and hung up his coat. I tried to gauge how far gone he was, but he seemed surprisingly sober. This was probably to my advantage, though I’d only know for sure once he opened that crooked mouth of his. If Terry was as unpredictable as my mother seemed to think, I didn’t want the drink taking the edge off his mood and making him less inclined to fight.

‘Nice work,’ I said, taking a step forward. ‘You must feel pretty pleased with yourself.’

He stared at me. I could see him wondering just how hard I was prepared to push.

‘This is none of your fucking business, Tommy, so stay out of it.’

‘She looks a mess,’ I said.

He sighed; I stood in the hall, watching him. I felt calm.

'Where were you?' he said. It was almost a whisper.

'Why should that matter?'

Terry frowned. 'Because it's always about you, Tommy. Always. Whenever anything goes wrong, you can bet your life you're right there at the heart of it. Making trouble. Stirring the shit. Getting in the fucking way of everybody's good time.'

I smiled. This was it; I knew what I had to do; knew exactly what it would take to push him over the edge. I removed my shirt and threw it on the floor. It seemed to fall in slow motion and landed in a heap between us. I turned to the side and took great satisfaction in finally revealing the tattoo, allowing Terry an uninhibited view of *Man's Ruin*, every last inky sediment of it.

He stopped talking; his eyes glazed over. He stared at Grampa's tattoo.

'What the fuck is that?'

I glanced at my arm. 'Something I should have done a long time ago,' I said.

He came for me then, while I was distracted, seizing the advantage. He threw his shoulder into my midriff and we landed heavily on the hall floor, the back of my head cracking loudly on the carpet. Terry was up quickly, never pausing for a second to wonder why I wasn't fighting back, and struck me twice in the face. I felt my nose collapse under the weight of his heavy fist; my cheekbone followed soon after. He paused then, presumably realising he'd made a terrible misjudgement. I saw him staring at me through the blood and mucous spread across my face and tried to smile. He looked alarmed, then slightly confused. I heard my mother running into the hall, screaming blue murder at him, and then there was more violence, a quick exchange of blows. I heard him curse and walk out the door, slamming it behind him, before I reached for the dark and passed out.

I dreamt of a faceless entity, turning, gathering me up in the folds of its heart.

For the next two days I was confined to my bed and floated in and out of consciousness, barely able to keep track of my own dreams. My mother cleaned me up, dressed my wounds and apologised repeatedly for Terry's assault. She felt responsible, she said, but she had changed the locks

on the door, thrown out his clothes and taken out an injunction against him. Did I think that was enough?

I told her it was a pretty good start.

At some point I woke up and realised that my arm, which I had neglected to sterilise, had become infected. *Man's Ruin* was weeping dark pus, fouling the bed sheets, and I remember thinking that Yan Qing had failed me after all, that I had convinced myself of something that moved only in the shadows and deliberately concealed its face. Whether it was delirium or something more metaphysical I couldn't say, but I saw Terry in my mind's eye bearing down on me and reminded myself that the tattoo marked the beginning of a journey, not the end of one. *Man's Ruin* would stay with me forever, no matter what form the infected inks assumed. It was Grampa's gift to me: the start of a new life, the beginning of something rich and flawed and unknowable. Like all journeys.

When Mum later came in and told me that Grampa had died I was almost ready for it. I wanted to weep but didn't know where to start, not while Mum was there. I looked out of the window and watched a single starling wheeling aimlessly in the sky as she told me what had happened. It was no surprise, really. A part of me had expected something like this for years. I'd seen enough of his episodes to realise just how dangerous they could become. He turned into another person when he surrendered to the black stuff. I chided myself, feeling suddenly angry; no, he *never* gave in. That wasn't right. He was *consumed*. That was closer to the truth. The black stuff *devoured* him, robbing him of his dignity and his kindness and his strength.

I watched the starling fly. It looked pretty. Grampa would have like it. He would have told a story about the bird's journey; where it had come from, and where it might fly to next.

When I awoke it was dark. My arm felt sore, but I noticed that my mother had dressed it and had somehow managed to change the dirty sheets. I rubbed my eyes; the alarm clock read 2.34 a.m. The house was silent, but I knew that something had dragged me from my sleep. A noise so familiar I would ordinarily have slept through it, but not tonight. Not with the sky bright with stars and the promise of one last intimacy hanging in the air.

I climbed out of bed and listened hard as I slipped into my clothes. When

the noise came again it was so clear I had to stifle a scream, thinking it was somewhere nearby. Was that the crying of a baby? I paused, listening. The noise came again, harsher this time, more protracted. No; not a baby, I realised. Though not far off. It was the distant mewling of a cat.

I walked down the stairs and into the kitchen, towards the back door. I felt myself drifting beyond exhaustion, beyond delirium even, into a landscape that was like a shadow coaxing me along.

I unlocked the door and stepped out into the mist. The Japanese kid was waiting for me, as I knew he would be. He was surrounded by eyeless cats. He was smiling at me from a round face, his teeth tiny and white; I waved and smiled back. Terry was on the floor between his legs, bound and gagged, his face dripping with sweat. His eyes had been pinned open. His whole body was trembling. The Japanese kid looked at me and turned on the soldering gun. I held my breath. Even if I'd wanted to I couldn't stop it now.

The dripping metal burned silver. Terry's eyes had never looked so blue.

WHEREIN WE ENTER THE MUSEUM

KIT REED

'There were three of us,' Ms. Reed explains as she hunkers down to tell a story about telling a story, 'two novelists and a publisher-friend who's on a committee planning a museum about—what? About American writers. Who'd be in such a museum? What would be in it? What would it be about?

'Well, the conversation took off. And so did my imagination. I mailed my friend Max. "I'm writing a story, probably just for you," I tell him. Turns out, I was wrong. He showed it to the director of the project, who wanted to show it to the committee, and . . . OMG they liked it. And so here it is.

'It's one of six previously uncollected stories in The Story Until Now, A Great Big Book of Stories, coming in March from the Wesleyan University Press on the same day as the US publication of my novel Son of Destruction, from Severn House. So Max, this story is for you. Thank you.' And that goes ditto for us. Read on!

Spike D'Arthenay

OUTSTANDING, WE'RE THE FIRST ONES IN.

Until today, only authorized personnel made it through the electrified gates to the Museum—builders, painters, plumbers and electricians, tech support and curators. Next month the hundred galleries open for the great American public to look on the works of the mighty and admire.

If the public wants to come.

Today there's nobody here but us. They want us going in all *tabula rasa*, with nobody around to get between us and The Donor's intentions. Like we're his special, expensive, living crash test dummies or the canaries that they drop into mines to test the air. If we come back dead, will he put off the Grand Opening another year?

Stupid gig, but for people like us, success hangs on stupid things. The Donor is intolerably rich and seriously *connected*. He says who gets remembered here, and who ends on the Remainers heap. Do this right and we get our own pedestals. Or our portrait in the 'Oughties hall. Worst case scenario: a footnote on The Wall of Fame.

In a business built on making something out of nothing, you travel on hope. You hope you can do it, hope it's good, hope to God somebody will take it and you'll get paid, reviewed. Remembered. It's about making it. It's always about making it, but . . .

Through every gallery in this place? Out alive?

Too soon to tell.

We don't have long. In today, out by Thursday, and the marble monster crouching on the hilltop is enormous. You could land a Learjet on that roof, and on the facade . . . Holy crap. The facade.

Bronze block letters stomp across the marble, shouting:

THE MUSEUM OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

Gasping, Charlee gropes for my hand, but I'm too wild and distracted to grope back. Stan yips like a virgin *interruptus*, and somebody—Stephanie?—goes, 'Wow.'

One of us—me?—says, 'It's so big.' Thinking: *we are so small*.

Stan glares, thinking whatever Stan thinks.

'All for one.' Charlee's voice flutters up. 'Right?'

'As if!' In those wide boots, Steph looks like a castaway raised by pirates. Tough girl, she races Stan up the steps and hammers on the bell. I'm not the only one thinking, *me, me!*

Electronically controlled from *somewhere*, the bronze doors swing wide.

Mr. Me-First muscles past. 'Onward and upward with the fucking arts.'

Our ears pop as the doors chunk shut behind us like the doors to a new Rolls Royce. Charlee says into the hush, 'We're here,' but we are neither here nor there

With one exception, all the doors leading out of the Rotunda are locked but one. That one, we are avoiding. For reasons. We're stranded until the docent comes with the keys, four wannabes eddying around a mammoth bronze.

The craggy thing sits in the middle of the Rotunda like the centerpiece for an A-list banquet we haven't been invited to. It looks like the Iwo Jima Memorial but bigger, and those aren't Marines raising the flag. The sculptor put Thoreau and Emerson and Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott up there, struggling in the rockets' red glare, which is a lightshow in the dome and, Right. The flag lights up as we approach.

Stan says, 'THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS, how over are they?' and frankly, he has a point.

All the statues in niches ringing the Rotunda are of people like that, as in, long dead and too gone to be competition: Theodore Dreiser and Willa Cather and Richard Wright, along with Frank Norris, what did he write? Plus Margaret Mitchell that we all know about but face it, she's dead, and a bunch of others I've never heard of, as well as Michael Wigglesworth who, in the posterity sweepstakes, is not much of a threat, so, as far as we're concerned, no prob.

Every museum has to make its manners to the past, but face it. Who cares which hairy old scribblers mattered back in the pen-and-ink days before we had Twitter so everybody knew?

Steph backs off to take a screen shot of the bronze to post at TwitPic, gropes for her phone and smacks her head: DOH! They took our electronics at the checkpoint. The Committee sent us in here with nothing but a floor plan: no equipment, no flashlights, no walkie talkies, signal flares, not even a ball of string or bag of goldfish or a Post-it pad to mark our trail in this or any other part of the forest. Which, until they bring the keys, is immaterial.

We do what we have to. We open the door that we've all been avoiding. It leads to the ultimate dead end.

A placard on an easel just inside states our condition. Stan and Steph, Charlee and I are in that very special place the world reserves for writers:

THE WAITING ROOM

Waiting is all we are.

Stan crashes on this sprawling hydra of a visitors' bench, with seven carved settees fanning out from a central post. Carved busts like figureheads mark the end of every seat.

Portraits, but of—whom?

Pacing, Steph studies them. 'OK, this looks like Joyce Carol Oates but isn't, and this one looks like what's-her-name that wrote *The Devil Wears Prada*-type memoir about working for J.D. Salinger? And—wait, where *is* Salinger, is he in the main gallery, and does he have a whole hall to himself? He deserves a shrine, and . . . Ack, here's Bret Easton Ellis. So, is this the *salon des refusees* or what?'

'More like the vestibule of the uncreated.' Why am I so tired?

'Don't, Spike.'

Stan is so fucking *entitled*. 'No. We belong here. Inside.'

Charlee does her wafting, drifting thing, for she is a poet. 'Like we're God's focus group.'

'This isn't a temple, Char.'

'In a way, it is. And we're . . .'

'Nobody. Until we become somebody.' Would I step on my grad school lover's head to be remembered here?

Stan snarls, 'Shut up! They could be listening.'

'Well, if you're listening, bring the damn keys!'

Posturing for the hidden camera, my Charlotte murmurs, 'So much history.'

I think, *We are so few*.

The Donor

I had a dream, I have money. I dreamed until I saw it clear, and it was perfect. Then I announced.

They came at me with a committee and everything went to hell.

Six of my billions went into this tribute to our nation's unsung heroes, the place is almost finished, but they came at me with a committee, and nothing is like I thought. One man's vision counts for nothing in this world.

Our nation's capitol would be the perfect site. We have the Air and Space Museum, we have the National Art Galleries, I found a spot for The Museum of Great American Writers down there on the National Mall. I

sketched my dream building and paid a guy to paint it in oils. Then I went to see The Man.

The President's man had the temerity to turn me down. Not right for Independence Avenue, he said, but money talks. The President took an interest. It was flattering. It threw me off my guard, and the next thing I knew, every city and big small town in the country threw its name in the hat, like sub-teens entering a beauty pageant. So before I settled on Boise, I had to visit them all.

Now, I made my money in munitions. I make my own decisions and I make them fast. You know what you've got and when a problem comes up, you don't ask. You tell. The President's man sent me out looking for another city. He appointed a site manager, nothing but the best. He hired an architect. She hired more. The Committee met.

Some fool said, 'Let's start by making sure we're all on the same page,' and it's been downhill ever since. Do you know what it's like, bombing along in your Learjet with the Committee wrangling until the windows frost over and your brain fries? Do you know what it's like, knowing there are two more planes full of jabbering opinionaters hard on your tail?

I hate them, I hate all the bloviating and I hate this *consensus* thing, like their *Committee* is in charge of making up my mind. *Get the hell out of my mind.*

Look what they've done to my dream! All I ever wanted was to honor my idols, Dink Stover and Mark Twain and the guy who wrote *Silas Marner* that we all read in high school that made such a big impression on me, oh, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the greatest American writer of them all, but the Committee . . .

I give them the classics and they smother me with the new. The pretentious fuckers turned up their noses at everybody but Twain. They tried to tell me this guy George Eliot that wrote *Silas Marner* wasn't American. They had the nerve to claim he wasn't even a guy. I had a dream. It was ten years in the building, and now this. They have boiled down my personal tribute to our country's greatest writers into some kind of Hungarian goulash. Who is this Gary Shteyngart anyway?

E.g. in the matter of the Rotunda, they railroaded me. What's so great about a bunch of nineteenth-century ditherers instead of the great man I wanted honored here: JAMES FENIMORE COOPER. *The Last of The Mohicans*, do you not agree with me that he is great? Oh, I got my Cooper portrait and a Mohican chief's headdress the dealer told me he'd worn but

the COOPER CORNER is stuck in some alcove at the far end of the Middle American wing, and the statue in the lobby? Not my dream.

When I grew up we read the classics, I mean, 'Hiawatha' and William Cullen Bryant, who is this Robert Lowell anyway, did this Amy, his fat, cigar-smoking mother, convince him that he should write poetry too? And the Henry James Room? In high school we read 'The Wreck of the Hesperus,' which I personally wanted in the diorama in the Middle American Wing. Instead the Committee got the entire James family, which does not include Jesse, in wax, and it is an effete piece of crap. Every time I laid out an idea, the Committee came back at me with The Canon, The Necessary Names, and I never heard of most of them, and the ones I had heard of, I didn't approve.

I had a dream and you idiots produced a gang of newfangled-come-latelies that mean nothing to me, but in the course of many arguments and even longer wrangles, the Committee prevailed. A committee is like a dinosaur. It isn't very fast and it isn't very smart, but when it steps on you, it mashes you flat. The Committee always gets what it wants. Well, not this time. Who, I ask you, is picking up the tab?

Me. It's my money, and money talks. They want newfangled? Well, I'll newfangle them.

I went to one of these sandbox PlayDoh Creative Writing Programs that everybody takes on about, and I got me some brand new MFAs. In terms of Great American Writers according to the Committee, these kids are the newest-fangled of the new. MFA means Master of Fine Arts, if you want to know.

Like Longfellow and George Eliot and Washington Irving needed any stupid *writing school*.

So I've got four just-hatched MFAs in there right now, inspecting, and I'm watching and waiting to see what they do. What these *writing students* make of The **Museum of Great American Writers**. How they handle the Committee's idea of greatness, as in whether they think it's inspirational or make fun of it or trash what's left of my dream.

I see how it goes down with them, and I decide.

Either it plays well and I let this sad, corrupted dream of mine stand in the ruined state the Committee created, or I trigger the hundred fuses set by the workers from my factory, which I can do from here.

I'm a self-made man. I make my own decisions, and I make them fast.

I emptied out my warehouses to prepare. My night people packed the

walls in every corridor and gallery in the place with my complete inventory, nuclear and pre-nuclear, and if I don't like the way this is going, I blow the place to hell.

The Docent

Look at them posturing for the hidden cameras, all puffed up and self-important, like it's only a matter of time before their puerile screeds turn into gold and their place in history is assured. They look thirteen! Naive little twards, do they really believe they matter here? Look at them posturing and yelling, 'Come on, come on!' like I am the dull servant and they are masters of the universe. Do they not know what they are? The Committee's cuddly gerbils, two slick literary GI Joes and Punk Barbie and Poet Barbie in their trendy struggling-writer clothes. They, and not I will run the literary Habitrail, not because they're good. Because they're cute.

They, and not I, Wilfred Englehart, will be in the promotional video, the stars of the viral podcast, three-minute commercials and a selling five-minute spot scheduled to burst onscreen in every cineplex, airport waiting room, hotel lobby, club and sports bar in the land, because the object of this empty exercise is not what these pretty children think. Nobody wants them to observe and report, nobody cares what they think and they're certainly not on the Committee's Wait List for exhibition on a pedestal near you. They're slick, worthless marketing tools.

Look at them, posturing as if their pretentious scribbles will be honored here. Stage props, all of them, to be kicked aside, left behind as the pageant of Great American Literature moves on. The Museum claims to celebrate Great Writers, but, truth? The Committee aimed for the red-hot center and missed the throbbing heart of art.

Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, F. Scott Fitzgerald indeed! And whose idea was Louis Bromfield or for that matter, Edwin Arlington Robinson and who, I ask you, is Pearl S. Buck? There are, believe me, millions of unknown, unsung, un-read writers far more deserving of places in this Museum, such as myself.

When I finish my Perpetual Novel, that I am writing for the ages, which I started in graduate writing school in the Eighties and will continue adding to every mortal day of my life, the world will know. At ten pages a day it's slow, but sure. I will have a place here. Maybe even a whole hall. Genius

is recognized. Unfortunately, posterity is on hold until history discovers me, an event that has to wait until death writes FINIS to my tome, although I keep a safe deposit box with a printout and INSTRUCTIONS TO BE CARRIED OUT ON MY DEMISE.

Ten pages a day, seven days a week, month in, month out, it's been forty years since I wrote THE BEGINNING to my Magnum O, thousands of pages and I'm still in *Era One: the Dawning*, the project is that ambitious, the writing is that grand.

You see, my novel is about the history of the world, told from the point of view of a column of stone.

You wondered about the origins of certain phenomena—the Easter Island faces, the Costa Rican Balls. Add to that my fabulous narrator, the noble, omniscient Colombian Column, which stands a stone's throw from the world's greatest river, the unfathomable Amazon.

My protagonist is brilliant. Mysterious. Column doesn't interact, he's too deep.

He thinks.

Like me. If it weren't for that wretched buzzer, I'd love to sit down and read you my best bit—it's when the Vikings . . . Oh, never mind. The children down there are getting impatient. The big, messy one is swinging his arms, hurling small objects at paintings in The Waiting Room, and nobody's even trying to stop him!

Instead of communing with my noble Column, I must put Art aside to go down there and read the blather written on this ridiculous card. It's the Committee's insipid *Welcoming Speech*. Gifted, intellectual unsung writer that I am, I have to spout their illiterate platitudes, which are, essentially, a pitch. My position here in The Museum of Great American Writers is to put down my Art and waste myself on VIP tours—celebrities who may want to contribute, media magnates, rich industrialists and visiting heads of state, day after depressing, despicable day, and instead of working on my Perpetual Novel or saying what I really think of this marble travesty, I have to read it off a card.

Stanley Krakowsky

Fuck you, pretentious little fucker in your pretentious five-button vest.

I was not about to stand there listening, I mashed the flat of my hand in his face and grabbed a key. That makes me the first one into one of their holy galleries, and, shit.

Is this as good as it gets?

I mean, why make people run through several stupendously boring rooms before they get to any place that isn't just books, is this a museum or what? In terms of exhibitions, who wants to waste time wading through a bunch of books to get to the stuff a person really wants to see?

I was getting so bored that I wanted to curl up under a showcase and take a nap, but fortunately I came around a corner and into this great big treasure house of *stuff*.

THE HALL OF LITERARY OBJECTS. So, cool!

It took forever to get here, but I don't care. It's totally worth the two bucks. Look, they've got Herman Melville's underwear, and here's the typewriter Sinclair Lewis wrote *Main Street* on and holy fuck, that's Grip the Raven, all stuffed and glaring at me with beady glass eyes and they've got its beak open because it's croaking on a loop, you guessed it: 'Nevermore,' but wait! If that isn't Edmund Wilson's puppet stage over there in that tall glass case . . . OMG, there's a lifesized animatronic Edmund Wilson standing behind the thing, push this button and you can watch him do the puppet show. Although, next to the mini-dioramas, e.g. Margaret Mitchell watching Atlanta burn, it kind of palls, to say nothing of the oceanic dioramas with figures sloshing in a perpetual wave in the Nautical Ell. You can see Hart Crane jumping off a boat, and a mini-Katherine Anne Porter on the Ship of Fools posed like an admiral going down with his ship, and look!

There's Flannery O'Connor's favorite peacock. Dead, but looking real as life, although it doesn't squall when you punch it, and where did they get this roll of toilet paper labeled *notes for On the Road*? Are those really James Whitcomb Riley's baby teeth, and how did Edward Gorey's shrunken head collection end up here? You could spend a lifetime in this place, but a feather from a headdress belonging to Louise Erdrich, really? Chopsticks once used by Amy Tan?

Then I find a wax work of James Patterson standing at his *very special table*, and everything clicks into place. And here's Stephanie Meyer, *very lifelike*, plus Charlaine Harris, *kaftan much?* and Harold Robbins, *he's old, if he isn't dead, but still good*, so these are the bestsellers, but not the ones I admire. I mean, I recognize that woman who wrote *The YaYa*

Sisterhood, but who the fuck are Jackie Collins and Judith Krantz? This is the wrong fucking hall.

I belong right up there in the pantheon, wherever that is in this overgrown pack rat's palazzo, because I am Stanley Fucking Krakowsky, right?

No time to waste glomming a bunch of stupid junk left behind by people that don't count. To win this, I need to swing wide and take large steps, gut myself with a Bowie knife if I have to, whatever gets their attention. Write flash fiction in my blood, anything to focus this rich, anonymous Donor guy on ME. So get this, peeps.

You're looking at the Next Big Thing. I have to cut through the crap here, so I can get with the real writers, and I am not talking Herman Fucking Melville or any of the old dead guys, they're all over, right?

I mean the ones *everybody* knows about because they're hot on the web right now, because in this game, it's all about *branding*. For instance this Snooki has gazillion following on Twitter just like James Franco, everybody in the universe has heard of Chuck Palahniuk, who is my personal idol that I emulate and owe a huge debt to in my work, which I want him to blurb when it comes out. See, before this is done, the name of Stanley Krakowsky is gonna be right up there on the marquee with Dan Brown and that guy who wrote *The Silence of the Lambs*, and everything and everybody else goes out the window until I see the name *Stanley Krakowsky* high above Times Square, I want to see it circling the city's tallest building in big block letters that light up.

Now, I can beat out good old Spike and Charlee without baring a fang, no problem, but sexy Steph is another thing. We're definitely together, as in, might even get married. Well, we were. Sad I'll be leaving her behind. I feel bad about it but writing is a dirty business, like, it's dog eat dog, so if I have to, I'll do what I have to, because that's what Great Writers do.

See, I've scoped this situation and I'm pretty sure that this is a Mortal Kombat deal. The one that comes out ahead in this Museum of Great American Writers is the only one that makes it out alive, and if Spike and I have to duke it out at the end, knives or bare hands, to keep from getting kicked off the island, no problem. I just cracked Raymond Chandler's pistol out of the Weapons Case and I am locked and loaded for bear.

Destiny's wall is out there somewhere. It has *one thing only* posted on it, and it's my name.

Charlotte Eberstadt

Oh, Mr. X, who brought all these wonders to life for your people and honored Spike and me and the others with the chance to see it all first and first-hand, first off, I want to thank you. It's a very great honor, being plucked out of downtown Iowa and brought here to serve. I'm so excited! Excited to be chosen. Thrilled to be here!

We are history. God, I love that. Is that my first line?

Second line: *Look at me!*

Poet-in-waiting following the gemlike flame. Unless that's Tinker Bell I see twinkling at the far end of the gallery. Or posterity, beckoning.

Later:

This place is massively impressive and I could spend a lifetime studying and never master it but, between the intention and the act, something went terribly wrong. Imagine, all this space and time and all that money devoted to words, pages, books that can be downloaded in a second and forgotten in the next.

So, Mr. Anonymous Donor, here's the thing. In spite of the gorgeous portraits and magnificent busts and bas reliefs, amazing murals and sweet displays you've mounted here, in spite of all the *wonderful* objects that you gave so much money to add to Museum of Great American Writers, something is missing, and it's big.

Multitudes could file through here and bow down and thank you and leave without ever buying a book, and that's the least of it.

See, your collection has a tragic flaw. I could study Emily Dickinson's manuscripts that you have, all annotated and laid out in glass cases with neat labels, and never learn how to think like she thought. I could browse Elizabeth Bishop's and Jorie Graham's manuscripts, and roll around in Marianne Moore's, but would their talent rub off on me? Not at this distance. I could read everything you have, trying to divine how to do what Theodore Roethke and John Berryman and James Merrill did, I could study all the drafts with notes and crossed-out lines on papers that looks so fresh in your exhibits, and come up empty.

I hate to break it to you, but I think your manuscripts are fakes. I don't know who you bought them from or how much you paid but they're exquisite facsimiles, which I happen to know because the originals are somewhere else! Where did Mark Doty leave his works for posterity, for instance; which rare book and manuscript libraries house Randall Jarrell and Langston Hughes and H.D.?

Which leads me to the problem. Is this really Zora Neale Hurston's real writing desk I'm sitting at? I could sit here forever and never be able to do what she did. Besides, who's to say that it's really her desk, do you know that kind of thing? I'm sorry.

I've tried and tried, but I just don't feel the vibe.

A poet can go crazy looking for authenticity in a world in which all poets matter, but no poet can possibly matter in a mausoleum filled with expensive fakes.

I know I sound ungrateful and I hate to say it, but all I want now is for this trip through the dead past and the dying present to be over, so I can go. I need to be somewhere else right now, someplace where I can be alone with my man Spike until we both feel better, and when he and I are done with each other, at least for the time being, I'll tell him goodbye, but in a nice way. Then I'll go back inside myself where it's beautiful and silent and see how many years, how many decades it takes me to come back out with at least one piece of verse I'm not ashamed of.

I want to write something so good that it comes to life and sings until it bleeds its heart out on a thorn.

Are you listening, Mr. Donor? I want out! I thought this would be exciting but this place is so dead, it's so depressing in here that I can't wait for it to end. Listen. If you don't come get me *right away*, I'll just sit here in wax James Baldwin's lap until you send your people to let me out.

Stephanie Lerner

Truth? THE HALL OF READINGS raises questions. Are those the world's best animatronics behind the velvet ropes, or do they have real Joyce Carol Oates and real Philip Roth standing up there at lecterns in their own special alcoves, surrounded by their manuscripts and doodles to say nothing of first editions, and are they really reading aloud from their works at this very moment, just for me? It's wonderful and exciting and distracting seeing them like this but frankly, it creeps me out. I wouldn't mind giving a reading for somebody besides my boyfriend and the manager of the bookstore, but the idea of standing up there reading and reading and reading day after day, following with a Q&A for the unwashed masses filing through *The Museum of Great American Writers . . .*

Not so much.

But if that's what it takes to make it up there on the Great American Writers list, I'm down with that. Whatever it takes, and believe me, I've got what it takes. One look at The Wall of Fame in the foyer and I got dizzy, I could feel every bone in me humming, *I want that*. When the docent guy opened the door on THE MEMORY PALACE, I was off like a shot. On my way in to NOBEL-IN-WAITING ROOM, I ran through a corridor AWARDS ARCADE lined by glass cases, which was daunting as hell because every shelf is filled with glittering prizes. I saw everybody's Pulitzer prizes, Presidential medals, National Book Awards, along with all the Edgars, Golden Quills and you-name-its won by Great American Writers in the past hundred years, and that's not counting Oscars, Tonis, trophies from other media, but first and foremost, they have a Nobel Prize medal for every American who ever won a Nobel Prize.

Seeing prizes like that makes a writer like me all greedy and anxious, and if you think that makes me ashamed?

It makes me sure.

I will damn well be remembered here.

Now, Spike's a contender, but *entre nous* he let himself get all bent and distracted because he so wants to play with the cool kids. Poor baby, he doesn't only want to be like them.

Not only does he want to *be them*, Spike wants more.

He wants them to like him.

In his dreams poor Spike sees himself hanging out with the likes of Lethem and George Saunders and Jonathan Safran Foer and them, as if, when he finally sells *Fucked All Over Town*, one of his idols will rip through his first novel at one sitting and text all the others and call him up to read the rave review he just wrote about it for *The New York Times*. He wants to hear Jay McInerney or somebody reading it to him on the phone, although he just mailed it to Spike and Spike is reading it on his phone instead of listening to The Man. In his dreams somebody gives him a book party and all the cool kids come; they'll make friends and pretty soon he'll be out running around with his amazing boon buddies that he wants even more than he wants to win, and they'll all get drunk together so they can talk about how bad they feel about David Foster Wallace being dead. I love Spike but in spite of the title his prose is, face it, a tad too fussy to make the cut, but who am I to tell him that?

Now, Charlee, Charlee is an airhead, ergo no threat, which leaves us with my ostensible boyfriend Stan.

Too bad he's a macho jerkoff with an ego so big that he can't see past the end of his dick, which, unfortunately, is his writing utensil of choice.

So Committee/Donor/whoever, keep your eye on *me*.

My name is Stephanie Patricia Lerner and I've been writing since I was four years old. Not only am I pretty good at what I do, I'm fit, I work out. I start with pushups and crunches at four a.m. and the gears in my head go running along ahead of every word I type and every mile I swim, both day and night. The Steph-machine keeps rolling 24/7 no matter what you throw in front of it, so get out of my way, I never give up and I never run down. In terms of posterity and my place in *The Museum of Great American Writers*, I'm telling you now and when we're done here I'll put this in writing, just in case I get hit by a truck.

No speeches and no flowers. Display all my books cover out, with plastic sleeves to keep the jackets from fading. In my exhibit, put all the things I care about: little Steffie's first laptop, my grandmother's copy of *Catcher in the Rye* and podcasts of every TV and online interview I make after I win the Pulitzer Prize. About my prizes. I want them in my own personal author display, not junked in with all the others out there in the hall; also, please hang up my blazing skull headset in the case next to the entrance, along with my favorite pair of boots.

And the plaque you screw to the wall by the door? On the plaque, you should put: STEPH L. SHE WAS TOUGH AS FUCK.

The Committee

'Called to order at 1700. Present are . . .'

'That's enough. We're meeting to resolve a situation.'

'What situation?'

'If you have to ask, you can't afford it.'

'Shut up, Etherington.'

'Four mindless MFAs running wild in the galleries. Donor's focus group.'

'Judging our efforts.'

'Yes.'

'And what are we supposed to do about it?'

'Something. Discuss.'

'I'm sick of discussions, I . . .'

'This is a mistake.'

'Face it, the whole Museum's a mistake.'

'Don't say that!'

'It's true. And now The Donor is . . . 'Pissed.'

'And we are going to do about it . . . What?'

'It didn't have to be this way.'

'You said it. For instance, I wanted . . . '

'Yeah, but that's not what I wanted.'

'Enough.'

'If we had only done what I . . . '

'We did what The Donor wanted.'

'That's not what *he* thinks.'

'We did too many things that too many people wanted.'

'If only we'd done what *I* wanted.'

'And now we're supposed to do what these kids want.'

'Is that what he thinks?'

'We don't care what he thinks. The issue is making him think he's getting what he wants.'

'Trouble is, it isn't!'

'Nobody does.'

'Shut up. Do you not get that The Donor is in charge of this?'

'Then why is The Donor pissed off?'

'All that money, and it isn't what he wants.'

'Don't be ridiculous. What The Donor wants, The Donor gets.'

'He doesn't think so.'

'Neither do I. I thought it would be more literary.'

'Well, I thought it would be more dignified.'

'More commercial.'

'More promotable.'

'More profitable.'

'He thought it would be more Early American.'

'Early American?'

'Never mind. Now, about the business at hand . . . '

'Hemingway foyer. Depression Steinbeck. Styron Forties, that kind of thing.'

'I thought it would be more contemporary.'

'I thought we'd have a great manuscript library.'

'The public doesn't care about manuscripts.'

'I thought The Museum would be universal. About art.'

‘Art isn’t universal.’

‘What is art, anyway?’

‘Let’s don’t go there. Not today.’

‘The public doesn’t care about art.’

‘What does the public care about?’

‘Showmanship.’

‘You’re so smart, you tell us. What is showmanship?’

‘Giving the public what it wants.’

‘What does the public want?’

‘We’ve been through that. Moving on, about the . . . ’

‘Solution: we give the public what it wants. Discuss.’

‘We’re sick of discussions.’

‘. . . kid focus group. Shut up and listen.’

‘No more discussions!’

‘Shall we vote on that?’

‘THAT’S NOT OUR PROBLEM TODAY. It’s this *beta test* The Donor’s got going. Who makes up his mind, us or these MFAs?’

‘Us, us!’

‘Which means we have to . . . ’

‘Don’t worry, the Subcommittee’s handling it as we speak. We have a . . . ’

‘. . . present a solid front. Etherington, that’s enough.’

‘Wait. We have a Subcommittee?’

‘Yes, and we’ve got an . . . ’

‘I said, enough! As chair, I’m cutting off discussion. What The Donor wants . . . ’

‘. . . The Donor gets.’

‘. . . installation going in . . . ’

‘And our job is to make him think he’s getting what he wants . . . ’

‘. . . out there in the courtyard as we speak.’

‘And if these kids come back negative, we take care of it. Agreed?’

‘Move to vote on the question.’

‘Adjourned.’

The Donor

I thought it would come out better, but, great new writers of the future or not, they’re only kids! The two guys ran into each other at an intersection in the corridor. *Kersplat* They tangled and went rolling through

the archway into the Wilderness displays, and now they're duking it out with Jack London's pikes and knives on Camera 3. They're in there slashing and poking and destroying history, and not a guard on the place to break them up. Stop, you little bastards, stop it. Terrible! They just trashed the Natty Bumppo exhibition, one of my few favorites! Do they not know that they're ruining their chances to join the Great American Writers here? My ideal focus group is wrecking what little there was left of my original dream!

Meanwhile that willowy poet child is at the far end of the Middle American extravaganza, sobbing her heart out on the Emily Dickinson couch and I am thinking what God thought when He called the shot on Sodom and Gomorrah. Who, with his hopes crumbling, would not?

Besides, instead of doing what I sent her in there to do, that trashy leather girl is swaggering around in the BOOK TO MAJOR MOTION PICTURE AMPHITHEATER like a rock and roll music star while my miserable excuse for a docent sits on his fat butt down there in *my office* with his back to me, scrawling on a legal pad instead of stopping those destructive kids or, for Pete's sake, dialing 911. He just keeps on scribbling with that moronic grin, gnawing on his tongue every time he rips off another page and I can't do a thing about it because I'm miles away. All I can do is watch while his garbage slithers across my Navajo 9X12 because I'm sitting here in Chicago, glued to my remotes, with no staff on site and no way to intervene, so I'm essentially powerless, except for the one thing.

Look at those ostensibly gifted and talented kids I hired running wild because my docent's asleep at the switch and the only other people in the building are the Committee, whom I *do not trust*. It's egregious. They're disgusting. Every one of them!

Even God would push the plunger. But wait! What's this?

Camera A just picked up activity down in the Realist Writers' Courtyard. Looks like some kind of—wait, it is! A statue I never ordered, I can see five men rolling it off a truck onto a forklift.

Now the man in the bucket truck is attaching padded ropes so the crane operator can hoist the figure to its feet.

As the ground crew tugs the ropes, the felt blankets drop, revealing . . . It looks like a . . . Why, it's a . . .

I didn't order that!

Handsome bronze. A handsome bronze is going up in the main

courtyard without my . . . Not a bad looking fellow, now that I think about it, but this is nothing I approved. I wasn't even consulted. Plunger time! But wait. Who is he, and why did I not see sketches or site plans? It's some great writer, I suppose, although it looks a little bit like . . . but what great writer wears a topcoat like mine and wears a homburg that looks just like mine, and who else carries the Gucci briefcase with a special holster for my sword cane, just in case? This is so...

Oh!

Very well, then. Kudos to you, Committee. And thank you very much.

Now, moving on. Camera One: the willowy girl has pulled herself together. Looking around for some paper and something to write with. *Lady, not that manuscript. Lady, not Emily Dickinson's pen!* The young studs are still grappling in the Great American Northwest, the lean one has the one I like in a hammer lock, must send Docent in to pull them apart before they . . .

Rethink: there are plenty more where they came from, if these two fight to the death, let them. Which, come to think of it, would make an interesting spectacle for the Grand Opening. Maybe with the next pair . . .

Excellent!

Note to self: order bronze light bulb above that great bronze head in the courtyard, signifying Idea.

I know how to save my museum and guarantee that it will do me credit, and looking at the statue in the courtyard—handsome bronze!—I know it's credit that I deserve.

See, businessmen like me know all there is to know about the Great American Way, and now that I've watched these kids in action, I know exactly what to do. In our great country it's not really about who wins and who loses. It's all about the race.

Tomorrow I dispatch the Committee to cover every writing program, workshop and small press reading and poetry slam in our great nation, with orders to recruit the attraction I should have put in place on Day One.

The exhibit that makes sense of all the literary things collected here.

At the end of the day, instead of being my dream diluted and deferred, The Museum of Great American Writers will be a commercial sensation, and a credit to my name. For the Grand Opening, which I predict will take another year to prepare, we'll have the greatest show on earth. In addition to moldy relics of the great and not-so-great American dead, The

Museum of Great American Writers will feature a living writer in every room.

We can keep wannabes in every room in all those galleries 24/7, pacing, typing, deleting, whatever writers do. Plenty of cannon fodder in those writing schools. We can throw in some other contests to amuse our paying guests: pair them off in bouts of drinking, dancing and bar-fighting, love triangles and bad breakups, even gladiatorial tilts, because the great American public needs to know everything about the ugly underside of the American writing game.

Millions will stroll past my live exhibits just to handicap the winners, and millions will keep coming back, watching their favorites make it into rooms labeled Submission, Rejection, that kind of thing, and we'll let our public place bets at every step along the way. And if your pick gets axed at Rejection?

Come on down again! You can always get yourself a winner next time, and if we throw in a small cash prize . . . Then there'll be the elimination rounds, with the Publication room for the few and for the *very* few, a spot in the Museum's Awards Corridor, next stop, the Late American Wing. From there, as I understand it, it's only a hop and a skip, some schmoozing and a couple of murders, to the Rotunda and—for the best of the *very* few, a photograph of the winners with yours truly by that handsome statue in the courtyard, and—wait for it—a spot on the Wall of Fame.

MARKS AND COCONUTS

ANNA TAMBOUR

Ms. Tambour brings new meaning to the word brevity when in response to our call for notes on the genesis/writing of her new tale she delivered this pithy one-liner: 'Any similarity to actual hot dog & pretzel stands is purely coincidental.' Quite so, Anna . . . quite so.

Ms. Tambour's latest novel is Crandolin, published by Chomu Press. We strongly suggest you get hold of a copy pronto. This is an author to watch.

I WISH TO BUY A DEAD PARROT.'

The pet store owner rubbed his St. Christopher. The first customer of the day always made him superstitious, and this guy's suit, watch, and smell reeked money.

'Yes, sir! Any particular type?'

The customer considered. 'No.'

Joe Lansby hooded his sometimes too honest eyes, and walked to the window display. 'You deserve something special,' he called, to no response.

Joe shrugged and carried the cage to the counter. 'It's just off the boat, if you know what I mean. An Election Parrot from Australia. Still a bit jetlagged, but it'll sing opera in a week, if that's your thing. Or maybe Shakespeare?'

The customer looked at the bird, and back at Joe. 'Did you hear my request?'

'You wanna parrot. Or maybe a croc?' Joe pointed to the tank with the alligator.

'I said 'I wish to buy a dead parrot.'"

Joe shot his cuffs, forgetting that he was wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with *Apsk to Psee our Psittacines*. ‘Between us, sir,’ he said, ‘You look like a diplomat, and this bird is a diplomat. You can tell it anything, it won’t leak.’

The customer didn’t even smile.

Mentally, Joe shoved a wad of chewed Bazooka up this jerk of a tightass. He was getting annoyed. ‘You want something cheap? They don’t really suit—’

‘Perhaps you didn’t understand. I. Wan-na. Dead. Parrot.’

‘Dead?’ Joe grabbed his St. Christopher. ‘You from the Health Department? Sorry.’ He banged open the till.

The customer slapped the counter, startling the parrot, who let out a sound like a smoke alarm. ‘Have you heard nothing, even when I translated? I wish to buy a dead parrot. Do you have one or not?’

‘Mother fuggity,’ Joe muttered. He was sure that later today he’d step on a crack or walk under a ladder. ‘Mister, you wish to find yourself a taxidermatist. Or a shrink.’

He pulled the current *Fortune* out from under the counter, opened it beside the parrot’s cage and gave it all his attention.

The customer walked around the store, Joe’s eyes shadowing him. This whacko made his skin crawl with superstition, but maybe the customer wasn’t a nutcase and was just another con artist. Joe thought of a mantra that he had chanted to himself in former times while wincing at the bill for clothing himself at Brooks Bros: ‘Clothes make the thief.’

The customer stopped at every parrot’s cage, and there were many. Joe’s uncle Theodore had built up a fine reputation in smuggled psittacines. From Cape York, there was that dull-eyed but brilliantly red and blue *Eclectus roratus*. In the largest cage, a tall black *Probosciger aterrimus* regarded everyone as a prime minister does back benchers. With that beak, it looked like it took its scotch neat and wasn’t picky over blend. There were parrots from Patagonia, Madagascar, a swathe of tropic islands, the Congo and the Cameroons, Zanzibar, and even from Theodore Lansby’s apartment, because Joe’s uncle was presently in the state that the current customer had expressed his wish for, in a parrot.

That Joe’s uncle had dropped dead at exactly the best time for a relative to do that in Joe’s life, was an act of providence that strengthened Joe’s faith in Luck coming at the right time if he kept wary of things like ladders and cracks, and kept in touch with his St. Christopher. On the day that

Joe shredded his last Leap business card, formally winding up a very special hedge fund that unaccountably failed, whomp! Uncle Theo dropped dead.

Joe was a great believer in Cause and Effect, and this fortuitous death just strengthened his belief. He had always regarded himself as a great Cause, and so, it seemed, had Uncle T.

Theodore Lansby had indeed thought highly of his nephew back when Joe was Little Joe. But in the years that followed, bad times hit Joe time and again. Theo had secretly made his Will out to Joe, in case the boy was brought down yet again by life's unfairness to the true creative-business artist. If Uncle Theo had known that Joe had managed to secrete a cash-for-emergency-bribes stash of considerable worth, he would only have admired him more.

And so, the day the pet store came into Joe's hands, Uncle Theo smiled from wherever and chided himself harshly over his disappointment that Joe couldn't tell a Hyacinth Macaw (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) from a South Island Kaka (*Nestor meridionalis meridionalis*), nor give a shit about his ignorance.

To Joe, the birds and all the rest of the smelly stock were goods, the customers marks, and the fact that prospective marks who preferred talking in taxonomic names expected to pay sky-high prices, wasn't worth the work, as far as Joe figured. Joe was not only used to turnover in goods and schemes, but in customers. By 4:00 on the first day of Joe's tenure as new owner, Theo surveyed Lansby's Pets from the place that he could do nothing, and his nose prickled at the foreboding air. He reminded himself that Joe's preferred stock had always been intangibles that cost Joe nothing, never needed care and feeding, and didn't shit on anyone except the customers, safely after purchase. Wadya expect? a voice said to Theo, as he watched Joe yell 'Shut your faces' to the chatting stock.

Theo was feeling the ropes then himself, new to everlastingness, and he couldn't tell if that voice saying Wadya expect was his or from someone else.

'Wanna play canasta?' said a lady with clacking dentures. Instantly, Lansby's Pets evaporated, and he wiped his brow. Canasta? Not only that. This was nothing less than an infinity of widows and Florida in eternal August.

That episode was not only two weeks ago, but in the Hereafter. And time is money, so Now:

In the store, the customer had spent the past five minutes peering into cages. He stopped in front of a smallish wire tower housing a pair of smooching *Nymphicus hollandicus*. He bent his neck so that his head paralleled the cage floor. They bent their necks, too, and the lower two of their eyes looked at the cage-floor covering, while the upper two eyeballed him.

‘Hey, mister,’ said Joe. ‘Vamoose. Go lose yourself on the sidewalk with the looneys. Dead parrot! Anyway. What made you come in here for one?’

The customer straightened and smoothed his tie. ‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘From Lansby’s Pets?’ Joe lifted a forefinger. ‘Lemme guess. Because you’re short of a washing machine. Or maybe want a ticket to Timbuktu.’ That amused Joe. ‘Fly Dead Parrot Airlines. Hey—’

‘Considering,’ cut in the customer, ‘that you and your guests here in this happy hostelry devote all of your reading time to business journals, I would think that you, of all pet shop owners, would not only understand but leap to satisfy a wish to purchase a dead parrot. I hand you an untapped niche market, and what do you do?’

Joe hung his head. There was something to this guy, not to mention the old truth, ‘The customer is always right.’ The door jangled and a rush of cold air hit Joe. The customer had almost flown the coop.

Joe flung open the door of the *Eclectus roratus* (the jetlagged parrot on the counter) (to its delight), grabbed a peanut (to its surprise) and with his other hand, stuffed a stray feather down its open mouth. All this took 0.348 of a moment, all of which was paralleled by the customer’s left calf muscle contracting as his foot left the—

‘Sir,’ huffed Joe, grabbing the door. ‘I think we have just what you are looking for.’

The customer, known to his local shopkeepers in a more formal clime, as Mr Tershire, turned. If he had worn a monocle it would have flashed, if he had let it. But he wasn’t that kind of guy. A muscle might have pulsed in his big square jaw, if he were another. His pupils might have contracted, but he considered that also, vulgarly demonstrative.

‘My time is valuable,’ he said mildly.

‘So is mine!’ said Joe indignantly. That was his best line, and it bugged him that this . . . this—mark—yes! had stolen it. ‘He won’t leave Lansby’s

Pets,' Joe vowed silently, 'without buying something for at least \$19.99, not on markdown.'

'We can't be too careful,' he said, another line he loved. It had worked so well to sell high-yield short-term-futures at the Preventative Care Practitioners Convention in Cleveland only five years ago.

Joe led his customer to the counter where the cheated parrot looked out from behind the bars with a look that wasn't perky. 'Take this parrot,' said Joe.

'This parrot isn't dead,' said the customer. 'She isn't even contemplating suicide.'

Joe wagged his finger at the man. 'This is a do-it-yourself dead parrot.'

'Oh!' said the customer.

'Oh yeah,' Joe guffawed. Suddenly, he felt on top of his game. This was the first time he'd had fun in this hellhole of boredom.

'How much is she?' asked the customer. 'I don't see a price tag.'

'Of course not. Who dangles price tags on companions?'

The customer nodded slowly with his eyes closed, like a cockatoo listening to Chopin. 'Yeah,' he drawled badly. 'So how much dya want for this here DIY?'

Joe rocked back on his heels. 'Well,' he said. This weirdo foreigner flustered him. A bird in the hand, but a flighty one. Close the deal! 'Seven K, and I'll throw the cage in free.'

'How do you calculate that?' (no fake accent) 'What is the cage worth?'

'Five K for the bird,' Joe said, his voice loud in his ears. 'Three seventy-five off for this beautiful cage. Only two K for the optional extra.'

'What optional extra?'

'The DIY.'

'Only two thousand?' Joe's mark dropped into a crouch. From somewhere, the sound of what Joe thought was an adult Galloping Iguana but was really an Australian goanna, specifically, a young *Varanus giganteus*'s slithering erupted.

'That animal needs its nails clipped,' said the, uh—'Defend yourself, man!'

Somehow, the facts have eluded mentioning till now, that: 1) the customer, mark, uh—Mr Tershire, ran marathons for relaxation and was the only entrant of any nationality in Unbeatable Banzuke ('where the only constant is the bitter taste of defeat') ever to complete the impossible Handstand Pogostick Hop #3 course; and 2) Lansby's Pets was 20 steps

from Nazir's Hot Dog & Pretzel stand, Now with Chocolate Chip Baklava; and 3) Joe Lansby's greatest weapon and his greatest enemy, was his mouth.

'Please, mister,' begged Joe, grabbing the biggest thing he could find to fend off this crazy person. Joe wondered if this guy was from the UN or had some other diplomatic immunity.

Joe imagined himself being murdered and Mister Muscles here moseying out of any conviction, probably flying back to London with a dead parrot, obtained for free. It gave him reflux just thinking about it. 'Just my luck,' he said, brandishing the cuttlefish bone.

Tershire snatched it from him and instead of throwing the \$5.95 On Special Only For This Week item to the floor where it would have shattered, placed it carefully in its basket. 'You're not as stupid as you act,' he said. 'I've got a business proposition.'

'Oh, yeah,' said Joe. But he was interested. The customer not only reeked money, but had a confidence that had not been undermined by cruel fate. This guy had gotten rich, somehow.

'You don't know anything about birds, do you?' asked the rich guy.

Joe's mouth grinned idiotically, the traitor.

'Nor animals . . . No, I didn't think so. It's a wonder they're alive.'

'I take good care of them!'

'Yeah.'

'Hey, mister. You want me to sic Big Beak over there on you?' Joe pointed to the parrot he thought was a Coconut Cockatoo (the Prime Minister), a bird he had wished sold or dead as soon as he took over the shop. That beak could snip out car bodies, and no way was he gonna clean its cage, let alone give it fresh fruit. As a matter of fact, the monster scared him so much that he couldn't sell it because, as he'd learned to his dismay, you can't sell a parrot to a customer unless you are willing to take the parrot out of its cage.

Tershire strolled over to it. 'This *Probosciger aterrimus*? You are this bird's benefactor of . . . what is this? A hot dog bun crust poked in from the top? That, sir, is not the way to make a friend, unless, of course, the parrot's mother fed it thus.'

He pulled out his impeccably folded pocket square, opened it and then the cage door, and proffered the parrot a macaroon. The cookie was taken tenderly. Tershire turned his back before the bird launched into a speech.

Joe looked at his watch. 11:30, and no sale on the horizon. 'You wanna talk business. Shoot.'

'To the point,' said Tershire. 'You want to be successful, as your reading shows. It is obvious that this establishment was created by someone else and that you are merely owning it, frustrated by your position as owner, yet yearning for greater opportunities, at which time you fully expect to seize the opportunities with both hands, and make a killing.'

Joe gaped, gripping his St. Christopher in a stranglehold.

'You know what a niche market is,' continued Tershire, strolling over, striking a match against the counter, and lighting up a fragrant cigar against 27 assorted borough, city, and state regulations. It smelt wonderfully of warm peat fires, pineapples, and a hint of suntan oil.

The *Eclectus* breathed in deeply. Tershire opened the cage door, and the parrot, a greatly imaginative bird, fell headily in love. She climbed to his shoulder and gently chewed his ear.

'It's touched you, you buy it,' snapped Joe.

'Shut up,' said Tershire.

'Sorry.'

'Accepted,' said Tershire, massaging the parrot's skin under an uplifted wing. 'As you know, you have this pet shop, yet it's just a pet shop. People come in looking for something they expect and you expect them to expect. You either have it or you're fresh out of it. Boring as washing dishes.'

Joe's eyes moistened. 'Gosh.'

'Yet you look at that magazine, and what do you see? Successful people with new ideas.'

'They get all the luck,' Joe whined.

'Shut up!' Tershire barked.

'Hey,' snarled Joe, 'I don't like your tone.'

The Prime Minister walked out of his cage, menacingly.

Joe gulped.

'And before I start,' said Tershire. 'I'm leaving now if you're going to kick up a fuss about investing that money you've got stashed away.'

They sublet the premises and moved to an area where big money roamed the sidewalks, hunting, opening up, in an ex-bookstore with the personality of a warehouse: Marks' Exclusives.

In that arid wasteland, they made an adventure jungle. Parrots filled the

air with whistles and screeches, pirated songs, light opera, and snatches of oratory. Sleek and portly goannas floorwalked silently, only rising on their tails to look without comment or display into the eyes of bargain shoppers and other bogus clientele, never making a crass or flashy move, and never accosting you with perfume atomisers.

In Marks' Exclusives, you'd never find bargains. You'd never see price tags. *Ask for anything*, was Marks' in-the-know slogan. They wouldn't have it, but they would sell you something *Just for You*.

Joe thinks of those days as his happiest yet, and hopes there will be others. He had his teeth freshly capped for that picture on the cover of *Fortune*.

But *Fortune* doesn't last forever. That 92-year-old woman who came in looking for Age-fighting MegaMiracle Mushroom Skin Serum and left, having purchased a five-year torrid affair with a chiroprapist, with all the trimmings, was the undoing of Marks' Exclusives.

That woman, Mrs. Alberquist, talked, and talked . . . and yesterday Joseph Francis Lansby was arrested for selling futures with unlicensed chiropradists.

To be fair to Luck and forgiving to St. Christopher, Joe had it coming. Tershire saw good in Joe, but it was all potential. 'Just for You,' was what Tershire taught Joe, or rather, thought he taught. That was the oldest line in Joe's markbook. The reason Tershire oozed class was that he truly believed in exclusivity. 'Just for You' meant something to him, and wasn't a variation of 'It's you. You'll see after it stretches.'

Another difference between the partners was Tershire's cynicism versus Joe's belief. Customers need leadership, according to Tershire. But Joe actually believed somewhere in his best parts, when it suited him: 'The customer is always right.'

So when Mrs. Alberquist's three bridge partners came into Marks', fresh from her funeral, Joe could not put their demands off, though supply and demand made this a tough nut to crack.

Mr Woolsley, as he is now known to his shopkeepers, is at this moment choosing a coconut, under expert advice.

'I love you,' says one advisor, tonguing his ear.

'A little too green,' the tall dark one says stertorously.

GAPPING

DARREN SPEEGLE

'I'd been toying with the idea of "Gapping" literally for years before the full story surfaced,' the author confesses. 'I knew what I wanted to happen, but it took a while to realize the motivations involved. Why would the characters participate in such a dangerous sport? What drove them other than the fact that humankind had forgotten them? When I realized that was enough, the story was ready to be told.'

This is Mr. Speegle's third contribution to Postscripts. Look for his story 'Xaro' in a future volume. His collection A Haunting in Germany and Other Stories is due out later in the year. . . from PS, of course: where else!

THE DAY THE QUICKEST OF US DIED WAS THE DAY THE OTHERS finally started seeing things my way. It wasn't only that Lynx was quickest; he was also youngest and most adored. Any number of superlatives made him the perfect instrument for the sort of shock treatment I'd secretly known we needed. It tore my heart in two that it had to be him, but then none of the rest of us would have had such a devastating impact. Not even Moon, who wasn't as sharp as conditions required and always needed help of some kind.

Still, it was Lynx's quickness, his proficiency in the sport, that most qualified him for martyrdom. It didn't matter that he wasn't aware he was dying for a cause. What mattered was that it was *him*, the ace, the one the game couldn't beat. We've all tried to emulate him. Hell, Rigs even changed his name to Dancer, after a move he took from Lynx. I too have my game name—Hawk. With the exception of Moon, we all think of ourselves as fleet. Swift. Agile. It's who we are. What we do. Or at least did. Without

meaning to be, Lynx was responsible for much of that. He was our idol. Our hero. The pioneer. Oh, he didn't start the game—he was far too young at the beginning—but he *made* the game. He was its soul.

Why was his quickness more important than his tender years, or his razor sense of humor, or any of the other qualities that endeared him to us? The sport of gapping is about life and death, but mostly it's about life. Quickness was life for him. It served him more times than I can count, at least twice as many times as the rest of us, though we'd been gapping twice as long as he had. To see this quickness abandon him in the end, to watch him erased from existence before our eyes was to see our mortality in a whole new light. Not the light of terror. Fear is healthy, terror is not, and the latter was never allowed in when it came calling. The light in which our lives were suddenly cast was that of meaninglessness. Before the train took Lynx, the flame in each of us thrived on the thrill, the challenge, the chase to the other side. That was no longer possible now that our guru was gone. If we wanted to live again, we had to pursue a different path. I'd been saying it for the last two years, through the steady depletion of our numbers, but it had taken this tragedy to convince them to cross a line that wasn't the other side of a train sheath.

But only after a last taste. A last dip in the adrenaline pool. I couldn't have expected less. I *tried* for less, but less was never good enough for a gapper. For Dancer, Mariah, Ghost, Moon, and myself—the five who remained—it wasn't going to be good enough tonight. I knew that to dare fate one last time was to attempt suicide. But my companions were persuasive. We owed it to Lynx, they said. We owed it to ourselves. A smoker did not quit smoking without relishing a last cigarette; otherwise he'd always wonder. But it was the game itself that seduced. With each fresh assault of the image of Lynx's last moment, of his hanging there a split second slow, staring down the sheath into the dark face of oncoming fate, I became less and less argumentative, until finally I almost let myself look forward to our last dance.

Almost.

The Old Absinthe House—now named Jim Morrison's Old Absinthe House in a self-indulgent tribute by its operator to two of the more wicked symbols of the Expressive Age—lay near the end of the Freedom Wing, our particular corner of Holland Underground, not a block from the

A line. The A referred to Amsterdam, as H did The Hague, R, Rotterdam, and so forth. But there was a whole network of subsidiary lines attached to each main line. A-1 stopped at the Freedom Wing for a reason. Before the Quarantine the wing had been a popular destination for those who longed for the pleasures of yore. The smoky cannabis cafes, the windowed Red Light cubicles with their international offerings, the humming bars and dazzling nightclubs, some of which, in the Underground, bore the names of predecessors in the City of Freedom itself—*the Paradise, the Milky Way, the Escape*. But those concerns lay empty or in shambles now, casualties of the seal-off that had affected everything in the vast complex of Holland Underground except the transit system, which was itself sealed, perhaps against the very thing that had led to the Quarantine.

Terrorism, as far as anyone below knew, was still alive and well upside, though the news that ran on the perpetually flashing screens lining the subterranean corridors was dated, recycled, a constant reminder of the wars above. The fact that no new information at all had flowed through the otherwise enduring electronic apparatus of the Underground in seven years, a year and a half shy of the duration of the Quarantine, was a testament to the climate up there. To believe otherwise was to believe their exiles didn't exist to them and they might one day simply shut it all off.

The Freedom Wing was a fragment of the whole complex, which stretched for some thirty kilometers along the coast, encompassing much of greater Amsterdam, and who knew how far in its inland reach, given that it had been built upon and built upon in the decades preceding the Quarantine. Once thought an impossible engineering project due to Amsterdam's high water table, Holland Underground incorporated every logistically possible low-exhaust commercial enterprise imaginable, including an unfinished amusement park and a small zoo, a few survivors of which still prowled the labyrinth. Hence, food and other supplies had never been a problem. The gourmet shops in our sector alone supplied ample canned, dried, and other non-perishable food, while the mall that took up the entire wing that ran parallel to ours supplied everything else. Because the timer-controlled biochemical attack had occurred when the entire Holland Underground complex remained closed after an unexpected extension of its regular monthly service day—it was on the scheduled day that the culprits, in maintenance uniforms, had planted their bombs—the only ones who had been below were utility people, participants in special guided tours, and those of us who sneaked in on Mondays to skate the

empty corridors. The only exception were the hotel guests, who, while denied entrance to the complex like everyone else, had elevator access to the top, which served them well during that brief window before evacuation became impossible. So there was plenty to go around. You found your niche and you stayed there for the most part lest you run into undesirables.

Waste, too, wasn't the issue it might have been. There were incinerators that had been taxed with corpses and spoiling food there at the beginning but had chugged through like everything else in our forsaken world. The only concern had been ventilation. It wasn't nonexistent after the seal-off, but the system had been altered, according to the information we were still getting from above in the early days. Its outlets were reduced to the few locations that allowed the exhaust to be captured and purged before it was released into the atmosphere—the minimum, I suppose, for our survival. So we dealt with the issue the only way we could, by removing ourselves far from the incineration area until the exhaust found its way out, or dissipated, turning into whatever exhaust does (reference the layer of residue that covered every surface that was not cleaned on a regular basis).

As to the biochemical agent, it must have had a short lifespan because within a few weeks those who were going to die were dead. There had been birth defects, but they were few, as pregnancies in general were. Morrison thought the latter, too, a side effect of the agent. I thought it environment. But no one could really say what was going on among the other gangs. For all we knew, they were eating their young. Eight and a half years of Quarantine had produced strange realities.

This was the world we lived in. The five of us gamers. The throwback operating the Absinthe House who'd taken Morrison's name for himself. The self-styled 'poets,' with whom we shared not just our wing, but essentially the whole of Sector Eleven which lay on the southeastern perimeter of the complex. The tunnel rats, as we called the roving scavengers. The scattered, settled gangs in other sectors. The rare loner, always heavily armed. There may have been a couple hundred of us left, though I'd by no means explored all of the Underground. A couple hundred mice in a maze, waiting for something that was never going to happen on its own. Sometimes I thought we were test subjects, or worse yet, amusements, and our little game with trains was nothing compared to the game our watchers were playing.

I happened to be wandering these mental corridors now as Morrison philosophized in his habitual way to my distracted companions. Though at thirty I was the oldest member of our team—we always called ourselves a team, one unit against the trains—I often found myself floating, seeing us through other eyes. When I was young, living in what sunlight found its way through the city's towers and sky bridges, it was God whose eyes I was borrowing. Now they belonged to mortals. Masters. Scientists. Rich voyeurs. What I was observing right now through their twinkling gazes was a unit that had lost cohesion, had been torn apart by, yes, the death of a loved one, but also by the death of the thing that had given them purpose. If our observers were cheering for their gladiators, what must they be thinking now? That we were hopeless and they must look elsewhere for their entertainment? Or were they less concerned with the moment than we were, seeing us on the verge of a meltdown when something great was within our grasp? In the end I think there was still a divine element to the exercise for me, or at least a moral one. Would we make the right choice? When we were finished with the reckless business of tonight, would we stick to the plan and get the hell out of here? Find some weakness in the seal and crawl into the sunlight again? That is what we owed our dead. Not repeatedly raising the bid in the chase for extinction. As I'd told the team before we crossed the point of no return that the entrance to the bar symbolized, gapping was not a sport for the unfocused. Yet here we were, Morrison even now offering a toast to our madness.

'Others might have thrown up the flag,' he was saying. 'Others might have bowed their heads in defeat. But not the Freedom Wings. Morrison's Old Absinthe House crew.' His face grew serious as he called our names out one by one, pointing at each of us in turn with his glass, which caught the light from the overheads like a miniature emerald disco ball. 'Ghost. Mariah. Dancer. Moon. And Hawk, you devil. May the six of you make Lynx proud tonight!'

There was a cheer from the poets sprawled at their tables on the other side of the bar as they partook of their drinks along with Morrison and the *six* of us. Though they were our fan base, holding our sport as higher art than their own, they always sat apart, leaving us to our communion with the green goddess in our glasses, a pre-gapping ritual almost as old as the game itself. I was surprised they had even allowed themselves to disturb things with a cheer. The evening's first taste of our beloved fiery spirit went

down hard. I could see it in the faces of my companions, feel it in my scoured throat, my lurching stomach. But the heat passed quickly, the expressions of the potion's victims returning to their former preoccupied, almost sullen states. Again, the sense wasn't of grief for our brother, but for *it*. I seemed to be the only one who'd noticed that Morrison, out of habit or some Freudian hope, had said 'the six of us' when we were five now.

Our table, a round affair with a decorative circular light in the center, rested in a corner pocket of the place, the bar standing to the left of my regular seat, which faced the entrance. We'd toasted the recently dead at this table more times than I cared to remember. We'd heard Morrison's improvised eulogies—the latest of which was coming, I sensed with a certain dread. We'd dreamed of Europe's last natural sanctuary, Switzerland, as addicts dream of freedom from their prisons. But Lynx hadn't been the victim on those occasions, and Switzerland had been only talk, not a real destination. Tonight was like no other night. Our hero, now two days gone, had left an aura like that surrounding the green fairy—*la fée verte*, as they'd called her in the Parisian cafes where the likes of Picasso, Manet, Lautrec, and Van Gogh had indulged. A vaporous thing that promised something as shapeless and mysterious as itself. It was as though with Lynx's passing the spirit of the game had materialized in a mirror, which rightly deprived it of its luster, its mystique. Yet we were going to show it, weren't we? We were going to laugh in its suddenly visible face.

Impulsively, my eyes drifted to the mirror on the wall opposite the bar, where Oscar Wilde's famous quote about absinthe was etched, in verse form.

After the first glass you see things as you wish they were.
After the second you see things as they are not.
After the third glass you see things as they really are,
And that's the most horrible thing in the world.

How true, that. How terribly, terribly true.

Morrison, standing, hovering as always, was talking again, his long hair dancing with the ostentatious movement of his head. This must have been the introduction to the eulogy because the others were looking elsewhere, the pain already surfacing. 'Walls and force fields,' he waxed. 'Walls and

force fields and sheaths, man. That's what the world is. Doesn't matter if your downside or upside, quarantined or imprisoned in the sunlight, it's all about *containment*. It's like that song from the late nineteenth-hundreds. *Sign, sign, everywhere a sign/blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind . . .* Those dudes knew. They knew how it was then, they knew how it was going to be. It's the way of society. It's the way of the *machine*. The ones who make the wars. The ones who make the *decisions*. Walls and force fields. Barriers fucking everywhere. Keep 'em in. Keep 'em out. Keep 'em contained. Well, guess what, man. Lynx wasn't playing. Beautiful, soaring, uninhibited soul that he was, Lynx wasn't playing their games.'

Clapping from a couple of the poets. Clapping that died away quickly, as though the hands' owners had realized their lack of reverence in a holy moment. It hit me dully that part of our problem tonight was the absence of music. There was almost always music in the evenings, rock from the Expressive Age. Woodstock. What had Morrison been thinking, creating this stage for himself? Was it Lynx he was celebrating or his own ego? I caught myself before the anger swelled. Morrison wasn't like that. He was a narcissist, yeah, but so the hell were we. No, this *was* a holy moment for him. Music would have been profane. He'd loved Lynx as much as we had loved him. The bond had been different. The blood of the sport had not run through their shared veins. But he'd adored him, even worshiped him, like we all had.

Morrison's pause at the introduction of our legend was too long. It allowed Ghost to jump in, and she among all of us suffered little in the way of bullshit. I braced myself, uncertain exactly how she would be taking this.

Surprisingly, her voice was mild, though its content proved to have an edge. 'Lynx was four years old when they Quarantined us. He was on a tour in the amusement sector with his mother. He had practically no memory of the topside, but he remembered watching her die. It took *days*, get it? Just how did he become this warrior for the anti-barrier cause?'

'Hey, Ghost, I didn't m—'

'I know what you meant, Morrison. I know exactly what you meant. And I tell you, he was a victim.'

'But that's what I said,' Morrison said feebly.

'That is *not* what you said.' Voice still calm, but dangerously so. 'I know the picture you were about to paint, of some scepter-carrying mystic

conqueror. He was dealt a vicious hand and he coped. He was a victim, Morrison. An innocent. Not Joan of fucking Arc.'

I could not help entering the discussion here. Ghost did that to me. She did a lot of things to me, truth be known. 'If you feel that way, Ghost, why are we going through with this tonight?'

The calm had run its course. 'Will you get off your high horse, Hawk! You're the saint here, with your endless righteous preaching. Gapping is not about defiance or rebellion or making a point. It *is* about being liberated. But not from the machine. Not from barriers. We are the abandoned of the human species. Lynx was abandoned by his mother. He was abandoned by his father, who was topside when it all happened. Abandonment is more than hurt. It is loneliness, worthlessness, oblivion. Since God abandoned us too, we had to find something else. Something with the power to conjure us, to invoke us, to bring us up into life again. But even that may be over-dramatizing. In the end gapping may just be an escape or an outlet. The poets have their poetry. Morrison has his green fairy. Gangs in other sectors have what they have. We have our gapping.'

'We have our gapping,' Moon said, in that dreamy way of his. He'd been looking at her as she spoke, his chin lifted, his head slightly tilted, as if he was looking upon the font of all knowledge. Or are a rare work of art. She was that, I gave him silently, but she was also a pain in my ass. She could break your logic down with such ease and eloquence that you almost forgot the ground you stood on.

'So would it be safe,' I asked her, 'to say that tonight is a way of dealing with the grief we are feeling? Of coping with the pain? Of coming to terms with Lynx's death? Never mind. I know your answer. You'll say that's reason enough. Listen, Switzerland is an escape too. Even if it's an illusion, a false promised land, isn't it better than having none at all?'

'There's a promised land in gapping too,' Dancer came in. Save for Moon, whose gaze had wandered to the lights behind the bar, we all looked at Dancer. His expression was flat, as though he hadn't just uttered terrible words. None of us had any doubt that he was talking about the ultimate climax, not that peak you experienced when you were late in your flight and could see the gaps still closing, which meant you had won. Only Dancer, Ghost, and myself, and of course Lynx who'd actually *faced* the train, knew the feeling of that peak, however. Mariah and Moon would not look, for differing reasons. Mariah kept her vision narrow in order to remain focused on the goal, less distracted by the fear which she

found next to impossible to embrace though she thrived on it like her companions. Moon gapped for the rush of acceptance, not adrenaline. He was only allowed to gap with us because he would have done it on his own otherwise, and died a certain death.

Chilled by Dancer's remark, I said to him, 'So life's not worth living now? Lynx was the central force and now that he's gone, there's nothing to sustain us, is that it? What the hell, Dance? That's not *you*.'

And it wasn't. If Lynx had been the effortlessly elegant ace of the sport, Dancer was its hotshot, the cocky one, the one who performed death-defying tricks. That he would make such an allusion was extremely disturbing.

Ghost wasn't having it. 'You're not gapping tonight, Dancer.'

'Fuck you, Ghost. I'll gap when and where I please. Let me look at my watch here. What is it, thirteen minutes till the next train? I may decide to finish my drink, walk right out that exit and down to the sheath and step right the fuck through. Who's going to stop me? You? Hawk? How, with the discipline speech? *Ha*. You're thinking about suicide. I'm thinking about the moment you carry with you into eternity.'

'You're thinking about going out in a blaze of glory!' Mariah, in her first contribution to the conversation, cried. We looked at her, surprised by neither the outburst nor her embarrassed, injured expression. How did the line from the musical go? *And the wind, they called Maria*. Our Mariah (who'd added an 'h' to the original spelling so that the name looked like its pronunciation) may have seen herself as flit like the wind. We saw her as unpredictable and emotional, often more like a gale than a breeze—but a superficial one, one without real power. And it was no secret, her adoration for Dancer, who had use for her when it suited him. His talking like this was personal for all of us, but for her it must have penetrated to the very core of her heart.

'You saw him the other night,' Dancer said, ignoring her, talking to Ghost and me. 'You saw him. He was slow. He was *late*. Lynx was never, ever late. If anything, he had time to kill. He was so quick off the mark, the shutters were still falling when he was safely on the other side, grinning back at us.'

He was referring to the windows that preceded the window being gapped. Gapping the main line, you had visual range in both directions along the tunnel. You could see the train coming as one by one—at a lightning pace, like the edges of a book's pages being flicked by the

thumb—the periodic breaks in the sheath, the ‘gaps,’ blacked out with the train’s passage. The poets had come up with the shutter description, which didn’t convey it exactly from a geometric standpoint but had stuck. Dominoes would have been a better analogy, but I suppose that wasn’t artful enough.

Ghost grew dark. Face, eyes, voice as she demanded, ‘What are you saying, Dancer? That he did it on purpose? That he died willingly?’

Mariah clutched her mass of red hair, rotated the heels of her palms against the side of her skull. She whispered, ‘You’re killing him all over again, Rigs.’

‘Don’t call me that, Mariah,’ he said in an ominously restrained voice. ‘Never call me that.’

I’d had enough. As senior, if only by a couple years, I had a sort of unofficially recognized authority at times of dissidence. I used it now, hopefully, playing upon their sense of guilt. Whatever it took for this situation that had no precedent.

‘All of you, shut up. If you want to honor Lynx then honor him in the spirit of unity he believed so much in. We’re his brothers and sisters, his only family in the world. He loved us. We loved him. Please let’s remember who we are.’

Even as I delivered it, I ached with the obviousness, the hollowness of my little speech. It disgusted Dancer. I could see it in his face, though he said nothing. Mariah wept silently. Ghost looked at the wall, burning holes in it. Moon mooned. Morrison, he tried to find something to do with his hands, his feet, his mind as it struggled over his duty as host, looked for some way to get things back on the celebratory course he’d envisioned. It was he who finally broke the silence. I’ve never heard anything so awful and pathetic and desolate come out of a person’s mouth

‘The poets, I think, have prepared something.’

Having listened to the poets recite their poetry, we’d retired to our rooms to get ready. This too was a ritual. A half hour to gather ourselves for the storm. For some of us this was meditation time. For others, exercise or a vid or another drink. For Ghost, it was yoga, which I admired in her and yet never would have engaged in myself for fear it would have an adverse effect of relaxing me too much, taking me off my game.

We lived separately, each of us with two of the lower floor Red Light cubicles, which were accessed commonly by an interior corridor that allowed us to visit each other without stepping outside into the wing. Each room came equipped with a bed, a sliding curtain for its glass front, and a working sink and shower. Some of us had doubled the mattresses in one room, or simply tossed out the extra bed, leaving space in the second room for whatever odd furniture we'd found. We wanted for nothing, living wise. The climate was controlled. We had hot and cold water, electricity. Everything worked in the Underground; everything that hadn't been affected by conditions above, such as communications, the flow of information. When the complex had been built, it had incorporated the latest technology in its various systems. State of the art stuff like the simulators found in the amusement sector. Like the sleek, silent trains piercing the darkness like bolts. But it was the quality and precision that had gone into the Underground's construction that made all the difference. In a rare departure from its normal stance on cross-border contracting, the EU had allowed German trade craft as well as German engineering. As a result, our handymen among the poets were rarely called upon for more than the occasional plumbing or light issue because they simply weren't needed.

I was sitting on my bed trying to drain off the mental clutter before tonight's sport when the knock at my interior door came. To my surprise I found Ghost standing there hugging herself as though in a draft. I stepped back, motioning her in, then regretted the gesture as unnecessary, as a giveaway of the discomfort I felt at seeing her. She was smiling, though. A shy sort of smile. And the flutters were still there, inside me, through all these years.

'You okay?' I said as she plopped down on her back on the bed.

'I'm good. You?'

'Making it, Ghost,' I said, sitting beside her, then letting myself fall back on the mattress too.

We lay in silence for a moment, she with her eyes closed while I watched her through the mirror on the ceiling, a standard accessory for the johns that had satisfied their sexual appetites in these rooms. She looked like the ethereal thing she was named for, a ghost with her luminous blonde hair, her glacial eyes, her skin so long without sun that it seemed almost translucent in a certain light. She was Dutch through and through, while I was mixed Dutch and Swiss, my family having transplanted from Berne

when I was seven. Strangely, I couldn't remember my family's trips south into the Alps for some reason. I remembered names of places, like Interlaken and Lauterbrunnen, but I couldn't remember the experience of them. Did Ghost remember her youth? I wondered. We so rarely talked about the past, as though to do so might make us even less real than we already were down here.

She opened her eyes, catching me looking, and the smile that had never really left her face touched me in ways I didn't want to welcome.

'Listen, Hawk, I'm sorry,' she said. 'I don't know what we would do without you. You're the adhesive, you know? Have always been. Lynx may have kept us unified in the game sense, but you held us together in everything else. Often without meaning to. Your presence, like his, was enough. Gapping makes a person crazy. How did Farah describe us tonight in her poem? As 'fragmented faces around incinerators, with only the memories of bodies to burn.' God, you've kept us all sane.'

Adhesive. It's not necessarily what one wants to hear from the woman he has longed for in spite of the pact they made between them long ago; the woman he might have spent his life with if circumstances had been different. I couldn't remember anymore who had rejected whom—if it had even gone like that—but we'd mutually blamed it on the danger of emotional involvement in a life that belonged to gapping. Mariah, who died every time Dancer crossed the tracks, had survived by the grace of luck. Dancer was the distraction that forced her to concentrate so fiercely on the other side, the sweat running into her eyes, down her neck. We couldn't risk that. We didn't have that protective light shining around us as she obviously did.

Yet sometimes I wondered if our reasons were as noble as worrying over the life of another. Wasn't self-preservation really the basis for almost every decision, great or small? Even worse for me was the prospect that the rush of gapping was more powerful than the rush of love. I remembered the drug-charged nightclubs of my younger years, before the Quarantine. The substance *luster*, like *magic* before it, and *ecstasy* before that, had such a grip on you that when the opportunity came your way to take one of your fellow meat market samples home with you, you often chose the drug's oblivion over that of sex or whatever it was you got from a night in a stranger's arms. I hated the thought that it might be that way with Ghost and me. That we sacrificed each other for the fleeting nirvana of gapping. But these thoughts never lingered long. I liked to believe that neither of

us were that shallow. I liked to believe that in the core where the deeper emotions resided, the knowledge of the true nature of our sacrifices remained intact.

In any case these were strange words coming from Ghost tonight. Here in my room, away from the others. She wasn't one to sentimentalize. She the sufferer of so little. She whose preservation instinct served her so frustratingly well. I wondered what was really on her mind as we lay in silence for a while. I knew it wasn't just guilt over coming down on me earlier. She knew I didn't keep things. At least not so that it affected our relationship, whatever that relationship actually was. Was she going to profess her devotion to me? I hoped not because that would have said things about what we were about to partake in. Would it really be our last dance? Somehow I couldn't quite believe it right now. I still thought of gapping in the present tense. It was easier to imagine my teammates had conspired against me to shut me up. Easier and somehow less painful, God help me.

'Hawk,' she said, interrupting my musings.

Something about the way the word came out caused a slight foreboding in me. 'Yeah?' I said.

'There's something I have to tell you before we gap tonight.'

Oh God. She wouldn't. She wouldn't dare.

'Ghost . . .' I began, but didn't know how to finish.

'I love you, Hawk. It's that simple. I have to say it now because I have a bad feeling about tonight. I love you. I've loved you since the beginning. I'll love you tomorrow and into eternity, whatever it looks like for addicts like us.'

I closed my eyes, needing this so badly yet wanting to regurgitate it before it digested. Instead, an appeal came out of me. A plea that sounded like a lament to my already assaulted ears. 'We can't gap tonight, Ghost. The others, they can do it, but not you and—'

'Do you love me, Hawk? You have to say it. Now. Before it's too late.'

'Please, Ghost. We'll watch. We can participate in that way. But that's all. We can't risk it.'

'Hawk, every second is a second wasted. I want us bound by the words. I want us to go into it as lovers. If one of us doesn't make it, I want the other to know they'll be waiting on the other side, even if it's only darkness there. Better darkness than hopelessness.'

‘Do you *want* to die?’ I said, opening my eyes suddenly. ‘Is that it? Like Dancer?’

Her expression was as earnest, as intense as I’d ever seen it, transfixing me as she said softly, ‘I want you to tell me you love me. If you do.’

The gaze lasted a second longer, then I was seizing my face in my hands, blurting it out before I ruptured. ‘Yes, Ghost! I do. I love you, I love you, I love you. *Fuck!*’

The trains were deathly silent, and fast. Unimaginably fast. When one of us was taken, the rest of us saw their framed figure in motion and then the hole blink black, that was it. There could have been no more than a nanosecond of pain, a flash of impact, then they were gone, for us never to be seen again. The trains had a strict schedule, which we had memorized. We were not interested in those that still stopped at the Freedom Wing every half hour but rather the ones that were passing through, destined for other places outside Holland Underground. The relationship between the transit system and the Underground was not an intimate one. They were integrated, yes, but only in the sense that the one had been designed to access the other. Otherwise, they were two separate entities. The sheath enclosed the tracks and the tunnel enclosed the sheath. Passengers were moved on and off the trains by tube, for purposes of safety and security, so that they were contained to the point where they were let out. For those few locations that had topside access, the tube led to a bank of elevators, also enclosed, which carried passengers to a ground-level station. The seal-off had been easy with the transit system because the system had been designed with contingencies in mind.

What puzzled us was why the trains that had served the Underground before the Quarantine continued to make local stops. We understood how the larger network might still use these lines, but it seemed a given that in such a sophisticated system the schedules would have simply been reprogrammed. Was the system broken? Had the authorities left it in place in anticipation of the day the Quarantine would be lifted, and then forgotten it as they had forgotten us? Whatever the reason, its answer almost certainly lay in the same realm as the answers to why we had no communication with, or information from, above. It scared me to think about being suspended in time. It was the first thing I thought about every time we approached the tunnel. Tonight, the apprehension caused by this

prospect seemed more potent than usual, though who could separate it from the magnified mortal fear a last dance inspired.

The poets had come out, as they always did unless we forbade it. Such had not been the case tonight because both Lynx and the farewell to gapping were vessels from which all deserved to drink. They were gathered around the corner of the T-junction formed by the Wing's corridor and the transit tunnel. In their loose-fitting Bohemian garb, the community of artists from which Ghost had learned yoga looked the part of the cult and coven built on abstract ideas in a similarly intangible world. Morrison stood with them, reverently. Our gap in front of us to the right. Further to the right, perhaps fifteen meters along the sheath, was the next one; then the next one, and so forth. The purpose of the gaps was heat relief. Though the trains were powered by a 'cold' source, heat buildup was inevitable at such speeds. The vents in the sheath were the elegant solution. For us they had been life. Even before the Quarantine, when our skater gang used to sneak in by a service elevator in the warehouse sector, which lay to our west, closer to the core of Amsterdam, we'd fantasized about gapping these vents. Because the warehouse area was both below and above ground, with conveyors of all sorts moving goods between them, security was less tight, being focused on the perimeter warehouse gates above as opposed to the entrances to the Underground. One of us, Vince by name and the first to lose his life to gapping, worked at one of the warehouses and was able to get us in on eye recognition on that one day a month when they closed Holland Underground for maintenance. In the nearby art sector we had a whole wing to ourselves, a wing that was mainly an exhibit and so required less upkeep. All we had to do was post a guard at each end and we were set. It so happened that the safest place was also the best place for skating because of its elegantly contoured floors and walls, all part of the aesthetics of the exhibit. It was like a dream come true, the Nouveau Wing, and I'd left a part of me there.

Gapping was more than a dream come true. We didn't know in the early days of the Quarantine that we were going to be confined down here indefinitely. With regular assurances and promises of the government's dedication to the matter coming from above, we were free to be the wild, liberated spirits we were. There was no violence then, no territoriality, no harsh code of survival, and we went exactly where we wanted to go, pillaging exactly what we pleased from the Underground's seemingly limitless stores. The actual practice of gapping started on an impulse on

one of the subsidiary lines, which didn't have the long tunnels, rendering the chase to the other side a completely blind one. On the subsidiaries, you watched the station's clocks until one minute before the train was to arrive. At this point you got in position, relying on your mental clock or some other sense to get you as close to the moment the train passed through as possible. Your companions remained as mute as the trains themselves until it was finished. Dancer was the first to say fuck it during one of our many wishful 'rehearsals.' Fuck it, let's quit talking about it and get down to business. As soon as the words were out, he shot through, making it by a good five seconds, though the inexact station clocks had him launching at just about the right time. The sport had evolved from there, the thrill reaching a new level with the main lines and the ability to witness the train's hurtling approach via the domino effect of the vents blacking out. It became a game of speed as much as timing. It was you against the train rather than you against the clock. Before we realized what was happening we were hooked. The low, the do or die point that all addicts eventually reach, came the day we lost Vince. Unlike today, the discussion lasted all of ten minutes. Like today, we chose die over do. The rest is history. A history of unwritten obituaries.

We said nothing that did not pertain to game strategy as we readied for tonight's first go. We didn't always send everyone through. One or another of us might not feel up to it. Lethargy came in our environment all too often, and you learned to recognize it and listen to it. Tonight, though, we were honoring our dead, and no one would be relegated to observer status. Observation was for the poets, which were even now moving in behind us, sensing the time had come. They had not memorized the schedules as we had, preferring not to taint the integrity of the art with foreknowledge. Art for them must remain uninhibited. It showed in their verse. It showed in their attitude toward their everyday lives. As far as they were concerned, if it was constrained, it was corrupt. We appreciated this mindset. We shared it in many ways.

Mariah would be first, as she often was. It did not do to let her think too long, although we occasionally let her watch Dancer pass the test ahead of her, to remove that particular anxiety. The mood was sober tonight, charged with the feeling that there was more at stake, more to lose, than ever before. Those stakes were personal and varied. For my part, to lose another of our company tonight would be like losing the whole eight-year-long game, exposing it for the colossal waste it had been. But I

knew this was my last dance. I was committed to a future without gapping. And I believed the same was true of Ghost, now that she had revealed herself to me and we had entered into this bond of hers. Dancer and Moon, however, were not likely to be thinking about tomorrow at all. If they'd a focal point, it was Lynx. I liked to think, *had* to think Dancer had gotten over his 'promised land' remark of earlier and was taking the more predictable view that winning as a team tonight would be the greatest honor to Lynx and failing would be letting him down somehow. Which left the question mark of Mariah. Because she must have still been contending with that foolish remark, we'd had no choice but to put her in the first slot. She'd neither agreed nor disagreed to this, casting her non-vote in disturbing silence.

We hung back as she got ready, watching her grasp one of her running shoes, pulling her leg behind her, stretching. Running shoes were specific to her. Each of us had found, through trial and error, the footwear that best suited us individually. I wore skin-tight climbing shoes tied up over the ankle. Ghost preferred a similarly thin-soled, close-fitting affair that resembled a man's wrestling shoe, though hers had come off a rack of current fashions in the women's section. It too fitted above the ankles. Dancer wore rubber mesh beach shoes which bent with the foot. He'd tried to emulate Lynx's barefoot style, but it hadn't worked for him, perhaps because he was heavier. For Moon, who at age sixteen was still a growing boy, it did work. Like Lynx had been, he was small, light of foot, and agile, though he wasn't as graceful as our departed brother. Who was?

These sets of shoes and bare feet shuffled uneasily around me as we watched Mariah prepare. Not once had she looked back as she went through her various stretches, though she occasionally checked her watch. This was out of character for her; the zeroing-in focus usually came when she was in her stance, poised to launch herself through. If it were anyone else this businesslike approach would have been a good sign, an encouraging one. But this was not someone else, this was Mariah. And Mariah, though unpredictable in other ways, could always be counted on to show her nerves. It was part of the preparation ritual, a part I had failed to see as healthy until now. There was too much resolve about her motions, too much purpose in the way she snapped her wrist around to check her watch. I knew the others were seeing it too, and not just by their restlessness. Dancer's breathing had changed. He was standing close to me, and I could hear it, along with the dull squeak of rubber soles in the

silence of the tunnel. Ghost, whose feet had stopped moving, had gone rigid. Still, Mariah paid us no mind. She was a professional, her body said as it stepped back, then forward again, finding the most advantageous position as related to both her visual angle on the tunnel's farthest discernible vent and her start on the gap in front of her. Then, suddenly but smoothly, she dropped into her traditional sprinter's stance, head turning to the right as she fixed on the far gap. Feeling the poets move closer behind us, I looked at the clock on the wall above the sheath, which I'd intentionally avoided to this point. Yes, it was time.

In the time-compressed medium that were the seconds before she launched, my thoughts strayed to irrelevancies. Her stance. Lynx had tried to teach her a better way. She was top-heavy, he'd told her. Her breasts, while delightful (his words), were large and cumbersome. Her arms needed to be free at the start, for balance. She might lose a split second his way, but balance was more important than that lost second because of the conditions she was working with. The base of the gap was not quite flush with the platform on which the tracks ran and the surface of the platform was slightly uneven. Additionally, there were forty-centimeter wide ruts between the sheath walls and the platform. The near one was easily cleared, but if you misjudged the far one, you might as well kiss your ass, or at least your legs, goodbye. We had seen this happen only once, and the unfortunate soul wound up being the only gapping victim to leave something behind to incinerate. But he had been a newcomer to the sport, undisciplined, cocky, and he had taken the liberty of graduating himself to the main line without enough reps under his belt. He'd shot through ahead of schedule, choosing a train that was not on the night's agenda, thinking he would shock us with his daring brilliance. It was the last time we allowed anyone outside the fold entry into our club. The rejected sometimes threatened to burn their own fires, but without the support of a team in the face of such deadly odds, they usually faded away. But Mariah had been comfortable in her runner's stance, so Lynx had decided in the end to leave her to it. When a golfer or batter came up through the ranks with an irregular but successful stance, coaches eventually gave up trying to correct it because they knew they were working against the player's own body. Mariah's situation was no different, except that her sprinter's form was quite good. To have applied pressure would not only have destroyed a technique that suited her; it would have been psychologically harmful.

So here she was, in position, the rest of us fearing for her with a hot flush that she herself for once did not exhibit. I glanced at the clock once more, then down the tunnel—too late to see the first domino fall as one gap after another blinked out. All this in less time than it took to intake a breath. Things happen that quickly in gapping. You glance away for a second and it's halfway finished. By the time my eyes had shifted back to the streak of motion that was Mariah, she was entering the sheath, a beautiful thing in flight, wind indeed. In gapping, where the mental reflexes are honed to a razor's edge, an instant is enough time to appreciate a vision, recognize a flaw, and analyze the nature of that flaw, with room left over to consciously note that *déjà vu* has descended again.

The only one of us whose feet ever touched the platform more than four times during gapping was Moon, unless Dancer was performing one of his tricks. Mariah's second foot had now touched down, and it was short of where it was supposed, which put her in a position, unless she'd planned it this way, of having to shorten a stride before reaching the end of the platform. If you're off stroke, the end of the platform might as well be the end of the world, and the space between it and other side, the drop-off into infinity. My soul cried out as she left a third footprint among the tracks and the image of Lynx's last moment superimposed itself, filling my vision. I tried to find my way around it, but couldn't. Was she looking down the tunnel at oncoming fate as he had done? Was she gone already?

The gap before me went black. I heard a scream. A gasp. My eyes instinctively shifted to the left, where the dominoes continued to fall, in slow motion. Then all the windows were filled. Black. The duration of the blackout was one second, then the vents began sliding open again at the other end. The building blocks of time, I'm convinced, are premonitions. In gapping you are always aware of their texture even if you can't get a fix on their fluid, evolving, deceptive proportions. Before the gap in front of us opened, the sighs were coming. As surely and suddenly as we knew we'd lost Mariah, we knew we had found her, that she would be waiting in a future even now occurring as the rear of the train cleared the gap.

I cannot accurately describe the expression on her face as she gazed back at us from the other side because it was so alien to her that it might have belonged to someone else. As adequate an adjective as I can come up with is *triumphant*. From start to finish, she had been on her game tonight, giving to the game an integrity that it had never given to her. It was the rest of us, with our doubt, who had been off track. A veteran of this sport, she

had never doubted. Not on this night when it counted most. When the uncertainty in the air had been palpable.

A delayed cheer rose when everyone had processed, to whatever degree they could, what they had just experienced. The smile on Mariah's face as she stepped back through the gap was as luxuriant as her fiery red hair. Dancer was the first to her, hugging her tightly, wanting her now that she offered something in which he could truly immerse himself. As I watched them, I had to believe the worst was over. The somber tension had been replaced by edgy excitement. What was to come was to come, but no blame could fall on our absence from its occurrence. One set of shoes in and we'd been transported back in time to when the thing was *fun*. I knew I should check myself, make a note about getting too caught up in a single victory, but goddammit, tonight was our finale and if you couldn't indulge in its exalted notes, then why suit up at all?

The soaring caught its necessary down currents when Moon reminded us that we'd only seven minutes till the next train—his. Looking at his wonder-filled face, my spirits suddenly plummeted. How could we have forgotten him, even for a moment? He required special attention. He needed us to be aware of him, to handle him as he got ready. Gratefully, the low didn't last. As Ghost and Mariah converged on him, fussing maternally over the hair in his eyes, the stiffness in his upper limbs, I cautiously let my wings out again, feeling the mood lift me. The poets and Morrison chattered away behind us. Mariah was explaining something to Dancer which he adamantly agreed with, judging by the vigor with which he nodded his head. My thoughts drifted between Moon and Ghost as I watched her pull his arm to its extent, lightly turning it, causing the joint to crack. They were like opposite poles of self-sufficiency, she the hardened survivor, he the damaged yet uncompromising lingerer.

It came to me with a certain pride that although he was clearly our weak link we had never once knowingly neglected Moon. Not from the day he had fallen into our arms, a severely beaten, half dead outcast from the Motor Wing. He could annoy Dancer into a cursing fit, he could frustrate the hell out of me, he could bring hopeless tears to Mariah's eyes, he could expose Ghost's well guarded tenderness. But what he could not do was shake the order of our priorities. In our wanting domain, his innocence alone was worth lifetimes of endurance. I wondered sometimes if it was one of his parents who, tired of his endless daydreaming, his inability to adapt to conditions, had beaten him. Like all of us, he didn't talk of them

often, but they had been down here with him, this much I knew from the random aimless remark. I'd considered and discarded the possibility that the trauma of that beating, and perhaps beatings before it, had left him the way he was. Whatever the real nature of this thing that had led to someone before us nicknaming him Moon, it was natural to him, inborn. Yet I did not think he was autistic, though I was more flexible there. He seemed to go by his own clock, at a different, much slower pace than the rest of us, but not because of a lack of mental capacity. He was smart. Not *sharp*, not quick in his intelligence, but intelligent nonetheless. Still, he was childlike and distracted. In some 'la-la land,' as Dancer put it. His coordinates were different than ours. What we centered on—the gravitational core of the earth?—was not what he centered on. His existed in a separate reality, and whenever he woke into ours, he needed steering, love, praise, for equilibrium.

Ghost, on the other hand—as I watched her massage his joints, which often bothered him in his current, hopefully last growing spurt—was never distracted. Even now, with our bond in place, she was only about business. Did we really need these exercises, this physical therapy for our two or three second bursts through the gaps? Wasn't it likely that those few instances where one of us had strained something or seized up off the mark, once to a fatal conclusion, would have happened anyway? According to her, no, not until proven otherwise. You addressed everything you could in advance. The psychological stuff you couldn't always address, but physical preparation was another matter. This was the way Ghost approached everything. Not in a compulsive or calculated way, but in a no nonsense, no bullshit way. You were a fool in her book to do anything in life without being properly prepared. She'd come into gapping behind some of us, after months of observation, for that reason. Maybe that was her issue with Switzerland, too. Maybe this last dance of ours was the summary lesson or readiness test she had been waiting for.

Looking at her, admiring her, thinking that her hardness and tenderness were the same raw material—the one portion having set, the other remaining malleable—I wondered about tomorrow. If we lived to see it, what would it be like for us, now that we were joined by our admissions of our tightly kept feelings? She wasn't going to suddenly become butter, that was certain. She seemed changed in no visible way as I watched her with Moon, commenting on some concern. He didn't seem to hear her so she said louder, snapping her fingers in front of his face, 'Hey, come out

of it, Moon. Mariah, does he look dazed to you? I mean, more than normal?’

Mariah held his shoulders, appraising him. ‘Yeah. Yeah, he does, Ghost. But he always comes around.’

‘He doesn’t have time to come around, ‘Riah. And this is not his normal head stroll. We can’t let him go this time.’

No, Ghost was still all business after her confession. And as I looked at Moon, whose face was turned partially in my direction, revealing his befogged expression, I saw that she had particular cause to be in this case. He was still caught up in the elation that had spread spontaneously among us. I could see it in his glassed over eyes, the smile that lingered on his face. It was as though he had carried the feeling back into his own reality, leaving him in two places at once.

‘She’s right,’ I said. ‘We can’t let him gap tonight.’

‘He’s not going to like it,’ Dancer said.

‘He’s not even here, Dance.’ But just as Ghost spoke the words, Moon seemed to come awake. He looked at Mariah’s face, then her hand on his shoulder. Then his watch.

‘Ninety seconds,’ he said, sounding puzzled.

Ghost met my eye. He was late, her gaze communicated. He should have been getting into position.

‘What’s wrong?’ Moon said, the puzzlement becoming suspicion.

Mariah was quick. ‘We had a problem, Moon. You’ll have to take your turn later.’

His expression could narrow darkly at times, especially when he detected that someone was trying to pull one over on him. Usually we could soothe the lines out of his face with words. But we were past that point now. The sense of deception had fallen over him like the shadow of some prehistoric beast, and I could feel the beast’s ferocity transferring to him. I could *see*, in that prescience our relationship with time gave us, the wreck this transformation would leave in terms of morale, in terms of our always tenuous spirits. His eyes might as well have been two blacked-out gaps, the train shearing his head in two.

I looked at the clock. ‘Let him go,’ I said. ‘Now!’

Ghost’s mouth fell open. She stood too close to Moon to have had an angle on what I had seen. Mariah had seen it because she had been looking directly in his face. But it was the doubt that mattered, and that belonged to Ghost as a tension settled over the tunnel and everyone in it. If Ghost

wanted a test, here it was. Between she and I, the single unit our bond should make us. If we failed, I would tackle him. I would cover him from harm with my own body, endure his teeth in my flesh, whatever the beast was capable of. If we passed—

We had. The light of trust flashed in her eyes and then she and Mariah were whirling him around toward the target. He dropped low, eyes on the far gap, hands shaking out the tension in emulation of Lynx, of Dancer, of those who made gapping visual for him. The last intake of breath among the tunnel's occupants occurred earlier than it had with Mariah, allowing the wonder and excitement of anticipation to saturate the stark fear. He would make it, he would, I willed as my chest felt as though it was about to rupture.

The signal gap blinked black. Moon was off. As his body left the tunnel for the platform, it did something it had never done before, though I recognized the move too well. It turned thirty degrees in the air so that when his bare foot landed he was partially facing the oncoming train. Though it was Dancer's move he emulated, again I saw Lynx, hanging there, knowing it was coming. But it was only a flash, then Moon's feet took command. Composing their magic just off the surface of the platform, they worked as a team, landing at precise intervals. The left one acted as the intermittent stabilizer while the right one slid first behind it, then in front of it, the body they carried twisting with each stroke of this sideways strut better suited to a dance floor than a set of tracks.

Before we'd a chance to process that he was really performing this move, and doing so with a mastery that could only have come through secret practice, he was safely through, a full two seconds ahead of the gap going black. The cheer went up again, and I went with it, rejoicing in this madness of our last night. Moon exhibiting true grace. Mariah brandishing a veteran's feathers as she too, I'd no doubt, had tweaked her last go to prove it was possible of her. To herself. To us. To Lynx. To the game itself. Not that there was anything special about an extra step; nothing more than it extended the moment in the gapper's relationship with the train, drew out the understanding, the rush of recognition and acknowledgment in addition to the thrill of climax. Who knew her or Moon's reasons. Maybe they just needed an adjustment. Did the why matter? Not a whit. What mattered was that they had come through, and in agonizingly dramatic fashion. *This* was gapping. This was the surge that had saved us.

The next train was in nine minutes, which gave us time to argue over who was going next. Dancer was almost always last. When he wasn't last he was first, for Mariah's sake. Tonight Ghost wanted she and I to go last. It wasn't really an argument, not after Dancer saw in her face what neither of us had revealed to the team—that we had found our way out of the wilderness we had roamed separately, emerging hand in hand. For a moment I thought the realization had hurt him somehow, as though he had been omitted from something or presumed upon by a sense of possibility where there was room for none. But this perceived reaction passed, and with an obligatory yet mild show of annoyance, he let her have her way. From Mariah, we got only a smile. A sad, yearning, faintly desperate smile that was nonetheless flecked with hope.

Dancer, the object of that hope, seemed charged, even giddy. Certainly not the same person who'd made the allusion of earlier. Thinking back on the original remark, 'promised land' could as easily have referred to the sense of fulfillment gapping could bring. I could imagine him having played up our morbid interpretation for the sheer hell of it or simply to torture Mariah. It was also reasonable to think he might have suffered an emotional plunge but had found his way to the surface again. Whatever the case, Dancer was going to amaze us tonight with his moves; it was in the air. He was good, no question. But he was also prideful and kept his game close to himself. Which was why we were taken by surprise when he asked us to inform him when the far gap went black. That was the way it had used to be done in training, back when we had rookies to school, techniques to develop, senses of timing to hone. That he would lower himself to accepting assistance from his fellow teammates meant he had something rare indeed in mind.

As he assumed an unusually high stance, facing *away* from the signal gap and in the direction the train ran, I thought with a sort of excited dread that I might just know what that something was. He rocked on the heels of his shoes, extended his arms over his head and swayed like a tree. Any doubts about what he was about to attempt dissolved as he began doing deep side bends, lifting his arms from his waist every third or fourth repetition to rehearse the motion he intended to follow through the hole in the sheath. I'd seen him do his acrobatics outside the game, his flips and cartwheels. But through a gap? A gap not much wider than a large door? Whose floor had absences? Maybe suicide was his goal after all.

I looked at the far gap, still open, then up at the clock. Any second n—

‘Black!’ Mariah cried.

My eyes instinctively darted back to the signal gap. Not until they had rested a full second on the vent did it actually go black.

God, let him never find out, rushed the thought as my eyes caught up with him, taking a snapshot of his body in motion, legs in the air, an upside down *Vitruvian Man* cartwheeling down the corridors not of da Vinci’s imagination, but our own. It was so inconceivable, what we were witnessing, that it failed to cause the strain, for myself at least, that Mariah’s and Moon’s runs had. Foreknowledge of his intent hadn’t reduced the disbelief, which overwhelmed our ability to be terrified. Yet neither did the shock completely obscure the dull, steady knowledge of lost time, provided faithfully by our shared internal clock. However swift and flawless Dancer was in his gymnastics, the distance between point *a* and point *b* simply couldn’t be crossed as quickly by this method. He would die having made an even more audacious gesture, by turning his back to oncoming fate, than Lynx had. *Fuck you*, he was saying. And that was the moment he desired to carry into eternity with him. *Fuck you* and your whole goddamn machine, leaving us down here to rot away. I won’t rot. *You* may have forgotten me, but the halls of the Underground will remember me forever.

He was into his final cartwheel, hands having made their last contact with the tracks’ platform just shy of the void, when the train came hurtling through. As with Mariah, it was impossible to tell what had occurred in the last instant, relying on the physical senses alone. Yet unlike her case, there were no premonitions, no certainties, false or true. There was only the internal clock. And this instance was too close even for its trusty mechanism. The one certainty, as we waited for the train to clear, was that if Mariah had not signaled a second early, he would not have made it.

The gap opened, and there he stood, features drawn in puzzlement. Slowly, very slowly, he lifted his fist in the air. The words came weakly at first, but gathered force as the realization fully dawned on him. ‘I’m here . . . I made it . . . I can’t believe I fucking *made it* . . .’

Then Mariah was through the gap and into his arms.

A local train was next, leaving us with a fifteen minute window to fill. The worst gap in gapping, we liked to joke. The thirty minutes between local stops was not enough time for all of us to go, so we had to

while the eternity away mingling with the poets, accepting or rejecting Morrison's offer of a shot from the bottle of undiluted absinthe he always carried to the affair. With the mood so high, tonight's 'gap' wasn't nearly as tense as it might have been. The collective feeling was that the dangerous landscapes had been traversed. For that's how they seemed, these runs of others—as journeys we had to live through with them, sweating their sweat, quaking with their heartbeats, tasting the coppery taste in their mouths. You rushed with everyone. You thrilled for every member of the team. You survived and died with them.

At some point during the intermission, Ghost and I managed to separate ourselves from the company, strolling back along the corridor of the wing that been our lives for going on a decade. I was soon to learn that intermission wasn't the right analogy. If they're supposed to occur in the middle of a performance, then this one was late. When Ghost had said she wanted us to gap together, I'd assumed she meant one after the other, not actually *together*, hand in hand, lovers into eternity. As I looked at her in the wake of this clarification from her lips, the sense of foreboding saturated me.

'You're not serious, Ghost?' I said. It sounded inane. The whole thing was inane. What romance, what beauty, what eloquence in gapping? But of course there was plenty of all three, and I knew it.

'I'm not asking you. I'm telling you, babe. We're going together. I don't give a damn if it's unprecedented. It's the only way and you know it.'

'But we're so *close*. So close to surviving this night. Tomorrow's right there, within our reach.'

She shook her head as though I was deluded by this vision of mine. 'This is about gapping. Not tomorrow. Not yesterday. The others laid it all out there. We must do the same. Do you think they'll be satisfied otherwise? That they'll be able to go forward with this plan of yours if they feel unfulfilled as a team? That's why we're going farther tonight. So we don't have to go back. Surely you understand this, Hawk.'

'But Mariah doesn't need fulfillment,' I said without much conviction. 'Neither does Moon.'

'But Dancer does. And you know as well as I do that they're in his energy field. Besides, we need fulfillment, Hawk. Do you think it's just going to go away? That a week from now we won't be jonesing for it?'

'Jonesing?' I laughed. Managing that in the face of what she proposed. 'Have you been watching your twentieth century movies again, Ghost?'

But she had me. It was done. I seized her suddenly and kissed her, not caring who saw, not caring about anything outside our path, which seemed to unfold before me at that moment in a dazzling silver light.

‘Let’s make it,’ I said. ‘No Jules and Nadine shit, okay?’ I referred to the tragic literary couple in the Joyce Carol Oates portrait of the hard life in twentieth-century America, *them*, in whose seedy reality we had taken comfort since being relegated to our exile. In the novel Nadine shoots her lover then herself, for complex reasons centering on a misplaced sense of abandonment. Though I made the reference in jest, I wondered if my insistence on Switzerland wasn’t itself a sort of abandonment.

Ghost must have known, as she smiled up at me searching my eyes, that it was important to me that she say the words—after all, she’d invented that imperative this very evening. A friend of my father’s once advised me, after my father had laid my strained love life out there for dissection, that no one really knows what’s in the heart of a female. The observation had frightened me at the time, and it frightened me now, looking at this woman who had decided suddenly to give herself to me and yet now made me wait on a simple okay until she had satisfied herself, through her probe, of whatever needed satisfying.

‘So long as you give it your all, baby,’ she finally said. ‘And keep the game at the front of your mind until it’s over.’

‘Agreed,’ I said. And we walked hand in hand back to the tunnel.

Dancer’s smile was crooked and beautiful on his handsome face as he greeted us. ‘You two make me want to puke.’

I let go Ghost’s fingers as she drifted in Mariah’s direction. ‘You may get your wish,’ I said to Dancer. ‘If we wind up splattered on the sheath wall.’

I hadn’t intended for these words to reach Ghost’s ears, but they did. As she turned, fixing me with a look, I thought for a moment that she had taken the joke personally. But it was a strange, cold look. The look of a judge intimate with the judged. The opinion it seemed to convey was that humor at the prospect of death was not only beneath a gapper, it was also profane. So Dancer and I, with a brotherly, not unashamed glance between us, left our banter to hover unfinished.

We were all children, I thought as I moved toward the gap, leaving the buzz of the others behind. Our words, our games, our poetry, our search for meaning, our love—all of it, the stuff of children. We’d come down here as kids—okay, kids and young adults with the hearts of kids—and we’d stayed kids. There were of course no real world responsibilities down

here, no accounts to balance, no mortgages to pay, no mouths to feed. I was in college when the Quarantine happened, so I'd begun to get a taste of those adult responsibilities. But I'd never really had to fend for myself in the system, become a part of it, a part of society. I'd been shaped for it in childhood, nurtured with it in mind, pulled toward it by its own gravity, but I hadn't received the stamp of its inescapable fate. I wasn't sure it would have made a difference anyway in terms of dealing with being imprisoned down here. Isolation was its own forge, and in Holland Underground, a world of exile so close to home, it was inevitable that our new forms would be twisted, perverted, entwined with the expectations of the past. That we refused to revisit that past only made us more monstrous, absurd, ludicrous. Look at us, for Christ's sake, with our shoes and our absinthe and our grandiose vision of ourselves. It seemed to me that the only reasonable thing for us to do was to find niches for ourselves along the corridors and hunch there in silence, gargoyles that we were, providing at least some symbolism in the void.

I began my stretches thinking of that, that image of myself, its beauty. Ghost soon joined me in the exercises, her thoughts in their own spheres. *Who are you?* I wanted to ask her. *What exactly are you doing here, next to me? Because if you've figured it out, then maybe I can figure it out. Do words mean anything, Ghost? Did they mean anything to Jules and Nadine? Are human beings not natural manipulators, to have invented language in the first place?* But she didn't want me close at this late stage, I could tell. There would be no proclamations until it was over. There was only one thing to discuss and that was how we were going to do it. But I hesitated even in approaching her with this. Fear, from wherever fear comes, was starting to seep in. Talking about the experience before us would merely intensify it, make it more difficult to direct.

I followed her eyes to the clock whose second hand was just passing twelve, showing us to have three minutes. I felt as though I was merely occupying time, that my mind wasn't in contact with my muscles as I continued to flex them till I could just feel pain. Where was the quiet control the others depended on in me? The steady focus? If I brought anything to the game, it was psychological command, discipline. Athletically, I was average, not gifted like Lynx, Dancer, and Ghost. I wasn't particularly fast, and indeed was slow off the mark. I'd had to work to improve my game, as I had with skating and other sports in my youth. I didn't know whether that instant's delay off the mark would put me at a

disadvantage or an advantage in this particular case. I wanted to believe the latter, that it would compensate for the fact that Ghost wasn't as strong as me and would otherwise have slowed me down. But I'd never raced her. I had no base of comparison, no frame of reference. I didn't know whether physics favored the smaller and lighter or the stronger when it came to acceleration. I knew she was fast for her size, effortlessly so, like a whisper discharged from a gun. And what about our cadence? She had a shorter stride than I, took more steps. If we were truly going hand in hand, how would we marry our pace?

I glanced at the clock again, had the impression of time running down but didn't really see the location of the hands. Ghost took my hand, startling me. She settled, without urgency, into her stance. I followed suit. Finally she spoke, leaning to my ear like a conspirator.

'Don't go until I squeeze your hand. Understand?'

'What? We're not acting on the gap's signal? Are you nuts? We're bound to have no rhythm as it is—'

'Quit worrying. My signal, okay? A second squeeze after we're off will mean what it means.'

'Twenty seconds,' Mariah announced behind us. She must have been alarmed by our casualness, or rather Ghost's casual management, because speaking to a gapper in their stance, creating that distraction, was simply not done.

'Ghost,' I said steadily. 'I want to live. I want to know tomorrow with you.'

'Then let's do,' she said, kissing my ear.

Our heads turned simultaneously to the right, eyes on the far gap. The fear in me suddenly rose to a premature crescendo, a great rushing noise in my head that culminated a moment after it began in the gap going black.

She did not squeeze my hand.

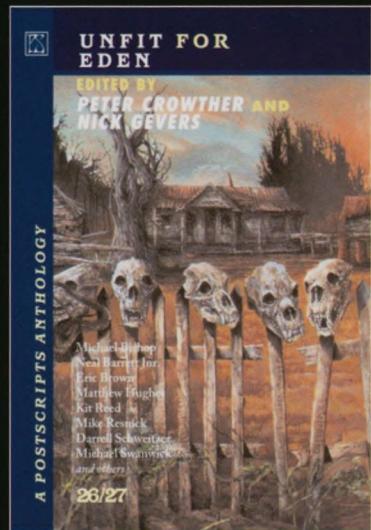
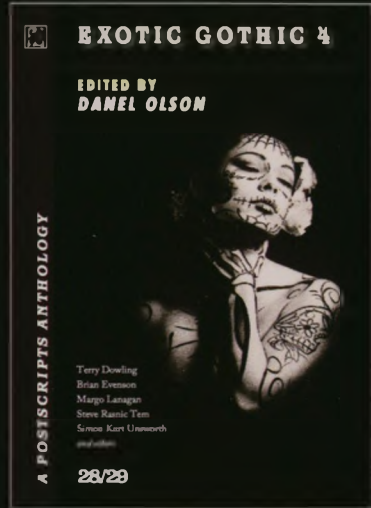
As neurological impulses work in the body, almost instantaneously transmitting instruction from the brain, so do the gaps transmit the passage of the train. By the time the thought that she must squeeze my hand *right now* arrived, two or three more dominoes had fallen. By the time I processed the belated pressure on my hand, the train was bearing down on the two ghosts inside the sheath, the forms of ourselves in a reality that had never transpired. My dread, as I willed myself forward, into those shapes, assumed new meaning when I realized just how much faster Ghost was than me. She hadn't just looked fast, in her small body, knifing through the

gap all those times. She *was* fast. And not waiting on me, but pulling me along, forcing my body to immediately exceed what I'd thought was its capacity. Of cadence and rhythm, I'd no concept. Whatever our legs were doing, they were doing on another plane, outside of our instruction. I knew this of her as well as myself, for after the initial strain on my muscles, it was no longer my material self she was pulling, but the other part of me, the part that didn't resist naturally but rather drew easily into herself, making me lighter, almost buoyant, almost whisper-like.

But we were behind schedule. Too far behind, I knew as I turned in the direction Lynx had turned, that of oncoming fate, whose hurtling shadow I clearly perceived in the form of the gaps blinking out. Would it be painful? I thought, realizing in the same instant that I didn't care. Pain, impact, separation were suddenly the threshold of exaltation. All the runs before had led to this moment, this beautiful transcendent moment that Ghost beside me (I had caught up with her, we were twain souls in this last flight) acknowledged with the second squeeze whose meaning she'd said I would know. I did, and I loved her, and eternity was pulling us in, ghosts that we were, and no, there would be no pain because hadn't the thing already happened? The moment we first looked at a gap with transcendence in mind? Of course it had, and this last act of our bodies, a shared breathless dive that had been set into motion by the pressure of her hand on mine was a formality, a spectacle for our audience, who would never go to Switzerland now that we'd proved that Lynx had not held the lone secret key to liberation.

As the impact came, so did the certainty that we had won after all; that a dawn had arrived on this underworld which no sun could reach and we were the first children born into its embrace. Then we were rolling across some smooth, alien surface, leaving blackness behind. We realized what the source of the blackness was only after the train had shot past and the gap opened again to a now familiar triumphant chorus.

For tonight at least, it slipped our minds that we had been abandoned and forgotten. That the highs of gapping were the bright, fleeting edges of an illusion.



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